

# UC Santa Cruz

## Cultivating A Movement

### Title

Amy Katzenstein-Escobar: Life Lab Teacher

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# Amy Katzenstein-Escobar



Amy (right) and her two daughters

## Life Lab Teacher

*Amy Katzenstein-Escobar was the first pilot teacher for the Life Lab Science Program. She was born in 1956 in New Jersey, and grew up in Southern California. She came to UC Santa Cruz in the mid-1970s and entered the community studies major. She received a Ford Foundation education project grant to teach migrant children from Watsonville, became a teacher, and then began teaching at Salsipuedes School, where she participated in a pilot project for Life Lab in 1980. She discusses her Life Lab work in this oral history, conducted by Ellen Farmer on July 27, 2007, in an office on the UC Santa Cruz campus.*

### Additional Resources

Life Lab Science Program: <http://www.lifelab.org/>

Blog about Life Lab's History: <http://lifelabhistory.blogspot.com/2009/01/share-your-life-lab-story.html>

Roberta Jaffe and Gary Appel, *The Growing Classroom: Garden-Based Science and Nutrition Activity Guide* (Revised Edition 207) <http://www.lifelab.org/store-curricula.html#tgc>

## Beginnings

**Farmer:** This is Friday, July 27<sup>th</sup> [2007], and I'm here with Amy Katzenstein-Escobar, the first Life Lab pilot teacher in our region. So, Amy, talk to me about your personal background, like where you were born and where you grew up?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1956, and it was too cold for my mom, so three months after I was born, I moved to New Jersey, and then in 1962, the family, which was three other siblings and my parents, moved to Southern California to work (my dad was a scientist) to work in the space race that was going on there.

**Farmer:** So where did you go to high school?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** I went to Pacific Palisades High School, known as Pali High, and I graduated there in 1974. When I was growing up in Southern California, I knew I wanted to live in the country. My fantasy was that I was going to go to a rural place to school. I was going to live in the country. I was going to have my own garden; I was going to have my own chickens and goats and kind of communal living. That was a fantasy. I kept trying to get my parents to move out of the city and up to where I could have a horse and be in a much more rural community, but they didn't want to do that at that point in their lives. So when my older brother was looking at colleges, we took family trips, and I saw UC Santa Cruz, and that was the place that I really wanted to go.

My dad was a gardener. What I did on the weekends and how my dad and I related was through gardening. When he was growing up, my grandmother was so sure he was going to be a farmer that she actually bought him land in Louisiana, where he grew up. He ended up not staying in Louisiana. He hated the culture of Louisiana at that time, very racist, and he left. But in his heart, he always wanted to be a farmer. He did give that to me. So I knew a lot about farming that I don't think the average person living in a city would have known, or maybe had an interest in.

**Farmer:** You said he was a scientist.

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Yes.

**Farmer:** Was that also part of why he liked gardening, or was gardening more of an avocation?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** I think he just loved the idea of growing things. His mother was an avid, avid gardener, my grandmother. She always had a garden and orchids. She was very interested in orchids.

**Farmer:** So it was ornamental gardening.

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** No, that was later in her life. She had an apartment in her eighties and grew orchids and African violets. She would just grow anything to grow—but when they were growing up, they had a big garden.

**Farmer:** Oh, like a vegetable garden?

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**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Yes, because he grew up in the Depression, so they grew all their own vegetables and did a lot of bartering in their neighborhood and things like that. They grew their own vegetables. She just knew a lot about plants and loved flowers but also did the practical gardening, too.

**Farmer:** So did you visit there when you were a child?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Yes, I did visit my grandparents. They lived their entire life in Shreveport, Louisiana. I don't really remember gardening that much. I just remember admiring that she had land and a garden. It wasn't, like, an acre of land. By the time we came, they weren't gardening for their livelihood, like in the twenties and thirties when they [had been]. It was just kind of fun to have their own homegrown tomatoes, things like that. She did a lot of canning. I think that was just from the Depression era, when you had to can your tomatoes, you had to can your fruit. So my dad grew up with that and loved those activities. Even though we lived in the city, we used to go out and pick apricots out in Lancaster, which is a couple of hours north of Los Angeles, and we picked cherries, and then we did these big canning days together. That was all from his childhood.

