

remarkable woman



Jeanne Nolan in her garden in Glencoe.

ANDREW A. NELLES/PHOTO FOR TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Jeanne Nolan

Organic gardener helps others reap the bounty of her experience

BY JENNIFFER WEIGEL
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Jeanne Nolan still remembers when the light bulb went on. She was a Winnetka teenager trying to find her purpose and “really into the environment,” Nolan says, “when nobody was talking about being ‘green.’ But I thought, ‘Doesn’t anyone on the North Shore realize there’s deforestation and air pollution and water pollution and species extinction?’ I wanted to make a difference.”

She was traveling through Flagstaff,

Drawing inspiration

Jeanne Nolan finds inspiration cooking dinner with the summertime harvest. “I don’t really plan. It’s like, grab a couple of harvest baskets, put on my tool belt, grab the pruner and that’s where dinner starts. That’s really fun for me.”

Ariz., in 1987 when she stopped at a health food store. She saw vegetables labeled “organic” and asked the clerk what that meant. She was told it meant they were grown without chemicals. “I said, ‘Do you

mean to tell me that all the food I’ve been eating my whole life has been grown with chemicals?’ ” she recalls. “I couldn’t even believe it.”

When Nolan returned home, she told her parents she was bypassing college to join a communal farm in California. There, she spent 17 years learning to grow organic food and build sustainable homes. The arrival of her first child created conflict with the commune’s attitude about raising a family, and Nolan returned to Winnetka in 2004. By then, sustainable farming had become a national movement. She decided

to apply her gardening knowledge in her own business, The Organic Gardener Ltd. (theorganicgardener.net), where she designs gardens and teaches people how to plant and harvest organic produce. She has also written a book, “From the Ground Up: A Food Grower’s Education in Life, Love, and the Movement That’s Changing the Nation” (Random House).

Today, Nolan not only works with individuals (including Mayor Rahm Emanuel and wife Amy Rule) but also schools, restaurants and nonprofit organizations. She designed, installed and maintains the Ed-

ible Gardens in Lincoln Park Zoo (in partnership with Green City Market), which is in its 10th season. Nolan, 45, lives in Glen-coe with husband, Verd Nolan, and daughters Thea, 13, and Kisten, 6. Following is an edited conversation.

Q: Were your parents upset that you chose to live on a farm instead of go to college?

A: My parents, Donna and Les Pinsof, are amazing people. They've been very supportive, but I'm sure there was some disappointment at the time. I had been a really good student, vice president of the student council at New Trier High School; I was an exemplary little citizen. My dad must have taken me to look at 20 colleges. But I had my first love, my first boyfriend, who was kind of a unique person. He read a lot of philosophy, and we really talked a lot about the earth, and I became a young environmentalist before the green movement (went mainstream).

So when I got home from Arizona and told my parents I wanted to work on a farm and grow organic food, a co-worker of my mom's saw an ad in The Reader that said they needed workers for a commune called Zendik Farm in Southern California. Zendik is a Sanskrit word for one who does not follow the established order. So I thought, "That's where I need to be."

Q: Was it a positive experience?

A: A lot about the commune was fantastic: eating all organic food, building sustainable homes. But there were some negative aspects to the experience that were pretty profoundly negative. The nuclear family type of relationships were really frowned upon. I didn't think it was a good place to raise children.

I left the commune when my oldest, Thea, was 2 and moved back home with my parents to figure out what I was going to do. That was really a low point. I was 35 and I had invested all of my energy into the philosophy of this commune, which was sort of like radical environmentalism. When I left the farm, I equated living in mainstream society as the worst possible thing to do. It was a big leap to leave but the best thing I ever did.

Q: Do you have moments wondering, "Am I doing enough?"

A: During my 17 years on the farm, I insulated myself and thought that was making a difference. But I didn't really realize that it was by moving back into mainstream society that I would really be able to feel like I was making a difference. The first couple years of having the business, I thought: "What am I doing? Does this even matter?" It seemed to pale in comparison to this revolution that I'd been a part of. When I was writing my book, I learned that one of the most effective ways for people to reduce their carbon footprint

was by growing (their) own food. It sort of dawned on me that maybe this was my way of continuing what I was passionate about from the start.

Q: Is it too late to start growing food in August?

A: There are some crops you can plant at the end of July and into August that will be ready in fall: lettuce, spinach, kale, chard, green beans, radishes, turnips, sugar snap peas, beets. It's too late to plant squash and pumpkins; they have to be planted earlier. But they thrive in the fall.

Q: Is there a fruit tree you would recommend to beginners?

A: The easiest tree that grows fruit that can grow in Illinois is a pear tree. But we also do apple trees and peach trees too.

Q: Do you listen to music when you garden?

A: I don't. I listen to the birds and the wind. But some of the music I've been enjoying lately would be Nina Simone, Blitzen Trapper and Django Reinhardt.

Q: Any advice for parents worried about kids carving their own paths?

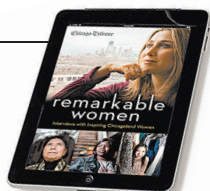
A: There are some people who don't do well in a linear trajectory that has already been preplanned and a path that has been walked by many others before us. Had you zeroed in on my life at any given time, it may have, on paper, sounded like a loser's life. "Single mom moves home at 35." "18-year-old high school superstar moves out and joins a commune." People thought, "What is she doing?"

But who knew that the thing I was most passionate about — learning how to grow food, which seemed so strange in 1987 — is now a national movement. It's important to let innovation happen, and innovation happens through individuals who take risks. I will have to remind myself of this as a parent as my daughters get older. What others say you're supposed to do isn't necessarily the way to live the life to its fullest and find happiness.

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