

# THE ACCIDENTAL FARMER

LINDA PROFFITT TEACHES OTHERS ABOUT AGRICULTURE AND SUSTAINABLE LIVING

BY SHAWNDR MILLER — PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSH MARSHALL

Passing a hammer to a ponytailed college student, Linda Proffitt exhorts everyone lining the length of Peaceful Grounds' 100-foot hoop house to pull the plastic sheeting tight. The urban farming center's founder and a dozen students are sealing the hoop house on this blustery fall day.

Though she calls herself an "accidental farmer," Proffitt is perfectly at home in work gloves and ball cap as she directs the volunteer labor at the demonstration farm at Marion County Fairgrounds. On the far side of the hoop house are long raised rows of vegetables and herbs. On the other side, bordering the Cattle Barn, are several mobile chicken tractors containing layer hens.

Some 75 IUPUI students have come to Peaceful Grounds Center for Agriculture and Sustainable Living to lend a hand on this day of service. Working in wind and drizzle, they pull spent plants, shovel compost and wield hammers and drills in service of the cause. Along the way they'll learn about the importance of red wiggler worms, whose dietary needs and bathroom habits are key to safely and productively growing food, especially in an urban setting.

By the end of the day, both soft and hard plastic will be tacked to the hoop house wall and further bolstered by a bank of compost, or a "worm zone," as Proffitt calls it. Just in time, because the temperature is expected to dip close to freezing after dark.

"Last year, through these means, you guys," she tells the students, "this house was 100 degrees with 2 feet of snow on the ground."

Proffitt's center, which was designated a regional outreach and training center by urban farming champion Will Allen in 2011, has hosted countless groups like this. They bring their service and take home inspiration from the model of urban agriculture.

In fact, the place is entirely volunteer-created, from the hoop house to the compost heaps to the interior of the Cattle Barn, also known as "Worm Central," or Peaceful Grounds Village. Its volunteer-built stage has hosted events ranging from local vaudeville act Blue Monkey Sideshow to rustic weddings.

"How do you explain a miracle?" Proffitt says, shaking her head. Every week, large groups of people — some from as far away as Texas — come to participate in her mission. They find their way to her through church mission opportunities, youth groups and university groups, and their contributions are legion.

In its first year alone, Peaceful Grounds benefited from the energy of 2,000 youths, who worked nearly 19,000 hours to help set up the center, then located in Southport.

And just one month into this semester, 600 students have so far come to offer their skills and time to the cause, all while learning about urban agriculture.

Lyla Mahmoud, Proffitt's right-hand woman for the school year, is a recipient of IUPUI's Sam H. Jones Community Service Scholarship, earning her an internship at Peaceful Grounds. The pre-law student coordinates teams every Saturday, learning leadership skills while expanding her agricultural skills. She envisions a career in environmental law and expects the experience she gains here to serve her well.

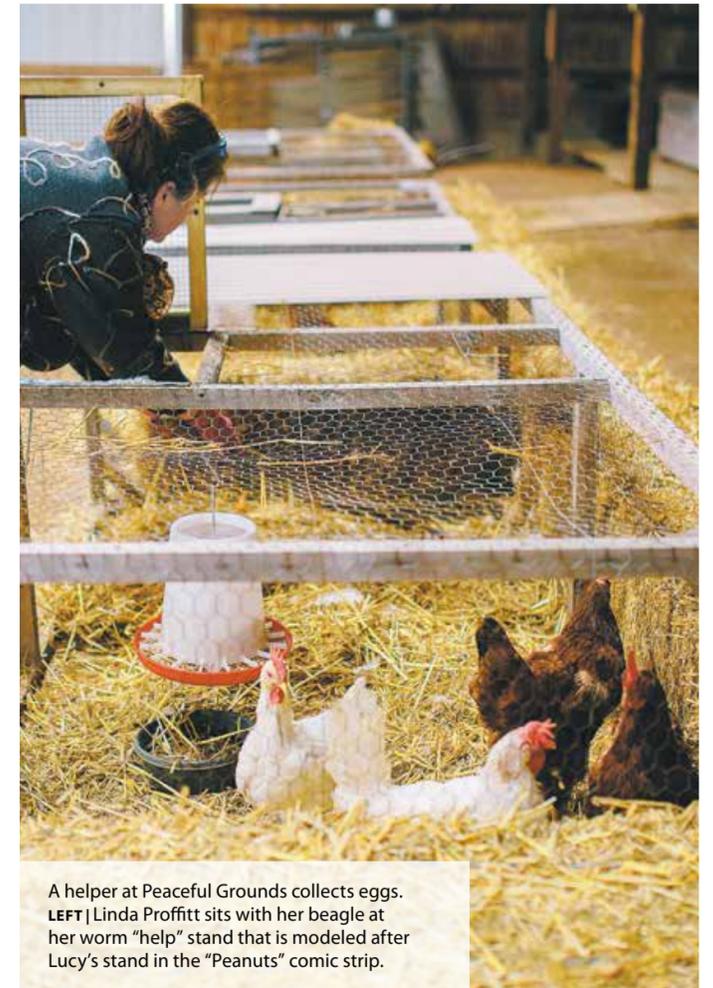
That suits Proffitt, who is not only in the business of growing plants and building the soil that supports them, but nurturing leaders as well.