Then I worked at a camp in the Trinity Alps. I went there as a child, and the thing I was attracted to was the garden. They had probably an acre of garden that fed that camp. Then I became a counselor in my first year of college. I was the gardening counselor. They hired counselors by their specialty, so my specialty was the garden. I did learn a lot there, and I always liked it. I knew I wanted to incorporate that into my teaching.

**Farmer:** That makes sense. And did you always work without chemicals, or did you ever use them?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** No, I never worked with chemicals, always worked without them. My dad didn't believe in them, either. He always felt like it was nature's way. If [pests] came and your roses weren't perfect, it was okay, because that's kind of like—let everybody eat some of the leaves. He was kind of an imperfect gardener. I wouldn't say he was the kind that put the powder on the roses. We had roses, but they were always full of aphids and things like that. (laughs)

But he was always thinking scientifically. He felt really bad when we would go and see field workers stooping and picking, and how hard that life would be. Wasn't there some way they could have jobs, but not such hard jobs in the field of agriculture? Could we somehow make it so that they weren't stooping all day? There were a lot of articles. My parents were intellectuals, so they would read about this in kind of an intellectual way of, "Oh, my God! These poor people! They're in the fields, and they have terrible health problems." My dad was always thinking there's got to be a way that we can do farming and not have such backbreaking labor. When he eventually started his own farm in his retirement, those were the kinds of things he was thinking about. One of the things he sort of was a pioneer in was planting seedlings in greenhouses and transplanting them by machine to the field. So the first six weeks, when the people are really trying to get these plants to grow, they're already established. The things that go on in greenhouses are much easier work than being in the hot,

hot fields, stooping all day. In a greenhouse you're not standing and stooping. So those were the kinds of things my dad was thinking about: how can we make farming productive, but not as labor intensive that it is backbreaking labor. That's how he got started on his farming business.

**Farmer:** And he had a farm and another business?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** He had a farm in Arroyo Grande, which is in the Central Coast, San Luis Obispo area. He wanted to get a farm in Santa Cruz. But my mom was a city gal, and she wanted to have a place that was close enough to Los Angeles (she was a psychologist) to have her practice. So she was, like, "Okay, we'll compromise and do it in Central California so I can come up and join you for long weekends, and I can still have my practice in Los Angeles." They did look at a lot of properties in Santa Cruz, but it was just too far away from my mom's practice. So that's how they settled in that area. And the farm is still going today.

**Farmer:** Who is taking care of it?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** It's called Greenheart Farms. It's a huge farm. It's about eighty acres of farm. They do seedling transplants, what my dad started. And they do have an organic house. They have roses, and they have poinsettias. About 500,000 poinsettias go out.

**Farmer:** Oh, my!

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**Katzenstein-Escobar:** It's all run by this one man who was an organic tomato farmer that my brother met and introduced to my dad, and now he's become the CEO of this farm. I'm on the board of that. Basically the shares that my parents owned, now the four of us siblings own part of it. We don't have a lot of say in it. If I had a lot more say, I would do a lot more organic.

**Farmer:** Is that chemical fertilizers, then, to make things grow?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Yes, poinsettias. I don't know what they do to poinsettias to make them bloom so much and have perfect— They do a lot of experimentation with poinsettias. Like they had this really dark purple eggplant color, which came from Costa Rica. There are people there who are workers from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and they say, "Oh, we have this great plant. Would you like me, when I go back home, to get seeds?" So they do have a whole experimental seed program going on. But they also have a huge drive to make it in the agricultural business, the business world of agriculture.

**Farmer:** So do they have contracts with nurseries and things like that?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Yes, they have contracts with nurseries. And they have a website where you can order. Cut roses is a huge business. It's not like in Watsonville. They don't do cut roses; they do the plants which those people buy to cut the roses. And they bought a rose business out of the East Coast called Norcal Roses. They bought that, and so they have all the rights to those breeds of roses. I guess roses are a less labor-intensive, [more] high money-making type



business. They got all the people who mail-ordered from that rose company. They got the list of people who order bare-root roses.

**Farmer:** Did he invent the machines that plant those starts?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** He didn't invent them, [but] he was one of the people who thought of the whole transplant way they come to the fields, and the machines put the transplant in the field.

**Farmer:** Aren't there people sitting on a little seat? But they don't have to lean over; they sit in it.

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Right, yes. That was his concept. But he didn't patent that or anything like that. He just kind of helped get that idea rolling, and then someone else took it over.

