



SUSAN VARICK PHOTOGRAPHY

The Constant Gardener

In 1986, a young idealistic Jeanne Pinsof left her comfortable surroundings in Winnetka to venture out on a coast-to-coast adventure, journeying with a commune of artists from California to North Carolina. It was a life-changing experience, one that inspired her to create an organic-gardening business that assists families in growing vegetables in their own backyards. Now, under the direction of Glencoe Union Church, she's taking on a new project that may prove to be the perfect bridge between the dreamer she was and the seasoned gardener she's become. **By Peter Gianopulos**

THE FIRST THING JEANNE PINSOF NOLAN noticed, back in August on her first visit to a place called Solid Ground, was the crate of squash sitting on the floor. It was a giant wooden crate. Costco-sized. The kind of crate you might see dockworkers loading onto cruise ships or Army chefs lugging into the back pantries of military mess halls, a box of squash big enough, as they say, to feed an army. Or in this case, a group more ravenous than any army: a group of 16 homeless teenage boys.

If you would have walked 200 people — maybe 2,000 or 12,000 — through the halls of the Solid Ground house in Humboldt Park, it's doubtful anyone else would have noticed that crate of butternut squash. But then again most people don't see the world quite the way Jeanne Pinsof Nolan does, having spent the last six years helping North Shore families build — and then maintain — custom vegetable gardens in their backyards.

Solid Ground is a supportive housing program for homeless youths aged 16-21, the first bilingual, male-focused shelter of its kind in Chicago. If you were to rank a list of details likely to stay with someone after a visit, that box of squash wouldn't even crack the top 100.

There's the 3500 block of West North Avenue, for instance, the sort of street where snow takes on the muddy hue of charcoal in the winter and the number of boarded-up shops equals the number of viable ones. On the corner is a convenience store where you can buy a bag of fresh Cheetos but often have trouble finding a banana — or any fruits or vegetables for that matter — in a hue other than dark mottled brown.

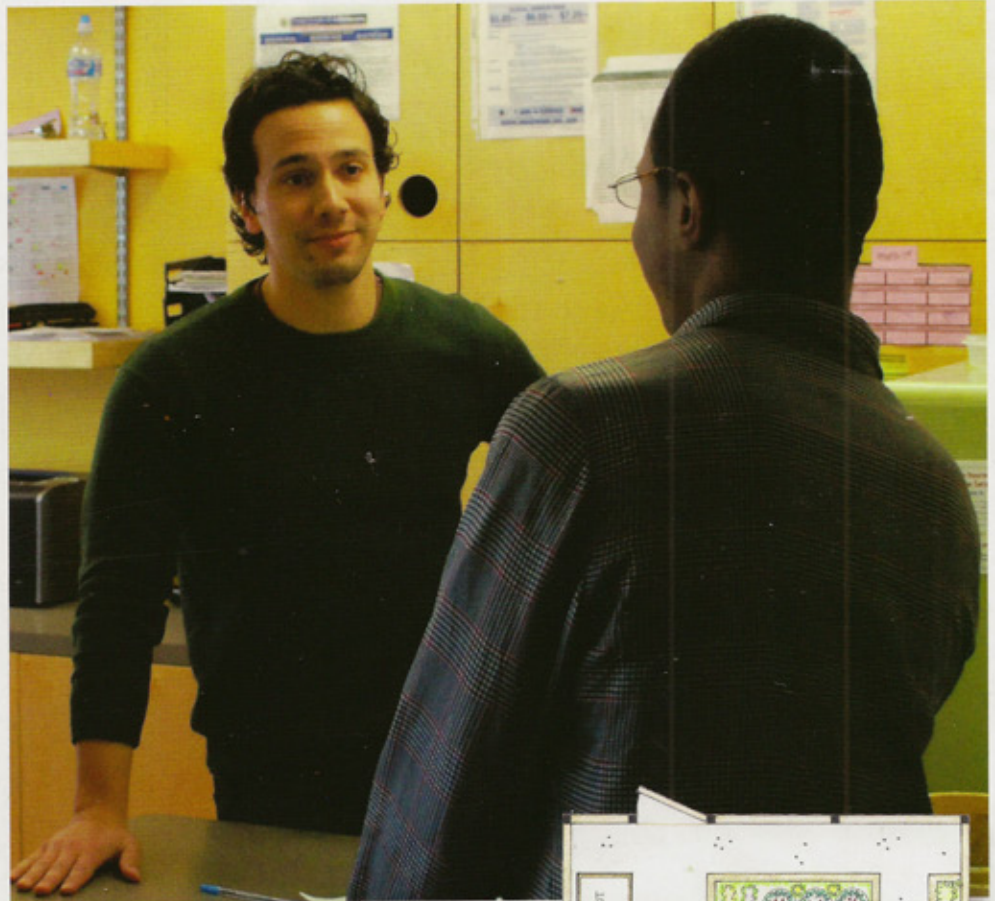
Down the block is a free crisis center run by La Casa Norte, Solid Ground's umbrella agency, which must fight constantly just to survive, as its promised state funding is woefully behind in its delivery. And then, perhaps most memorable of all, is Solid Ground itself, which on the outside looks as forlorn as the rest of the block, but on the inside is a 6,200-square-foot bastion of sunshine, both literally and symbolically.