"The more continuity we have, like Lyla, the better," she says. "The more people that are here that know what's happening, the better."

Continuity is also provided by community members like Gena Landers, who lives in a subdivision just on the other side of a field across from Peaceful Grounds. Landers had never given much thought to how her food was grown until a sleepless night prompted her to turn on her television. As it happened, "Food Inc." was being aired. The documentary opened her eyes to the consolidation of the meat and grain industries, and disturbed her deeply.

When she happened to notice signs for Peaceful Grounds, she found the answer to her newfound worries.

Landers says that when she walked in and met the center's founder, she felt she'd known Proffitt all her life. After taking a tour and learning about Peaceful Grounds' mission of building soil and teaching people, she was ready to sign on as a regular helper. Now she stops by every day to check on the chickens and spends several hours every Sunday doing whatever needs to be done to free Prof-



A helper at Peaceful Grounds collects eggs. **LEFT** | Linda Proffitt sits with her beagle at her worm "help" stand that is modeled after Lucy's stand in the "Peanuts" comic strip.

fit's time for administrative tasks. She's frequently a team leader on work days like today.

Landers is excited to be part of the solution. "We're going to have to learn how to get back to nature and respect the ground that our food comes from," she says. "We have to nurture it, take care of it."

For her part, Proffitt loves seeing people connect around food. "The love that is expressing itself through the service of so many people is a reflection of what life on the farm is supposed to be," Proffitt says. "It's supposed to be a loving stewardship of the earth itself. Many people want to reconnect to that communion with the earth. That's the heart of it, isn't it?"

Peaceful Grounds is the outgrowth of a mission that began nine years ago when Proffitt founded Global Peace Initiatives, an organization dedicated to engendering peace and mindfulness.

But its story starts even earlier. Though born and raised in Indiana, Proffitt lived in Palm Beach, Florida, for several years before moving back to the Hoosier state in the early 1980s. She likes to tell a story about Florida friends' reactions to the news that she was moving home to Indiana. "They looked at me like, 'Are you crazy?' Because it's Palm Beach, Florida, for God's sake!"

And her flippant response proved to be prescient. "I'm moving home to be a farmer," she recalls saying. "It was a joke, in 1984, to my buddies in Palm Beach."

Cut to a few years later, after she received her master of social work from IUPUI, lived overseas and returned home again to work for Gleaners Food Bank.

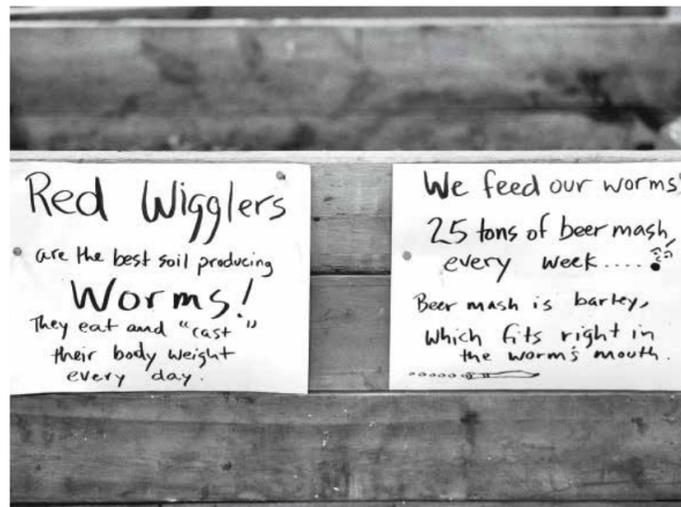
In this initial foray into food security, she coordinated Gleaners' supplemental food program. Galvanized to bring more mindfulness and peace into the lives of city dwellers, in 2006 Proffitt started Global Peace Initiatives.