**Farmer:** It's like a reclining, recumbent bicycle.

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Yes.

**Farmer:** It's ergonomically healthy for people.

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** That's what he was thinking about, and that's what he wanted. We had a cabin in Mammoth, which you have to go through the Owens Valley [to get to], which is a whole place that water was sucked dry from [to transport to] Southern California. He really wanted to do something to restore the whole [ecology]—put salt grasses back to restore the quality of the land. In fact, PG&E [Pacific Gas & Electric] of Southern California got a big contract with

my dad's Greenheart Farms, and they did I don't know how many thousands of acres of salt grasses in an attempt to restore that whole Owens Valley. That's the kind of work my dad was interested in. But once he died, the farm has not done any of that kind of work. You know: There's a problem here; how can we solve it with agriculture?

**Farmer:** Restorative agriculture.

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Right.

**Farmer:** I think the Farm Bill just passed this morning, or at least it passed the House. There is a lot of money for conservation improvements through farming.

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Right. And that's what my dad was interested in. That was a huge contract for the farm. We [his children] were very interested in that project because it was such a pet project of my dad's. We tried to get them to keep being interested in it. But it was like, "Oh, well, if they call us"—but they weren't pursuing it like my dad did.

**Farmer:** What was your dad's name?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Henry Katzenstein. I was talking to the woman who runs the horticulture department at Cabrillo [College]—Tom Dunks' wife, Patty [B.] Dunks. Do you know her?

**Farmer:** I don't know her.

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** She was one of the big people in agriculture, and she worked with Rich [Merrill].<sup>1</sup> She wrote *Gardening with Children*<sup>2</sup>, and she was really always into gardening and schools and children. Tom Dunks was a local principal in Soquel. She was really interested in getting that CD of the process of the restoration project. My nephew who lives here in Santa Cruz did the CD project. He did the history of this project.

I was seventeen when I graduated from high school, and Santa Cruz was, in my mother's eyes, a very dangerous place. There had been a lot of murders. It was called the "murder capital of the world," and she just did not want to send me off to Santa Cruz.<sup>3</sup> So we started looking at other campuses in Northern California, rural campuses, and I ended up going for a year and a half to Sonoma State University. But I ended up back at Santa Cruz, because I turned eighteen, and I was living with my boyfriend, and at that point my mom was like, "Oh, okay. If you have a boyfriend and you both go there together, that's okay with me." So we both put in our applications, and that's how I got to UC Santa Cruz.

**Farmer:** And what did you major in?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** At Sonoma State, I told them I wanted to be a teacher. I knew that I loved kids and I could take all these practices that I thought were really great, like farming and agriculture, and I could bring them into the classroom. So that was my idea of combining my love for children and my love for the community, and agriculture, and creative play for kids into the classroom. So when I went to Sonoma State, they said, "Well, the whole way this state is

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going, if you want to teach in the state of California you have to become bilingual. They will not hire you unless you know Spanish.”

I had taken a lot of Spanish in high school, and I had been really interested in the culture, so that was, like oh, yay! I can keep going in Spanish. So the first thing I did before I even entered UCSC was I took their Spanish language intensive program for the summer. I was going to be a Latin American studies major. I took up to Spanish 5, and then I started taking lit classes in Spanish. It was way too intellectual for me. I was writing papers in Spanish and analyzing papers, and it was, like, I just want to *be* in the community, talking to people. “I want to be in Watsonville. I want to be up in Davenport,” and they went, “Well, I think you’d be better in community studies, because community studies is where you really go out and you’re involved with the community.”

So I changed my major from Latin American studies to community studies. I started volunteering all over the county. Davenport was the first elementary school with farm workers. I had always wanted to live on a farm, but then I started meeting farm workers and their parents, and I fell in love with who they were as a people. They were always really kind and so grateful for anything I did, so that was a direction that I started going in.

I was in community studies, and I was working with migrant kids in Watsonville, and I saw that there was a Ford Foundation education project that you could apply [for]. There was a group of people who had an idea that we really wanted to teach the migrants year ‘round, so that when they went back to Mexico after the strawberry season, which ends in October, we would follow our

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migrant students down to Mexico and we would teach them there, so that we could understand what was going on for six months of their lives and be better teachers and they could continue their English so they wouldn't forget everything. So I wrote a grant, and it was accepted.

