



Carlye Gates, Featured Scholar Journal of Undergraduate Research

“Everyone deserves affordable access to good, fresh food,” says Carlye Gates, who is currently working at Green Fire Farms, an eight-acre organic, market farm in Hoopa, CA. There, she spends her days tending to seeds in the greenhouse; transplanting seedlings to the ground; and, once they’re mature, harvesting the crops: a medley of fresh produce, including onions, kale, beets, blackberries, and parsley. In exchange, she receives room and board—hearty, wholesome meals made of the crops they’ve grown—and, more importantly, the opportunity to “creat[e] a more just, sustainable local food system” that makes fresh food “accessible and available to the community.”

Involved in community service work even before college, at UF Gates choose sociology as her major to better understand how social phenomena impact individuals as well as how to create positive social change. Outside of class, she searched for opportunities to make a significant contribution to a cause she felt passionate about. She volunteered with Campus Kitchens, a student organization that collects and distributes donated food to those in need, and travelled to Washington, DC to raise awareness about immigration issues as part of Florida Alternative Breaks. Sometimes she also volunteered with

Edible Plant Project and Friends of the Organic Blueberry Farm, planting fruits and vegetables and pruning blueberry bushes during their monthly volunteer workdays.

In spite of her community service, Gates felt isolated: “I lacked confidence to go out into the community and feel as though I could truly contribute and connect with people. Without that I felt alone on such a large campus.” Gates decided to join UF’s study abroad program, spending a semester in Prague during her sophomore year. Her time overseas was empowering: “I went not knowing anyone and was able to meet people and reach out, gaining confidence in myself and my ability to trust my own choices and follow what it is I wanted to do.” When she returned to Gainesville, she felt ready “to connect with people and become immersed in the community.” In a second stint with Florida Alternative Breaks, she served as a site leader in Belize. There, she led a team of students on water conservation projects, installing solar water heating and constructing greywater systems, which allow water from the kitchen to be reused in the garden. When she wanted to learn more about sustainable agriculture, she spent the summer working on Green Fire Farm, which she located through Worldwide Opportunities on Organic

Farms, an organization that matches volunteers with farms and gardens all over the world.

Gates knew that she wanted to attend graduate school, so she applied to the University Scholars Program to learn how to conduct rigorous research. Inspired by her experiences with agriculture and courses she had taken on international trade and global economies, Gates hoped to study “agricultural trade policy on an international scale … specifically the coffee trade and its impact on coffee growers in South America” and connected with Eric Keys, an assistant professor in the Geography Department. Keys told her that her topic was too big to tackle: she had only a year and limited funding to carry out the research. Performing “rigorous qualitative research meant I would have to be in that [foreign] location,” Gates remembers. Summer was approaching, and Gates didn’t have time to perform the initial research and organize a trip. She was disappointed, but undaunted.

Taking Keys’ advice to heart, Gates began speaking to area organizations about issues of food access and security. When she met with Melissa DeSa from Florida Organic Growers (FOG), a local not-for-profit organization that promotes organic and sustainable agriculture, she heard about a “USDA-funded project that investigated opportunities for improving the local food system, with a focus on ensuring food security for low-income residents.” She began working as a FOG intern a few days later.

Working with FOG helped her clarify her research focus and taught her valuable interpersonal skills that complemented her growing research abilities. By “conducting focus group discussions and facilitating public meetings,” she learned how to “make people feel welcome, encourage and stimulate conversation, and build rapport and trust, especially when there’s a racial, social, or economic divide.”

Even before Gates began her research, she knew that East Gainesville had few healthy food options. “Once you cross Main Street,” she says, “you enter a food desert—an abundance of convenience stores and shortage of not just grocery retailers but any outlet that sells affordable, fresh food.” The food that was available often cost more than food at grocery stores on the other side of town, her research also revealed. An item like bananas, she observed, saw a mark-up of almost 300%. Gates concluded that East

Gainesville is characterized by “food injustice”—inequitable access, both in terms of cost and availability, to fresh food. Through FOG, Gates was able to assist with the development of community-based recommendations for remedying this food inequality. Some of the suggestions—for example, allowing Electronic Benefit Transfers (food stamps) to be used at farmer’s markets—have already been implemented.

After graduating in May 2010, Gates began a graduate program in Urban and Regional Planning at Portland State University. She enjoyed her classes but was disappointed when she discovered that community development and resource allocation, and especially food access, was only a small part of urban planning. Further, she worried that she would have few opportunities to work with the public. Her research experience as an undergrad had prepared her well for the challenges of graduate school, but it had also showed her that she thrived on social research and was “commit[ted] to remaining immersed in issues of food policy and urban agriculture.” Though she left the program, she doesn’t regret her time there: “I had to commit myself to the program to learn that I didn’t want to be a part of it. I need to go and experience something before… I can know that it’s right.” She returned to Green Fire Farm to figure out her next step.

Gates anticipates that she will return to graduate school to continue performing research that will “create community-based, social change.” In the meantime, she hopes to join a project that provides farming or gardening opportunities to at-risk populations: urban youth “growing food as a means of self-empowerment and entrepreneurship” or prisoners engaging in horticultural therapy as a way to “prepare them for the world beyond the prison cell.” Gates continues to be committed to promoting food justice as a way to improve people’s lives and health, a topic she discovered as a University Scholar, that continues, she says, “to be close to [her] heart.”

—Ariel Gunn

Photo of farm by bee721, flickr