Sunlight streams in through windows, which look like they've been permanently varnished with Windex. The walls are painted in festive yellows and oranges. Stairs lead up to 16 dorm-like bedrooms where Solid Ground's tenants sleep. And, of course, in the back is a kitchen — perpetually

buzzing with teenagers eating, talking and listening to music. Step outside from the kitchen and you'll come upon a small back patio boasting a park bench, a mural and a couple of positively sad-looking plastic buckets filled with the sort of gan-

gly old vines you usually reserved for Italian ruins and mounds of mulch.

Joe Hankey, the young program manager of Solid Ground, will tell you that the aims of his backyard "vegetable-pail garden" were modest at

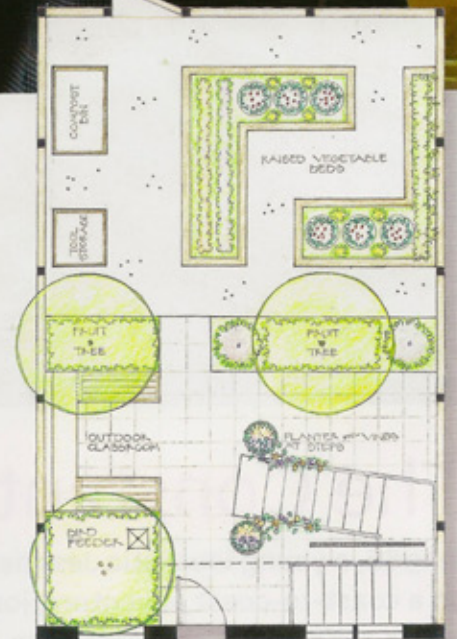


Joe Hankey, the young program director at Solid Ground, has longed to give his tenants nutritious dining options.

Jeanne Pinsof Nolan and Jackie Kotz's blueprint (right) for the Glencoe Union Church's garden at Solid Ground in Chicago.



A look at the garden space before its transformation.



by Organic Gardener

LA CASA NORTE • LANDSCAPE PLAN
Scale: 1" = 5'



best. He wanted his tenants to enjoy a bowl or two of pico de gallo when they had a craving. So he worked backward from the standard recipe. Tomatoes. Peppers. Cilantro. He found a few inexpensive buckets, some dirt and went to work.

The content of those pails — or rather the lack thereof — is the reason Jeanne Pinsof Nolan has made regular pilgrimages to Solid Ground for the last four months. Nolan runs the Glencoe-based garden-consultation business called The Organic Gardener, which helps families, schools and organizations plant and maintain vegetable gardens.

You can see the fruits (and vegetables) of her labor across the North Shore and Chicago, in backyards from Lake Forest to Wilmette, at the Edible Garden in Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago and on lush patches of green behind the Ravinia School in Highland Park and Central School in Glencoe.

It's a full-service operation. Design. Installation. Education. Maintenance. Fences can be built. Irrigation systems can be established. Seeds can be planted. Veggies can be harvested. Basically, a contract with the The Organic Gardener is an agreement to rent Jeanne Pinsof Nolan's two green thumbs for an extended period of time. They're at your disposal to use as you see fit.