**Farmer:** What were you, like, twenty?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Yes, I'm, like, twenty years [old], maybe nineteen then. I did my student teaching at Freedom Elementary School, which is the feeder school (still is, I think, but I don't know) for Buena Vista Migrant Camp. So I knew the kids from my student teaching. I left before them to go down—so I was down there for August and September before they arrived in October.

**Farmer:** Which part of Mexico?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** It's the state of Michoacán, about three hours south of Guadalajara. In Watsonville in the late seventies, early eighties, most of the people, migrants, came from Michoacán because it has a very similar climate, and therefore grows similar crops. I have pictures of Michoacán where I lived that look exactly like Watsonville. If you put the two pictures together, you wouldn't know whether you were talking about Watsonville or Michoacán, they're so similar. Now we're having a whole new immigrant population from Oaxaca, but the first wave of immigrants, at least twenty-five years ago, were from the state of Michoacán. So that's where I lived, in a small village named Tangancicuaro. I worked at Gomez Farms about six kilometers up the road. I

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became very close to a lot of my students. The experience really made me a much better teacher because I understood their culture and life in Mexico.

Still in my life today—just an example: A plumber came to my house, and he was from Mexico, and he had been raised in schools in Watsonville. I said, “Oh, I lived in Mexico.” It turns out he was from the same town where I lived in Mexico. If I go into Watsonville and talk to anybody who owns restaurants there, most of them are from the state of Michoacán. They have so much more respect for you because you’ve been where they have spent their lives, and [know about] their culture.

I came back, and I started teaching at Salsipuedes School, and that’s where I did the pilot project for Life Lab. A lot of these kids— their parents were in agriculture, but they had no idea what agriculture really was and how important it was to everyone. I really wanted to emphasize it, because they always felt like they were embarrassed to tell me that their parents were field workers. I really wanted to give credit. You know, we study science and we study how plants grow because it’s one of the most important things that we do as a society. Part of my wanting to emphasize that was making them feel like they were important members of our society. They weren’t just migrant farm workers.

As a teacher, I learned that when students went back to their villages in Mexico, they were the highest, most esteemed kids in their town. Because they were migrants, they had money. They had the best houses; they had the best clothing; they had the bicycles—all these material things that the other kids didn’t have. Then when they were in our schools, it was exactly the opposite. So they lived

this life of feeling really good about themselves in their country, and then coming here and feeling like they were at the bottom of the totem pole.

### **Piloting the Life Lab Program**

I think that bridge of what your parents do is so important, and how does it fit into our curriculum, and why we study agriculture. That was one of my reasons that I wanted to pilot the Life Lab program. The people doing it at that time, we were all young; we were all really enthusiastic and had a lot of energy. It was during the time we were concerned about the nuclear power plants being built; Chernobyl happened; we were really worried about our food supply. I wanted to bring in all these aspects in my teaching.

**Farmer:** Was your pilot year with Life Lab the same as your first year of teaching?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Yes. It was my first year of teaching, 1980.

**Farmer:** Did you have a plot of land at the school?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** I didn't have a plot of land at the school. I had a principal who was Latino and he had been a farm worker, and he had absolutely no interest in this project. He basically said to me, "You can do it, but you can't use any of the land. Just do it yourself." He wasn't very supportive of it. A friend made planter boxes for me. In front of my classroom we had planter boxes that the kids planted and harvested.

**Farmer:** So they were somewhat portable?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Yes, in fact they went with me when I went to Alianza School, which was two years later. Alianza was a bilingual school that was started in 1981. It was funded through desegregation money in Santa Cruz County, so we got a lot of kids from Aptos area schools being bused into Alianza to form an alliance and to create a totally bilingual, bicultural school. Gary Bloom was our principal, and he came around to every school and hand picked his whole staff. It was very exciting to be in a new school and with a new staff that all had [a] very similar philosophy. I'd say that was the high point of my teaching.

One of the things that the parents in Aptos wanted was a full-time science teacher. They were polled to see if their kids were bused, what were the things that they wanted to see. And one was a full-time science teacher, a full-time art teacher, full-time PE teacher, and bilingual classes.

