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Lily Discernment Institute  
Jones Valley Teaching Farm Internship

I will start by saying that I have been coined by this organization as their “star,” their success story. They call me this because I am graduate from one of their programs they used to offer at my high school, the Art and Science of Agriculture Program (ASAP), and was their student who loved science and farming the most and who could not stay away from the farm. I ended up interning there 3 summers in a row as a production intern and when I concluded I had outgrown what knowledge they had to offer, my boyfriend and I, who I had met on the farm, decided to learn more by bicycling to 8 small family farms around the southeast and working at each for 2-3 weeks at a time ([farmbybike.tumblr.com](http://farmbybike.tumblr.com)). I applied to return to this organization knowing that I am adept in this field, and wanting not to be on the production side of the organization, but hoping instead to share the knowledge I had learned from my time at JVTF, my travels and from studying environmental studies at Sewanee and instead join the programs side that teaches Birmingham area kids about farming and nutrition.

Jones Valley Teaching Farm, formally known as Jones Valley Urban Farm has been around for 10 years and has successfully educated thousands of Birmingham children and adults. I have known the organization from when they first started on a very small abandoned plot in Birmingham and have seen them move to larger and return to smaller plots on which they grow vegetables, raise laying hens and offer educational programs. It has been sort of a rollercoaster ride with exciting moments of joy and growth to sad and stressful moments where my bosses skipped out on their month’s paychecks. It started with a passion for agriculture and evolved into a teaching farm aimed at creating a healthier community, socially and physically. However,

even if you have all the passion in the world for what you are fighting for, and even if you are gorgeous and charismatic and convince some people that what you are doing matters, you may not still be the person best suited for the job as executive director whose responsibilities are to be a great leader, find the funds necessary and provide clear goals for the organization to remain sustainable. This unfortunately is what happened with Jones Valley Teaching Farm and I was able to witness and be part of this transition.

Fortunately the former director Edwin Marty, who had literally planted the first seeds with his own hands had a heart big enough and brain competent enough to realize if he did not step down and pass it on, the wilting organization would soon be nothing more than dead organic matter. For years it seemed there were complaints and impatience and people working too hard for too little pay, consciously knowing that if things did not change they would inevitably get burnt out and give up. Thankfully the work they had done did not go unnoticed and even though they were in a financial crisis, the mission and successes of the farm allowed for a new executive director, appropriately named, Grant Brigham, to come in, be welcomed and completely re-hydrate the wilting organization allowing for most of the employees and Birmingham to see the fruitful potential of the farm. A lot of what is has been working on is getting Jones Valley's name out there through social media, which I am against for personal used but have come to realize is necessary for most non-profit organizations.

My first reaction to this then 28-year old, fresh out of grad school man was skepticism. He was too good looking, and by that I mean J-Crew model like, with roll up jeans, starched white shirts, expensive hipster/farmer boots, and curly locks. I could tell he never got dirty and that he probably wasn't an educator. He did actually get a masters in agriculture education, but it was clear he had not had much farming experience, which was a humongous contrast to the

former executive director who was notorious for loving flowers, sporting a beard and sweating profusely (but in a sexy kind of way of course). What he did go to grad school for was non-profit management and with that knowledge his initial step was a deep cleanse for the organization. At first he listened, but then he cut and cut and cut, many of the programs in which JVTF was known for, some I loved, including the high school program that introduced me to organic farming and cut other programs and sites (one that was 35 acres) I too thought were not worth our time or money and that were bad decisions from the start. Of the nearly dozen programs we had, only two remain, one called Seed to Plate that I was a part of this summer and the Delicious Nutritious program where a JVTF staff goes into Birmingham city school cafeterias and teaches the cooks how to prepare healthier meals.

I knew that joining this internship would be a little rocky since so much was different: a new director, a new name, only one site and two programs, no community supported agriculture, just markets. The biggest switch was focusing primarily on education and putting less priority on the production side. The biggest shock happened when I returned from my study abroad in Costa Rica. I was told by my boyfriend that Rachel, the person who taught me ASAP and who was going to be my advisor for the summer, had just been fired. I was very sad and a little worried that my internship would no longer exist, but honestly knew that she and Grant were on opposite wavelengths and that she sooner or later would leave Jones Valley since he was boss. She was convinced he'd pull the organization under. Luckily I can say he's done quite the opposite.