So when one of Nolan's clients, a Glencoe Union Church member named Kathy Deveny, visited Solid Ground last summer and witnessed firsthand the sad yields being harvested from the patio's "plastic bucket garden," her mind immediately began flowering with ideas.

What, she wondered, might Nolan be able to do with an urban space like this one? Could she design a garden — both aesthetically uplifting and nutritionally beneficial — to help these young men find a modicum of peace? Could she design a garden that not only fed the body but helped heal the soul? And could the church, leaning on the vast talents of its congregation, then work with the young men to implement that design while teaching them invaluable life skills for their future endeavors?

Why not, she thought? Think of all the invisible roots that were already connected beneath the ground. One of Solid Ground's co-founders, Keith Decker, was a member of the Glencoe Union Church. Kathy, being a seasoned fundraiser, knew how to run a campaign like this, having co-



In backyards from Lake Forest to Glencoe, Jeanne Pinsof Nolan has helped amateur gardeners design, plant and cultivate their own vegetable gardens, yielding colorful baskets full of heirloom tomatoes like this one.

chaired the Glencoe Housewalk and overseen the annual arrival of the Watoto Children's choir from Uganda since 2003. And then there was Hankey himself who had made it a priority to talk to his tenants about the importance of well-balanced meals and proper nutrition, one of the pillars of Nolan's organic philosophy.

Besides, Kathy figured, this might be a good opportunity for Pinsof, a way of taking on a project unlike any she'd ever done before. Something new, something unique, something fresh.

She was correct in every point sans one. When Jeanne Pinsof Nolan agreed to work with the church on the project last fall, she wasn't so much agreeing to evolve as to return, in many ways, to the young girl she was so many years ago.



YOU SHOULD KNOW that when young Jeanne Pinsof Nolan — student-government president, national merit scholar — turned 18 years of age, she decided it would be in her best interest to leave home. There's no need to be melodramatic about it. There are all sorts of ways 18-year-old girls set off on their own toward womanhood.

Some leave screaming, hormones raging, screen doors slamming, like a tornado in the

night. Some just disappear, vanish, as if cast away by some sort of mysterious spell. And some, like Jeanne, float away like a wayward feather, gliding westward on a breeze of idealism toward some place brave and unknown.

The way Jeanne tells it, back in 1986 she'd take long walks around her neighborhood and come, one day, to a rather startling conclusion. What her neighborhood had in wealth, power and affluence, she believed, it lacked in "role models." And for young Jeanne, a role model wasn't so much someone who was financially successful as someone who "loved their life." A Romantic. A free spirit. An idealistic soul. A person unafraid, if need be, to follow their passions wherever they may lead.

Yes, there was a boy involved. There always is, isn't there? Pretty. Young. Idealistic. Beautifully naïve. It's almost a prerequisite for this sort of thing. If you're intent on changing the world, intent on playing Eve, sitting down to write your own shiny new book of Genesis in some place West of Eden, then you want an Adam by your side, if for nothing else to help carry some extra luggage on the long road toward your new beginning.

It rarely works out, of course. It certainly didn't in the case of Jeanne Pinsof Nolan. When she got to Arizona, she spent some time in her first authentic



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Kathy Deveny, who led the Glencoe Union Church's efforts at Solid Ground, hired Pinsof to design this garden for her home in Glencoe.

"health food" store — "it's where I saw the word 'organic' for the first time," she says, smiling — which led her further west to join an artist commune in California called Ecolibrium Arts Foundation.

When she came upon an organic farm there and put her hands into the soil, she found what she'd been looking for. Not supernatural clay but common dirt. Turns out, she didn't need an Adam, not a single relationship but 17 years worth of communal living, a chance to share her talents above ground the way the earth shares its nutrients below.

Just the sort of thing, she says with a wink, that every New Trier mother wants for her educated daughter. College? No. Farming with artists? Sure. "It was a different time," she says, "Most people were like, 'Your daughter wants to go live on an organic farm? Tell her, no.'"

But it turned out she was a natural. She and Mother Earth got a long like sorority sisters. On that California farm, Nolan walked over to the first sweet pea vine she saw, turned to the resident gardener and asked, "Isn't it time we harvest these?" The gardener smiled and handed her some gloves. The rest, she says, was all on-the-ground training.