**Farmer:** So you taught Spanish to the English-speaking kids?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Yes.

**Farmer:** And you were the science teacher?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** I wasn't the science teacher. I was a fifth grade bilingual teacher, and the kids went to a separate science teacher, a separate PE teacher, and a separate arts teacher, music teacher. Basically, we did Spanish one day and English one day. I taught all in Spanish one day and taught all in English another day. Since I was an upper-grade teacher, if my kids had just come from Mexico, they went to a different teacher. I didn't have my kids for reading. It was, like:



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okay, whoever was at this level has Amy. So my kids were all scattered for reading. But I taught reading in English. Transitional reading, it was called, because they had all started to read in Spanish, and they were transitioning.

This was a philosophy in California at that time, is that once they really have a solid base for reading, transferring to a different language is really easy, sort of like us when we learn a foreign language and we already have such a good basis of reading in our native language—to read in another language is easy. You can't understand everything, but you know how to read.

The whole philosophy in California during the late seventies and early eighties was: Of course, let them learn to read in their native language, and then transition them into English, and all you have to work on is building a rich vocabulary. You don't have to work on the skill. I still feel like that is the way that would be best to teach kids to read: to love their own language and transition into our language. But it changed around 1985. They gave this Bilingual Education Act about five years, and then they decided that it was not working and that they were spending way too much money. So they took away *all* the money for bilingual education. You got rid of your aides. We had full-time aides. When we were teaching Spanish, the aide could be teaching English or vice versa. They really didn't give it, I don't think, enough time to really see if it worked.

And then the English-only came into the schools.

**Farmer:** That was sometime in the nineties, right?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** In the nineties. So from 1985 to the mid-1990s, they just said, well, you can do bilingual education, but we're not going to support it at all. We'll take away all the funding, and if you think you can make it work, good luck. It was very disappointing because there was so much enthusiasm. There was a lot of enthusiasm from the Anglo population in Watsonville, and the Japanese, and all the different ethnic groups—they wanted their kids to be bilingual. The schools were much less segregated in the early eighties in Watsonville. I would say my first class was probably fifty-fifty English-Spanish. It was a very special thing to be in a bilingual class. You had to apply for it. The parents had to ask for it. It was a privilege. And that really shifted when they took away the funding and you had to teach bilingually with no help. That was really hard.

### Life Lab Curriculum

**Farmer:** So how did you fit Life Lab into all of this? How much time of your day did it take, and what did it look like at the school?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Okay, so Life Lab. I was pretty much alone when I did it at Salsipuedes. When I brought it over to Alianza, a lot of the teachers decided to do Life Lab. It was a unit in the science teacher's curriculum, and it was being piloted and used. By that time, they had started developing curriculum, like books. I like to have a concept and make up my own curriculum, and I think the people who started Life Lab really liked that about me, that I was very creative. But for most teachers around the nation, they felt like they had to put it into a book and do a step-by-step program in which everything was very spelled out

and put into grade levels. I understood why it was organized that way, because most people don't feel as comfortable with it. "Okay, here's a packet of seeds." How are you going to explain to kids what to do with these seeds? They needed a step-by-step curriculum. Plus, Life Lab started being outsourced. They hired aides to teach the science lessons instead of the classroom teacher. So they would say, "Okay, take this group of kids out, and here's a lesson."

Life Lab was very much a concept of planting seeds, and then I could do with that what I wanted to do. But then, as it got more and more refined, it was a first-through-sixth-grade curriculum and you started with what they recommended in first grade. It was all good, but I never really followed it step by step. I looked at things, and I did a pick-and-choose [of] what I thought were the creative lessons that I liked. Some of them were just too structured, I thought.

But I did talk to Robbie Jaffe<sup>4</sup> about this, and I talked to Gary Appel. They felt that to make it a saleable program and make it viable for all public schools throughout the United States, they had to make it very much a how-to, step-by-step program. They had to get it approved by the State of California. I think they went through the science curriculum board that you have to have the approval of to be able to have it be [taught]. You know, when school districts get to choose a curriculum, it has to be approved; it has to be on their approval list by the State of California.

**Farmer:** I understand that, and probably most states have a similar thing. But was Life Lab itself a program that they were selling?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Not at first. At first it was just, “Let’s introduce children to gardening in Santa Cruz County.” It was a very, very local program. It started at Green Acres School. And that’s where Gary got his first—I think his first job there. That was the huge pilot project, where solar energy was going on, and there were goats. They had teamed up with the local 4-H Clubs and things like that. So it was very local.

