

# THE PRINCETON PACKET

SOLUTIONS

Huck Fairman

## Citizen, farmer and founder

George Eliot, in her novel "Middlemarch," wrote that the growing good of the world is partly dependent on the daily deeds of neighbors working to improve our imperfect social state.

Pam Mount, owner with her husband, Gary, of Terhune Orchards in Lawrenceville, has long been working to not only improve their farm, but also to improve many aspects of our local communities.

Growing up in Princeton, she found her concern for community started early. In high school she concentrated on art, sensitizing her to different tastes and views. She learned the value of solar heating from a recent immigrant and she joined the Mariner Scouts, which prepared her for, and perhaps presaged, a journey to an island in the far Pacific.

After college, Gary and she joined the Peace Corps and were posted to one of the smaller Caroline Islands, a newly assigned U.S. protectorate after World War II. Their project was to teach English, but Pam found, as many volunteers did, that it was they, the teachers, who learned the most.

Among the lessons was the islanders' real sense of equality and democracy. In their regular town meetings, everyone on the island participated, everyone had something to contribute, and no one was afraid to say "no." As she got to know her hosts, she recognized, and this was corroborated in her subsequent travels, that people everywhere are much the same, with similar needs, responses, and connections.

One difference on the island the couple *did* discover was that women owned the land and that family succession was matrilineal, so that if a fisherman or canoe paddlers were lost at sea, the families remained intact.

Other values absorbed during their three-year stay, included the islanders' profound knowledge of and appreciation for the environment. They felt a real connection with their island world and keenly believed in preserving it. In addition, Pam observed, it was community rather than competition that motivated the islanders and guided their decisions.

On a more practical level, the Mounts learned of local medicines such as the instant, blood-coagulating property in Sea Cucumbers that works under water — important to the many divers who could easily scratch themselves while fishing among the coral reefs, where sharks are also seeking dinner. Pam re-

marked that she enjoys speculating how the islanders might have discovered that particular remedy. They also learned how the islanders navigated, in their small canoes, across the often vast distances between islands using the sun and stars.

After the Peace Corp, but taking with them the islanders' confidence in navigation, Pam and Gary struck out across much of Southeast Asia, Southern Asia, and points west. From this wide-ranging experience, they saw that, unlike the Caroline Islanders, people in power usually did everything they could to stay in power, and from the resulting inequities, an enmity prevailed between people, rather than a sense of community or brotherhood.

Returning to the states, the Mounts settled in a Bucks County suburb, but soon found that life was not what they were seeking. By chance they saw that Terhune Orchards was for sale, and so, in 1975, they seized the opportunity to buy it. Gary's family had owned an orchard in the area, providing him with some of the necessary experience. For Pam, the farm offered not only the opportunity to live off the land but to develop a sense of community, by then a value deeply planted in her. The farm would not just grow fruits and vegetables, but would be a second home for neighbors and visitors from all over who would be welcome to explore the farm, pet and feed the animals, pick strawberries, cut flowers, or sample the farm's produce, deserts, or wines.

Happily, the farm allowed the Mounts to pursue their individual interests, with Gary managing the farm, researching and adopting the latest advances in watering, pest control, variety selection, organic cultivation, and solar panels, while expanding the farm's acreage. Pam oversaw the marketing, started the farm store, and has never ceased reaching out, in an ever widening circle, to the surrounding communities.

Off the farm, this interest first took her to the Princeton YWCA in the 1980s, where she helped to expand the ESL Program and explore solutions to hunger in disadvantaged children. This surprisingly extensive problem lead her to start, with Bonner Foundation funding, Farmers Against Hunger.

Pam notes, with a baffled frown, that 40 percent of food produced in our country goes unused and is relegated to waste. Finding a balance among the imperatives of feeding the hungry, avoiding spoilage and insuring farm profitability has not yet been completely solved.

These many insights and experiences led her to run for the Lawrenceville Town Council, which she won, three times. As the mayor is a rotating appointment among council members, she used her mayoralty, in part, to help redefine the town ethic which now reminds residents: you're not just out for yourself — an echo, perhaps, from the Caroline Islanders, or earlier. In both capacities, she saw that the town needed many things, but where to find the money?

Her solution was to set up five nonprofit organizations which could accept donations (with the tax benefits going to the donors) and which would then fund town projects. Those included the preservation of open spaces, a 25-mile Lawrenceville-Hopewell Trail, and a nature center. Today, as a result of these efforts, 26 percent of Lawrenceville land is preserved.

Seeing that much was needed to preserve not only Central Jersey land but air, water and health, all within sustainable budgets, Pam conceived of two organizations to deal with these issues: Sustainable Jersey and Sustainable Lawrence. She saw that our local towns could not be sustainable if the county and state around them were not.

After speaking with Pam, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation provided initial funding for Sustainable Jersey, and other sponsors have followed. Sustainable Jersey is a certification program for municipalities that want to go green, save money and preserve their quality of life. It is also a blueprint for towns and citizens who want to achieve some or all of these goals. Currently 406 towns in the state are working on these actions.

Pam would say that much, if not all, of her determined, effective work has its roots in the values she learned as a scout: to leave the campsite in better shape than she found it. And what she witnessed in the Pacific, and has worked to replicate here, is that living with a communal approach and democratic values can bring people together to formulate policies that can sustain and nourish us.

*Huck Fairman is a local writer who in the course of researching another project was confronted by the overwhelming evidence that we are changing the earth's environment. And that will affect life as we have known it. He hopes to present the many good local responses to this situation that are already underway.*