

Educating Champa

IN THE STEAMY heat of a Bangladeshi afternoon, three girls wearing their brightly coloured *salwars* stand out against a small field of healthy green plants. One speaks intently as they all gaze at the red seeds in her palm. “Such a good yield, and they withstood the rains well too,” she says. “We will save these for next season.”

Sixteen-year-old Champa is the oldest daughter of a farming family in the village of Panjia, Bangladesh. At the age of 11, she left school to work full-time in the family household. In a country where education for girls is often deemed to be of little value, that might have marked the end of Champa’s schooling. But her learning didn’t stop there, thanks to an innovative literacy and agricultural education program that connects two overlooked community resources: traditional knowledge and an abundance of girls and young women who are hungry to learn.

Bangladesh is a country of paradoxes. While lush and rich in ancient rivers and alluvial soils, it is also a land of persistent food shortages. Agriculture is the livelihood of the majority, yet most Bangladeshis struggle to produce enough to feed their families from small plots of precious earth. This is especially true in the north, where increasingly unpredict-

able floods wash away crops, and years of introduced hybrid seed and synthetic inputs have depleted soils and undermined local know-how.

USC Canada, a not-for-profit that promotes sustainable agriculture worldwide, has been working in rural northern Bangladesh since 1971. In 2008, the group started offering a series of workshops in ecological farming methods. Initial meetings with villagers revealed some alarming trends: mothers were no longer teaching their daughters how to select and save seeds; neem trees, which guard against pests, were disappearing; and heritage rice varieties with adaptive traits that could be useful in a changing climate were vanishing. The workshops bring older farmers and adolescent girls into a unique cross-generational knowledge exchange and support it with advice from agronomists.

Attending her first intensive four-day workshop at the age of 14, Champa discovered her passion – and talent – for agriculture. “It was most interesting for me to learn the names of local varieties of crops from the elderly farmers,” she recalls. “I felt free to share my opinions.”

The workshops compare past and present trends in agriculture, and then move on to heritage seed collection and preservation techniques, as well as



composting using organic fertilizers, intercropping and other simple techniques that enrich soils.

Champa’s father, Nobin, was skeptical at first, but agreed to provide a small garden plot where his daughter could put her learning to the test. “Now I believe that education can change the life of a girl,” confesses Nobin, with evident pride. Champa’s very first harvest surprised everyone; her eggplants and beans were so abundant that surpluses were shared among neighbours.

Unexpected yields continue. Last fall, Champa wrote an essay on climate change in a countrywide contest to observe Bangladesh’s “National Girl Child Day.” Weeks later, Champa and her father were invited to Dhaka to collect first prize. ♡

– Sheila Petzold

The Naked Blogger

WHEN Vanessa Farquharson started her blog, “Green as a Thistle,” she had a fairly average Canadian lifestyle. She enjoyed her car, hot baths and takeout.

Then, over a year, she narrated her personal journey toward environmental awareness, sharing with readers her successes and frustrations.

Farquharson’s commitments were sometimes small (buying natural eye shadow) and sometimes radical (unplugging her fridge), but at the end of the year, she had been transformed. She shed her car, purchased only green products, and drastically reduced her energy and water use.

By making her conversion open and accessible, Farquharson served as a case

study for average Canadians trying to green their lives.

It’s these personal features that make green blogging resonate with so many people. Although they cover many of the same issues, actions and tips as other educational resources, green blogs are becoming a new way to get people interested in environmental issues.

Colin Beavan, known by his blog name “No-Impact Man,” committed to eliminating his family’s ecological footprint in the challenging urban setting of New York City. His goal seems downright impossible, and he concedes that it is a lofty one. But by sharing his difficulties, he diffuses the uncertainty and mystery of living green. And after witnessing his

journey, blog readers are convinced of Beavan’s authenticity, and are more likely to answer his appeal to do the same. In short, he guides readers by example.

Proving their popularity, both Beavan’s and Farquharson’s narratives have been published as books. *Sleeping Naked is Green* chronicles Farquharson’s year-long journey, while Beavan’s book, *No-Impact Man*, is now a documentary film of the same name.

To be sure, these blogs aren’t reliable sources of environmental information; the authors are simply sharing their often-unedited opinions. But their power to motivate people through personal narrative cannot be denied. ♡

– Bianca Sayan