And then people really liked it in Santa Cruz County. They started first piloting to a few teachers. Then teachers were saying, “I like the idea of gardening, but I don’t know how to do gardening. I need a step-by-step manual, a kind of manual guide.”

**Farmer:** “And I’ll buy it.”

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** “And I’ll buy it.” Exactly. So it became, “Oh, well, we could market this.” There was a big Life Lab book that they did. The concepts were in there, but it wasn’t a step-by-step. That’s what I used. And then by the time I got to Santa Cruz City Schools (I transferred after my first child, so that was in 1986), it was already by grade level. If you’re teaching grade four, here is your Life Lab science curriculum for fourth grade. And it was like, “Oh, but I love doing — that.” “No, no, that’s first grade curriculum.”

But it was popular. I was at DeLaveaga [elementary school], and I think I did a little Life Lab there. Then I went to Bay View, and they were doing Life Lab. So it definitely caught on to all the schools within Santa Cruz city. Teachers liked it so

much. They gave workshops [and then] they decided to expand it throughout California and then throughout the United States.

It was a way of marketing it to teachers who didn't have just an intrinsic interest and background.

### **Two Audiences for Life Lab**

When my sister's kids were growing up in Southern California, she would say, "Oh, we're doing Life Lab at our school." It became a household school word. A lot of schools had Life Lab gardens.

**Farmer:** Do you think there was some kind of transitional time period when fewer and fewer households had their own gardens, where it became important to have it in schools?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** I think there were two audiences for Life Lab. A lot of kids didn't really understand where their food came from because they were living in cities. And also in Santa Cruz, I think not that many people had gardens, and so that was really important to teach kids about. In Watsonville, they would see the fields and fields, and a lot of parents were workers, but they didn't understand the importance of what their parents were doing. It was two different audiences, I think. But for most of Life Lab, I think that was a huge draw. We are getting away from family farms, and kids aren't growing things. They don't understand how all of this is coming to be.

The interesting thing is, when I moved to my current home in 1985, my next-door neighbor began making educational films about plants and agriculture. George Levenson, who was a filmmaker, also did *The Pumpkin Circle* and *Bread Comes to Life*. It was really nice because he knew I was a teacher, so he used a lot of my knowledge of Life Lab and how it all fits in to do these two films, which I think work very nicely into the Life Lab curriculum. Kids see pumpkins but they don't really understand the significance of a pumpkin. And the same with bread and where it comes from. So he went back to the wheat fields. I would take kids to my house for field trips, and we'd go on a field trip to George's farm, because he had a farm, a little mini-farm right in his back yard, to show kids how you could grow everything right in your own backyard if you wanted to. That was just coincidental, that I moved next door to a person who was interested in gardening, and teaching, and spreading the word. My kids were in some of his films. He came and used my kids as sort of [an] experiment—pictures of them making bread in the classroom and that kind of thing.

### Other Changes in Central Coast Agriculture

**Farmer:** One story you were telling me before [the interview] was about the family that lived next door to your school that had their own farm.

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Oh, yes. The Cavanaughs have Cavanaugh Color. They live really near Salsipuedes School, and they were one of the parents of our school who really supported Life Lab, because they had a family farm. They still do. They sell little four-inch annuals and perennials to Lumberman's and

Orchard Supply. They're a local nursery who was interested in agriculture. They're also at the farmers' markets and things like that.

Oh, [another] family was the Momii family. They bought an old apple orchard in Watsonville, and they were going to go back to the land and start their organic apple farming. This was in the mid-seventies, early eighties. And they did that. But it was really hard to make a living. They were very supportive of Life Lab. Their daughter was in my first class. I kept in touch with them because they were such wonderful people and I loved their ideas. But they eventually had to both go back to the classroom. They were both trained as teachers, so they went back and taught. But they had a dream of— In fact, they're good friends with [the] Thomases, who have Thomas Farm. Their daughter and son both worked for Thomas Farms. They were connected to that community for a while, but they couldn't make a living from it.

