



Breaking Ground

By Stephanie Lager

“Is that a radish?”

“What’s a scarecrow doing here?”

“I thought this was the sidewalk!”

As I walk down Vera Avenue I stop to peer at a not so common sight: sprouting plants, fresh herbs, painted signs, and a scarecrow. Many have wondered what that blooming garden framing the block of Beit T’Shuvah on Vera would become, and February 8th we discovered the remarkable spirit, palpable energy, and bountiful sustenance seeping into the very ground that Beit T’Shuvah is built on.

Amidst the humming anticipation permeating the Comey kitchen, a family unveils the growth of Beit T’Shuvah’s very own Organic Garden Program. Davis Watson and Allison Hennessey began the program to connect residents to a tangible example of healthy, organic growth, and on this February evening, the community gathered to enjoy the fruits of their labor.



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Davis’ sister, Anna Watson Carl, renowned food writer and personal chef, directed guests, Beit T’Shuvah staff, and residents in preparations for the first ever farm-to-table dinner. Over 20 guests took turns digging their hands into the cool earth and toasty kitchen area to nourish a program that continues to sprout both literally and figuratively.

The Comey kitchen was packed with Harriet Rossetto and Fionnula Flanagan measuring ingredients, Rabbi Mark Borovitz simmering green onions, and an array of hungry helpers eagerly chopping heirloom carrots and vibrant radishes. Outside Davis led residents as they washed, de-stemmed, and snacked on the assortment of vegetables that were harvested from the parkway and Comey garden. As Davis bathed the Pac choi (a cousin of bok choy), he said, “I’m stoked. This is the next phase of connecting food growing to food eating. And my sister, who is so passionate

about dinner parties, to have her here celebrating the end of the season all the way from New York, is really cool!”

It was easy to get in the spirit with comments like:
“Sis, look at the size of this daikon!”
“Wow, that’s beautiful!”

Their passion is so ripe with sincerity that I can’t help but recognize the love they have for each other, for healthy food, and for sharing the bounty of fresh vegetables with Beit T’Shuvah. “I like to grow things and she likes to cook them,” Davis says, and it’s this type of give and take that makes the program fit in so perfectly with the BTS family philosophy.

As resident Nick De Gulio dressed the spelt pizza dough with ricotta cheese, green onions, and Swiss chard he said, “It’s really refreshing



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eating non-artificial, pesticide free food. We have our own little garden; our own little place of this world is good to have.” Nick touches on that which makes this program so successful. Besides having our own little place of the world to grow nutritious food, we have our own close-knit community that continues to grow and evolve. Spiritual counselor and staff leader behind the Organic Garden Program, Adam Siegel, chimed in on the same observation, “the amazing thing about the garden program is that we’re not just growing food, we’re also growing a program with better people and better partnerships with each other and with God!”

Two months after the dinner, the garden program has not slowed down in the slightest. I visited the parkway garden at Beit T’Shuvah to uncover the story that’s been emerging from the adorned curbside.

“There’s no better. There just is.”

Davis Watson says this to me after I tell him why I’m embarrassed for

the way I tossed my pinto beans; it wasn’t as skillful as they way he did. The way Davis sprinkled them, delicately, yet purposefully scattered to the side before dropping effortlessly to the soil, is the toss of a deeply knowledgeable farmer, passionate food justice activist, and charismatic Beit T’Shuvah resident.

Davis Watson, Alison Hennessey, Adam Siegel, and I speak in the Beit T’Shuvah Organic Garden office, which is snugly fitted on the sidewalk of Vera Ave, between the Beit T’Shuvah Garden Parkway and the new hay bales. The bales of hay will soon sprout luscious greens to accompany the Parkway and Comey gardens. Even though we’re in-between seasons, one artichoke and a tree of Meyer lemons have begun to sprout.

The charming way Adam Siegel nonchalantly throws the pinto beans sums up the laid-back and spiritually founded aura of the program. “The underlying thing is that we aren’t just learning about gardening and farming, we’re learning how to apply these lessons to recovery and



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that they were incredibly passionate about, they were able to bloom. On top of all that, the LA City Council just so happened to repeal the law that issues citations for planting gardens on public parkway—and with that, all of the seeds perfectly fell into place.

The head farmer and program director, Davis, is no stranger to farming; he worked on two organic farms in Tennessee, and when he moved to LA he was inspired by the lack of healthy food options and poor food knowledge at a local sober living. “I wanted to plant a garden and a program, but I didn’t want to do it alone.” He wanted to learn to be in a community, and he couldn’t have found a more perfect place to do so. The other part of the dynamic garden duo is Alison Hennessey, who ran her own garden in Santa Monica for 18 years. She has been digging her hands into curbside gardens far before they were in vogue.

to life.” And what’s more wholesome than taking lessons straight from the earth?

In response to the garden’s unbelievable evolution Davis says, “We’ve had a fair amount of community support and a tremendous amount of Facebook likes,” as he rakes the land with Alison, whose bare feet sink into pockets of the soil. Beit T’Shuvah’s Organic Learning Garden includes more than just 40 non-GMO organic varieties of veggies and herbs—it incorporates an entire informational course syllabus packed with every detail from food consumption, soil care, and plant growth courses to various field trips.

The whole garden story is quite serendipitous.. It all began when a few visionary mothers of Beit T’Shuvah Alumni, including Rhonda Snyder, Julie Sotor, and Carolyn Gold, along with Beit T’Shuvah’s Director of Facilities, Craig Miller, heard about garden programs at their congregations and were able to imagine a potential program for growth in recovery. They spoke to Rabbi Mark and Netiya, a Jewish network that brings garden programs to synagogues, schools, and nonprofit organizations in LA. About the same time that the Netiya project slowly faded away, the vision for an organic garden was simultaneously budding in residents Alison Hennessey and Davis Watson. Serendipitously, Davis and Allison were both emerging from their recovery and had experience with gardening and farming. “They were floundering a bit,” Adam recalls, but starting to discuss a program

Davis’ goal is to slowly change the food system and hopefully grow the majority of Beit T’Shuvah’s food consumption in-house. They have already begun—the garden program supplied the herbs for this year’s Passover Seder! People have been so inspired by the program that two residents, Jonas and Ben, even created a weekly juice bar at Beit T’Shuvah and others are growing their very own sprouts in mason jars as a part of Allison’s Sprouts Club.

“It’s alive,” Davis says, which speaks not only to the organic growth of the program, but the life lessons imbedded in organic farming that transcend our commercialized society and encourage people to use their hands to connect to something greater than themselves.

It’s not hard to see how seamlessly farming and gardening translates to growing a sober life. Time, dedication, and patience that involves tending to everyday, and reaping wonderful rewards in the end—it’s the perfect metaphor. So perfect that it seems the Organic Garden program won’t be a one hit wonder, surely it’s going places. Literally, the program is taking residents on field trips—planting trees, volunteering at food banks like Sova, garden digs with Ron Finely (Davis’ hero who is a social food activist and runs a farm in Compton), farmers market trips, milking cows, and countless screenings of food and farm films. This progressive program speaks to the continued cultivation of Beit T’Shuvah; whatever endeavor helps build gracious, beautiful souls, their hands are all in.