She moved where the artists moved. They created, she sowed, first in California, near the

border of Mexico, then in Austin — her self-described "combat boot" years — where she realized there are two types of weeds in the world: the weeds where you live and Texas weeds. She grew vegetables by the crate load, selling them to restaurants, markets and the public. But she quickly realized she'd rather grow than sell, rather teach than barter. So she headed back east with the group to Asheville, North Carolina, where she developed her business skills — converting sweet-potato smoke shacks into art studios — while organizing lecture tours for the artists at local universities.

Then came her first child, Thea, and with her a change in priorities. "It became immediately obvious to me that she needed her extended family," says Nolan, who has since married and welcomed a second girl named Kisten to the family. "Although I lived with great people in this community, they weren't her kin. If a child has the option of having grandparents and aunts and uncles in the mix, a child should have that."

So she did, in essence, the unthinkable. She called up her mother — I don't know who was more shocked, Nolan says, me or my mother — and moved back to Winnetka with the intent to set down some roots of her own.

It was a Rip Van Winkle moment, like waking up from a 20-year nap. Winnetka hadn't magically transformed into the Catskills, but since she'd been gone, an almost equally surprising change had taken place. Winnetka, had to some degree, gone green.

"Blink your eyes," says Nolan, "and you would see six Priuses driving down the street."

Nolan's skills, however, had not changed, so she immediately began installing a backyard garden for her parents, which drew so much attention from friends that they asked whether she could build small vegetable gardens in their backyards. Before she knew it, she had a profitable business. Word spread so far, in fact, that Abby Mandel, the late founder of the Green City Market, hired Pinsof to help create an Edible Garden in the Lincoln Park Zoo.

The rest happened organically. A rooftop garden project for Uncommon Ground in Rogers Park. Then school projects. Then work with the Les Dames d'Escoffier on an after-school garden-

ing project with the McCormick Boys & Girls Club.

And before she knew it, a half of a decade had passed. By 2010, Nolan had worked on more gardens — hundreds of them, in one form or another — than she could count. She had clients up and down the North Shore, including boosters like Kathy Deveny, who e-mailed her one day about an initiative her church was considering: the creation of an urban garden behind a homeless shelter for teenage boys in Chicago. "Would you be interested," she wrote, "in a different kind of project ..."

Turns out, Nolan was more than interested. When she arrived at Solid Ground, she saw in young Joe Hankey, a reincarnation of her younger idealistic self. He talked about housing being a "basic human right." He talked about the difficulties of cooking nutritious meals in the middle of a bona fide food desert. And then got all misty eyed, tears welling up in his eyes, when he discussed how much he wanted to give his kids a place they could call home, a place with a bed to sleep in and a communal dinner table to break bread around at night.

"It's not enough for us to say, 'We're going to work with you on your resume and your job search and your GED,'" Hankey says, today, "and not also realize that they sometimes have zero energy, thanks to these empty calories, to achieve those goals."

And then, of course, Nolan saw that crate on the ground. The squash box. How many crates like that had she filled with vegetables over her 17 years at the commune? How many people did it not only feed but allow to thrive? To work? To inspire? To heal?

And it was at that moment that she realized this wasn't just a project for the boys at Solid Ground. Or a project for Joe Hankey or Kathy Deveny or Glencoe Union Church. It was a project for that inner idealist who never bothered to wilt away.

"There was not a moment of hesitation," says Pinsof, "the answer was immediate and absolute."



IT JUST SO HAPPENED that a few months earlier, Pinsof had been contacted by Jackie Kotz, a landscape architect with a long history of designing therapeutic gardens for hospitals, including Northwestern's New Prentice Women's Hospital. She'd just earned a certificate in healthcare garden design

from the Chicago Botanic Garden and wanted to implement her new skills. Might a partnership, Kotz wondered, be beneficial for both parties?

It would — especially for the Solid Ground garden design that had taken root in Pinsof's mind. The phrase that kept echoing in her head was an odd but important one: dirt therapy. She'd clipped out an article that asked the provocative question, "Is dirt the new Prozac?" which showed that active nutrients in soil could raise serotonin levels and boost mood. What better place to start, she figured, than with the central concept of a healing garden?