**Farmer:** What about any of the students that you had? Have you heard of any of them going on in agriculture?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** I don't know of anybody that's in agriculture except for the Cavanaugh's. Their son helps run the business. Most of the kids I knew, their parents weren't the owners of the farms. In fourth grade I taught a lot on the Japanese internment, so a lot of parents, when they heard that their kids were studying this, came in and told me their history of what it was like to be a Japanese-American farmer in Watsonville during the 1940s.

## The Cannery Workers

And the cannery strike [in 1985] was a huge deal in Watsonville. We did a lot of support around that.

**Farmer:** Yes, Watsonville used to be a big cannery center.

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Huge cannery center. I mean, almost everybody you spoke to—the recent immigrants were the field workers, and then a lot of the kids that I was teaching—their parents were now cannery workers. They had moved up, and they were getting union wages.

**Farmer:** Was that Green Giant and Birdseye and those big companies?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** And Shaw, yes. When they decided to outsource that in the eighties and not pay union wages, that was a huge, huge economic blow to Watsonville. That's what started, I think, a lot of things that weren't in Watsonville before that: a lot more gang activity, a lot more strife in the community. Before, it was such a thriving agricultural community with the cannery workers and the union wages going with the canneries. You could rent a house. They could save money and buy a house, or pool with two families. There were livable wages in Watsonville for the prices of houses at that time.

**Farmer:** So the strike was about outsourcing?<sup>5</sup>

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Outsourcing, and they wanted to cut their wages and cut their benefits. They were getting rid of the union. And they weren't outsourcing yet, but they were cutting back. They weren't closing down, but they were



cutting back and doing some of the work other places. They wanted to stop giving the livable wage, and they wanted to stop giving good health benefits, and basically said, “Well, if you don’t do this, then we’re going to move away.” That was basically the threat. It was like, “You either take this huge cut or”— And then [the workers] were saying, “But we can’t pay our mortgages, and we can’t feed our kids on that income.” It was huge, because the schools were the main places doing fundraising for [the strike]. We were providing clothing. We were doing drives, because a lot of [workers’ families] were losing their homes, and they didn’t know what to do. There weren’t any other jobs they were qualified to do, and they had a mortgage to pay. We did flea markets, opened the schools up for things on weekends so that they could sell, and barter and that kind of stuff. That, I think, is a really sad part of Watsonville history. Well, there was a cannery right here in [the] Seabright [neighborhood of Santa Cruz] also, right by my house. That was a working cannery when I moved in.

**Farmer:** Is that where the climbing gym is?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** That’s where the climbing gym is, and Beckman’s Bakery and Black China Bakery is there, and there’s a salsa company that has moved in.

**Farmer:** What kind of cannery was it?

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** It was pear. You could smell the pears, and the train would come by and dump the pears. It’s really interesting, because I was reading about—if you go right down Seabright, there was that building for sale on eBay. It was kind of dilapidated. Those were cannery worker apartments.

**Farmer:** Oh, with an ocean view.

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** With an ocean view. (laughs) Cannery workers in the fifties and sixties were living in Santa Cruz in apartments that now are coveted, million-dollar places. That's what they built for cannery workers.

**Farmer:** It was such a rural area. There were the sardine canneries in Monterey. That's what happened here for a long time. The apples and—

**Katzenstein-Escobar:** Right. There were these vacation people that came for a few months, but the real work that was going on were the canneries and the fishing and the lumber.

**Farmer:** Well, thank you, Amy.

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<sup>1</sup>See the oral history with Richard Merrill in this series.

<sup>2</sup> Thom and Patty Dunks, *Gardening with Children: a Guide for Parents and Teachers* (Harvest Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup>A series of serial murders in Santa Cruz in the early 1970s earned Santa Cruz this terrible nickname, and presented difficulties for UC Santa Cruz in attracting students to the campus.

<sup>4</sup> See the oral history with Robbie Jaffe in this series.

<sup>5</sup> In his review of Jon Silver's documentary "Watsonville On Strike" Geoffrey Dunn writes, "In September of 1985, over 1,500 Teamster-organized cannery workers walked out on the two largest frozen food companies in the United States — Watsonville Canning and Richard A. Shaw Frozen Foods. The strike became a national *cause celebre* for U.S. leftists and served as a bitter reflection of corporate agribusiness run amok . . . The strike was . . . to go on and on, for five months at Shaw's and for over a year-and-a-half at Watsonville Canning."—*Jump Cut*, no. 35, April 1990, pp. 117-120.