What I wanted to get out of this internship was the experience to teach kids, be involved in lesson development, and help the farm in whatever way. My expectations, teaching especially, were completely met and were so because of the connections I had kept with the farm and the trust they had in me to teach. [This summer I actually was the employee who had known the

farm the longest and therefore had respect from everyone on my perspective of the farm's direction.] I only had one chance to shadow before I was thrown in the deep not knowing what I was doing. Luckily I was pulled out and given some guidance and gained confidence to jump back in, having learned from all the mistakes I had made initially. My first attempt at teaching I thought would be with 10 students, I taught what would be the awesomeness of SOILS, but it happened to be a very hot day with 22 middle school students who did not particularly love soil the way I do. It was tough to keep them enthusiastic and even little things I thought they would know they didn't. So much depended on age and demographics. I thought the way the staff made me just go for it was incredibly effective in letting me get the nerves and improve my teaching skills in short period of time.

There were definitely hard moments with stubborn children who didn't want to get their hands dirty or who only wanted to drink more and more sugary drinks, and there were even harder moments with chaperones who could care less about their kids being very disrespectful or about what the farm was all about, but the majority of the time teaching was incredibly fun and fulfilling. I will not forget kids reactions to smelling stink bugs, or the "aha" moment when they realized how absurd our food system is and how many steps can be taken out to benefit not only the environment but our bodies as well. When they realize in just our program they ate more than 10 different types of fruits and vegetables that they themselves hand picked or dug up, and that they were responsible for preparing it and turning it into yummy pesto, salsa or fruit smoothies. The best moments for me were actually when kids felt comfortable enough to talk about health-related diseases. Alabama is ranked in our country: 1<sup>st</sup> in diabetes, 2<sup>nd</sup> in obesity, 3<sup>rd</sup> for hypertension and 4<sup>th</sup> in inactivity. The vast majority of the African American kids, if asked if they knew someone who has/had diabetes will say yes. Since most of them knew someone who

did, a neutral, non-accusatory environment was created where talking about the causes and consequences of a disease like type II diabetes did not make the children feel guilty but gave them the knowledge and power to make an informed choice about what they put in their bodies.

Teaching was absolutely wonderful and I definitely see myself excelling at it with more practice and experimentation. That side of my internship was great especially when the staff and the interns finally collaborated, setting out clear goals and delegating tasks with the expectation that everyone would work hard to fulfill them. We were finally working together to make this program more legitimate and have a more inquiry based learning style than what was currently offered, which was more like a farm tour. I realized I liked the direction we were going, and that these new possibilities to think and be creative would be a nice challenge and could result in fun effective lessons that would put Jones Valley on the list of places Birmingham schools could send their kids on a field trip to. This being important to ensure that grants are renewed allowing us to service a large number of kids from all different backgrounds.

The part that was most difficult about the internship were the complaints and the confusion some co-workers had about their job. Many of them were not hired by Grant and had job descriptions that no longer fit the bill for where Jones Valley was heading. Rachel was fired because of it and her very public complaints about Grant and the direction, another employee, Scott is leaving because he feels his job expectations have changed and he doesn't feel the same passion for the job that is now needed from him. Bree is confused about what her job is now because of the change in the Seed to Plate program and for some reason the communication between her and grant is not great. I hope she stays but she needs guidance and reassurance that she is an asset to the farm and that her skills are necessary and have a place at the farm. It must

be strange to have such a young determined boss who didn't hire you and whom you do not have as great of a relationship with as compared to your last boss.

From all that I am saying, what I noticed was that the work environment for the programs staff was an all time low. They work above a daycare with crying children and opaque windows, and file cabinets full of ten years of junk that they wisely threw out last week. I have just found that healthy environments, that is a healthy spot to work and clear job descriptions/tasks that take advantage of your full potential makes happier and therefore more efficient workers that consequently make healthier organizations that can sustain themselves.

To make an organization such as Jones Valley Teaching Farm more sustainable takes a great leader, and I am happy to say I trust Grant and believe he will make the farm a great success. There is still so much to be done to get there, one big challenge is finding a new site because the downtown 3.5 acre site we have been using for the last 6 years is only offered to us in 1 year lease agreements and have declined our request for a long-term lease agreement. For some reason I have faith that it will work out and that a good team is going to come together and make it happen. Grant and my wonderful advisor Katie Lannon, who is moving back to California this Friday have told me and my boyfriend that we bring the needed energy to the organization and that we are often seen as the "soul" of the farm. That was probably the best and most surprising compliment I have ever received that only reinforces my gut feeling that tells me I need to return when I graduate or soon after and be a part of the farm for a good chunk of my life. I am in no hurry though, I know I need to explore, learn a lot more and then come back and share.