The nonprofit's projects grew in scope over the ensuing years, but it all started with peace hikes through neighborhoods plagued by high vacancy rates. Sowing sunflower seeds in the shape of a peace sign in a vacant lot led to the idea of growing food for the hungry. Proffitt had recognized the difficulties in cultivating peace when bellies are empty. So she partnered with local churches and schools to create 49 peace gardens, each linked to a food pantry.

But that experience led her to a bigger issue that would eventually result in Peaceful Grounds. Indianapolis soils held high levels of lead and arsenic. Not only that, but basic agricultural skills were



**CLOCKWISE** | Gloves hang from the barn walls ready for volunteers to arrive. A pile of vermicompost that will be used around the Peaceful Grounds property. Proffitt stands in the large instruction room in the Peaceful Grounds barn at the Marion County Fairgrounds. Handmade signs inform visitors about agriculture at Peaceful Grounds.



lacking as fewer people were accustomed to growing their own food. Proffitt began to see the need for a teaching/learning center.

"The peace gardens all told us we needed a center to teach that was robust and could help connect the dots between environmental stewardship, growing safe food and soil preparation," she says.

Now she connects the dots with hands-on helpers like these students, who gather in small groups at the end of their session to share insights they gleaned from the experience.

"A lot of work goes into growing food," says a youth in a crisp white shirt.

"When you get enough people together, you can do things faster," says another student.

"It's been really interesting to learn about this place — to know that this is right in the middle of the city," a young

woman says. "There are houses right over there."

Proffitt, addressing the entire group from the stage, reminds them that she herself was an IUPUI student some years back. "So believe that you can be an entrepreneur and change the world."

The world-changing may step up a notch in the near future: Proffitt is in talks to provide consulting services to large-scale farmers looking to transition to sustainable practices. "What we know is that we have a prototype, and our prototype can be applied to larger growing environments," she explains.

"It's a gift to be involved with farming," she says, noting that large-scale farmers may hold the key to local food security. "You get reattached to the earth and provide something people need."

For more information, visit [globalpeaceinitiatives.net](http://globalpeaceinitiatives.net).

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**—LINDA PROFFITT**

## THE WORMS CRAWL IN

"I think everybody in an urban environment should have a little worm environment going on," says Linda Proffitt. "It only takes a tablespoon once a month to give a plant the fertility it needs to be productive."

At Peaceful Grounds' demonstration farm, the small worm bins people normally associate with vermicompost have been usurped by large piles and rows, some marked with things like "Thank a Worm" and "9-Month Habitat."

Several enormous compost heaps are held elsewhere on the fairgrounds. The scale is necessary because each week Proffitt composts more than 10 tons of "beer mash," or spent grain, from local brewers Rock Bottom and Black Acre, mixing in enough wood chips to maintain a 50/50 nitrogen/carbon ratio.

The worms enter the picture later on, once the compost stops reaching a peak temperature of 160 degrees. "(The piles) reach a place where they don't come to temperature as much," she explains. "If you turn it every four days when it comes to temperature, you can make 29-day compost."

Limited mechanization at this point means Peaceful Grounds' compost gets turned less often, but the goal is the same. "The mixing and the turning are all part of baking a cake," she says. "If you don't stir your cake batter, you're going to have clumps." Stirring allows all parts of the pile to heat up.

"And the worms are like Clabber Girl," she says. "It's the extra ingredient ... that gives fertility to compost."

After the piles cycle through the temperature peaks, she inoculates them with red wigglers or allows them to migrate there on their own.

The result — after the worms digest the material for 90 days — is a potent soil amendment. "You can have straight carbon/nitrogen compost, and that's great," she says. "But

when worms digest the nitrogen, then ... you have the carbon fixing process, which breaks the wood down and gives this beautiful compost."

The last step for the finished vermicompost involves sifting in a giant tumbler. Fine worm castings and a coarser potting mix are the end product. Both are used in-house and as products that are sold to raise funds for the center.



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