



Lana Mustafa and Beth Pulawski

Planting the Seeds for a Better Tomorrow

BY CANDICE HOROWITZ

PHOTOGRAPH BY NEIL GRABOWSKY, THROUGH THE LENS STUDIOS

LANA MUSTAFA AND BETH PULAWSKI had tallied up a lifetime of vastly different experiences before their paths intersected in 2018. It was then that they each found their way to a position at Montclair Community Farms (MCF) where they became colleagues and friends. Prior to that year, their life trajectories appeared to be void of even the slightest similarities.

At an early age, Lana discovered her love of nature. By second grade, she was already on her way to being an avid gardener. “I moved a lot as a kid,” she said, “The one common denominator for me was always the garden, so it was an important part of my life. I used to joke when I was in high school that I had more gardens than boyfriends.”

Throughout her childhood, Lana’s gardens had always been a source of solace, providing her with a safe haven to escape the turmoil she experienced growing up with parents who were often at odds with each other. Although she was born in the U.S., Lana’s family was from Palestine and her mother frequently moved her and her four siblings back and forth between Philadelphia, New Jersey and Palestine. “I’m grateful because the garden has given me the most healing and the most growth,” she said. “Coming from a strict culture, college wasn’t necessarily an option for me. My only real option was marriage early on.”

In 2006, merely two weeks after her high school graduation, Lana rode with her groom through the streets of Mukhmas, Palestine on a traditional horse-drawn carriage ride to their wedding venue. That same year, Beth was over 5,000 miles away at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs in New York City. While in graduate school, Beth worked for a small nonprofit and travelled to Kenya for a research project on the impact of small dairy farms on women and sustainable agriculture. She and Lana were worlds apart.

A year later when Beth received a Master’s in International Affairs and began working at Lehman Brothers, Lana, who had moved to New Jersey with her new husband, gave birth to their first child and started her journey as a stay-at-home mom. “When we moved here, I didn’t have any friends,” she recalled. “I didn’t have much family. But I loved gardening so whenever I would get the opportunity to research something I would read an article and practice in my garden. That was pretty much how I learned everything. It brought me so much happiness and fulfillment.”

Gradually, Lana added to her repertoire. She got chickens and then bees. “Once I realized the bees are in trouble, I decided I need to do something about it,” she said. “I spent a year reading books, watching documentaries, saving up for supplies and eventually getting bees.”

Lana found beekeeping to be a welcome challenge with much to learn. “There’s the whole process of keeping your queen healthy and laying,” she explained. “And you’re battling with colony collapse disorder which is affecting hives all over the world. There are also risks so I’m always fully suited up because I’m highly allergic to bee stings. So I try to avoid it at all costs.”

Despite the risk, beekeeping proved to be more of a benefit for Lana when a friend asked her to teach her homeschooled kids about pollinators and what they could do to help them. The session was a success and once word got out, Lana started getting requests to teach other groups. “It became kind of popular. People became interested in the work that I was doing and started asking for private classes. This is how I got into environmental education.”

It wasn’t long before Lana was driven to broaden her horizons beyond her small homestead. In time, she gained the confidence to share her experiences. “My husband was always very controlling so I wasn’t allowed to be on Facebook. But as I started reading and learning more I realized how much I had to share. So I started my social media handle and I started taking pictures and adding descriptions and connecting with other people who were doing similar work.” This was Lana’s gateway out of her backyard.

Until then, Lana had delighted in the freedom and autonomy she experienced in the solitude of her garden but by networking and sharing her story, she opened up a whole world of new possibilities including the pursuit of a college degree. “I finally stood up to my husband and said, ‘Hey, listen. This is something that I want to do and you’re not going to stop me.’ But prior to that my garden was the only place where I was allowed to learn.” From there, Lana knew there was no turning back.