Of course, she'd already verified, from personal experience, the strange healing powers that can be borne from a day spent in the dirt. She'd worked with a young boy with ADHD at Lincoln Park Zoo who showed the kind of focus and endurance not usually associated with ADHD. There were junior gardeners, like Kathy Deveny's two children, who were as knowledgeable about vegetables as Alice Waters. And of course there were Pinsof's own afternoons spent in the garden, where stress held no dominion.

So Pinsof immediately began mapping out a design based around a single word: sanctuary. An environmental minimalist to her core, she started by designing her garden around the brick pavers in the backyard. Their wavy-lined ornamental design evoked in Pinsof's mind ancient Aztec patterns, symbols that would continue to speak to the mostly Latino community of Solid Ground.

Next she took a soil sample and found to her delight that the soil was not high in lead, which gave her free reign to sketch an audacious design. There would be cucumbers, peppers, eggplant, lettuce and tomatoes in the raised vegetable beds that wound around the walking paths in the back. Apple and pear trees would bloom as a natural border in the middle. And flowering vines and edible serviceberry trees would sprout a few steps away from the kitchen in the front.

This design was as vivid as blooming zucchini blossoms in Pinsof's mind, but on paper her sketches looked like caveman drawings from the Paleolithic Era. What she needed was Jackie's expertise in urban planning, not only accurate drawings — "I was way off with my tape measure," says Pinsof — but beautiful colored-pencil drawings to present to the Glencoe Union Church.

Recipe Book

Mirani's Adasi Soup

You'd think it would be different half the world away, in say, the Middle East, on the streets of Tehran, Iran. But boys will be boys. And dads will be dads. And where there are forbidden foods, young boys and old men are bound to follow.

And for young Kaveh Mirani, now the co-owner with his wife, Madeleine, of Mirani's in Winnetka, that forbidden food — deemed "unsanitary" by his mother — was a steaming bowl of lentil-rich adasi soup, ladled hot into a clay bowl and then onto the lagging tongues of workers, fathers and, of course, young boys wanting to eat like grown men.

Even when Mirani later emigrated to our shores to earn his master's degree in economics from the University of Chicago, he never forgot those cold winter afternoons with his father, when he would surreptitiously sip his adasi, creamy as chowder with enough protein to sustain him until dinner time, while his mom wasn't looking.

So when Mirani and his wife opened up a gourmet deli in Hubbard Woods, he made sure to offer a sampling of the Persian soup to sons and fathers from our shores. And when he formally opened Mirani's in 2006, he unveiled his own version of adasi, incorporating chipotle peppers and honey, building a bridge from Old World to New.

Mirani's, 727 Elm St., Winnetka, 847/441-5590



Chipotle Lentil Soup "Adasi"

SERVES 6

- 1 cup diced carrots
- 1 cup chopped onions
- ½ cup diced kohlrabi
- 3 cloves chopped garlic
- 1 ½ cup lentils, preferably small brown lentils, washed
- 2 tablespoons canola oil
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 1 tablespoon wine vinegar
- 1 tablespoon chipotle peppers in Adobo sauce (You may buy a can of these from many grocery stores in the Mexican-produce section. One can goes a long way).
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 4 cups beef or chicken broth and 4 cups of water (or 8 cups of water for a vegetarian version)
- ½ cup heavy cream
- ½ cup chopped cilantro for garnish.

1. In a medium-sized heavy stockpot heat up the oil on medium high. Sweat the vegetables (the first four ingredients) for about four minutes.
2. Add lentils, chipotle, vinegar, honey and cumin and stir for another two minutes. Add the liquids, bring to a boil and reduce heat to medium low. Cook until lentils are almost falling apart (about one hour).
3. Taste the soup, add salt or chipotle mix if necessary. Use a hand blender to blend the soup into a coarse texture. You should still be able to see small pieces of carrots and lentils in the soup. If you do not have a hand blender, use a regular kitchen blender. Bring the mixture back to heat; add the heavy cream and stir.
4. Serve in a rustic bowl and garnish with chopped cilantro. Serve with hot bread of your choice: flat Persian bread, Indian naan or a good French baguette.