By 2018, Beth had spent much of her career working in global health consulting mostly with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a job that continues to take her around the world. But after getting married and giving birth to the first of her two sons, she began to contemplate how she could help improve the world her children would inherit without straying too far from home. “I’ve always had an interest in the environment and sustainability,” she



Lana Mustafa, Beth Pulawski, Marissa Blodnik, Daniel Delcher, Cathleen DelaPaz with the MCF mobile farm stand.



MCF Farmpreneurs Pamela Hernandez, Jireh Gomez and Ammari Thomas making pizzas at Montclair Bread, an MCF partner. PHOTOS BY RENEE LIM



Lana says beekeeping is interesting and challenging.

said. “and I’ve never understood why in a country or a town such as ours, where there are vast resources, there can be such vast inequalities and differences in people’s lives, especially with things as fundamental as the food we eat. So I happened to come across Montclair Community Farms and started to look at potential ways that I could engage with them.”

Beth was brought in to develop the farm’s five-year strategic plan and was eventually hired as Director. “I’m a big picture thinker,” she said. “I figure out how we’re going to have the staff and the capacity to run the programs we need to impact our community.” In partnership with several local organizations including Rutgers/Essex 4-H and Montclair History Center, MCF has developed a variety of programs and events like Farm Camp and Fridays on the Farm.

Around the time Beth started at MCF, they had an opening for a part-time Farm Manager, a position seemingly custom-made for someone like Lana. “When I saw the job listed online,” recalled Lana, “I read the description and thought, ‘This sounds exactly like what I’ve been doing: growing lots of food, composting, and teaching little kids about gardening and bees.’ Lana’s experience and enthusiasm for the role overshadowed her lifetime employment gap and she was hired. “It’s really exciting for me because who doesn’t want to have their dream job?”

Since meeting Lana at MCF, Beth has become a friend and mentor. “She’s probably been my number one cheerleader and motivator over the last couple years,” said Lana. When MCF was awarded a 3-year USDA grant, Lana was hired as a full-time Farm Director which will enable her to go back to school. “Being a mom and now going through a divorce,” Lana said, “it was really hard for me to imagine completing my degree but this job puts me full-time with Rutgers so I’ll be working towards a degree in environmental science.”

Lana now spends her days managing the farm where she teaches classes and works with volunteers and interns. With the MCF crew, she also runs the mobile farm stand. As Beth explained, “There are many in our community who face food insecurity and lack access to affordable, fresh and local food with the Pathmark gone and few small produce

markets. We deliver affordable, organic produce from the farm to our senior sites so it's literally at their doorstep. People are out there at the mobile farm stand talking to each other - our interns and seniors - asking questions, and sharing recipes and connecting in new ways."

With the USDA grant and resources from local business partners, Beth, Lana and their colleagues have developed the Farmpreneur program for local high school students. It offers a chance for young people to grow their own produce, as well as create and market their own food products. Several local organizations and businesses have teamed up to help them learn how to do this. Small organic grain grower, Ruthie's Farm (run by the same Ruthie who's better known for her pizza and BBQ) along with Montclair Bread, River Valley Community Grains, Montclair State University, Essex County Schools of Technology, HomeCorps, the Township of Montclair and Montclair History Center have contributed to this endeavor.

"We're working with Ruthie's Farm to find ways to expand the

Lana with her children Dalia, Zak, and Aleena.



Beth's son's Alex and Lukas learning how to hold a chicken.

market for locally-grown organic grains." Beth explained. "The kids are going to learn how to harvest and clean wheat, mill it and then make and sell value-added products. And by meeting local entrepreneurs, they can see what different pathways exist for their future careers."

As Beth explained, these

community programs and the farm itself attract people from all walks of life. "It's amazing to see people, whether it's a five year old, a sixteen year old or a seventy year old finding their place on the farm. We all really crave and need the same things. And we all really do have more in common than we don't."

"We share one planet," said Lana. "For me the intention is reminding people that we're a part of our ecosystem and all of our decisions in life matter and ripple out. I think that we've almost disconnected our actions and how much they affect others whether they're human or other living organisms. If we want to see positive change in the world we need to take action and not wait for the person next to us to do it. And we all have that power." ■

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