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Gail Harlamoff: Executive Director, Life Lab Science Program

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3862v84f>

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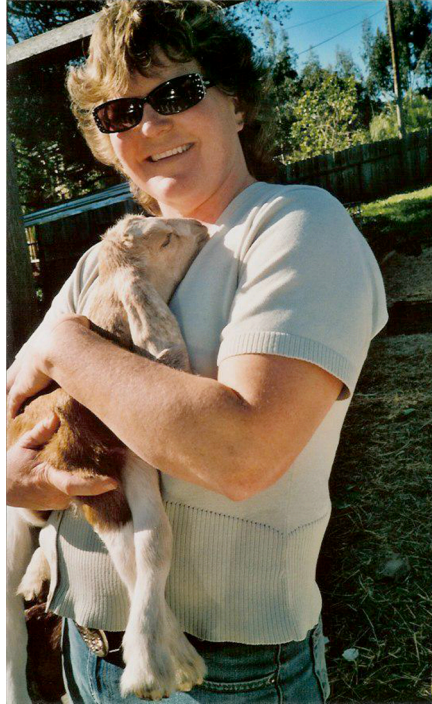
Publication Date

2010-05-01

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3862v84f#supplemental>

Gail Harlamoff



Executive Director, Life Lab Science Program

Gail Harlamoff is Executive Director of the Life Lab Science Program, a nationally recognized, award-winning nonprofit science and environmental organization located on the UC Santa Cruz campus. Founded in 1979, Life Lab helps schools develop gardens and implement curricula to enhance students' learning about science, math, and the natural world. The program has trained tens of thousands of educators in more than 1400 schools across the country.

Life Lab's specialized initiatives include LASERS (Language Acquisition in Science Education for Rural Schools)—also known as the Monterey Bay Science Project—which trains teachers in the region to teach language development through scientific exploration. The Waste Free Schools program helps teachers and students reduce school waste through conservation. And the

organization's model Garden Classroom, located on the Farm at UCSC's Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems, is used for teacher training and school field trips and events.

Harlamoff grew up in a (then) relatively rural section of suburban Soquel, in Santa Cruz County, with a large garden that provided much of the family's food. Her own struggles as a hands-on student in schools that emphasized rote memorization, and the strategies she cultivated to overcome those struggles, yielded insights that later helped her excel as elementary school teacher. In 1987, during Harlamoff's first year teaching school, a Life Lab workshop for teachers rekindled her childhood interest in gardening, and set her on a path that led to joining the Life Lab staff in 1996 and eventually taking on the executive director position.

Sarah Rabkin conducted this interview at Harlamoff's home in Soquel, California, on July 8, 2008. Harlamoff told detailed stories about children excelling in garden-based settings who had struggled in conventional classrooms. Outside the house, goats played and rested in a large fenced area, while in Harlamoff's kitchen, adjacent to the room where the interview was being conducted, her exuberant dogs got into occasional bouts of benign mischief.

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>

Food, What?! Youth Empowerment Program: <http://foodwhatblog.blogspot.com/>

Beginnings

Rabkin: This is July 8, 2008, and I'm in Soquel, [California.] This is Sarah Rabkin interviewing Gail Harlamoff about Life Lab. So, Gail, I want to start with some background about you, going back to when and where you were born.

Harlamoff: I was born in 1962 in the old Community Hospital in Santa Cruz.

Rabkin: And where did you grow up?

Harlamoff: Here. [laughs] At the very end of Maplethorpe Lane. My grandparents had a chicken farm on Old San Jose Road, and they sold it, bought a house on Monterey Avenue, spent some time looking for property, and ended up buying twenty acres on Maplethorpe. By the time I was born, my parents had built a house up at the top of the hill.

Rabkin: And what experiences did you have in childhood that sparked an interest in farming, gardening, agriculture?

Harlamoff: My grandmother and grandfather lived next door to us. So it was a community. We lived in our own community. There were only four or five houses on the road when I grew up. Soquel Drive was kind of gravelly, and we used to sit on a stump in the middle of the road to take a bus. It was very different. I always feel like I'm really old when I talk about that, but it was very, very different. There were a lot of Mormon families around here, and so we got

fresh milk from them. My mom did a lot of preserving. My grandparents and my mom had a huge garden. It was probably an acre of garden, and that's what we lived on.

So that was my initial interest, and then I stopped gardening for a while. And believe it or not, it was a Life Lab workshop that I went to in my first year of teaching, that Erika Perloff¹ was teaching, [where] I went, "Wow." For about three or four years, I hadn't done any gardening. Then I went right back to it after going to the Life Lab workshop.

Rabkin: Do you remember when that was?

Harlamoff: It had to have been 1987. So I'd done some little gardening, but it was just sort of hit and miss, more like helping my grandparents and my mom.

Rabkin: I want to come back to that in a little bit, but for a moment let's jump back to— So you're growing up in Soquel. And where did you go to school?

Harlamoff: I went to pre-school at the little white church in Soquel. [laughs]

Rabkin: The one downtown, in the middle of Soquel Village?

Harlamoff: Yes. There was a little pre-school there. Then I went to Soquel Elementary School, which my dad and aunt also went to. Then I went to Capitola Junior High, which at the time was known as "the hippie school." [laughs]

Soquel Elementary School funneled into two different schools. There was Branciforte Junior High or Capitola Junior High. Then from Capitola Junior High, we went back to Soquel High School. I graduated from there in 1980.

Rabkin: And then what happened?

Harlamoff: I started going to Cabrillo [College, in nearby Aptos] part-time and had a couple of different jobs. I was going to school only part time. I didn't really have a goal yet. In 1983, I saved my money, and I went on a trip with my backpack to Europe. I spent, I don't know how long—three or four months—and decided when I came back that I didn't want to work on an assembly line anymore. So I got motivated to go to school and went full-time to Cabrillo and then transferred to San Jose State. I went there and got my teaching credential and a natural science degree.

Rabkin: So you decided you wanted to be a science teacher.

Harlamoff: Yes, and I had done different things. I almost completed an archaeology degree from Cabrillo, a great program. It was just towards the end, I realized that it wasn't the kind of lifestyle I wanted. I'm a pretty grounded person. I like to be home, and I like to garden. At the time, when I was looking at careers, it was a lot of—you go where the jobs are. I didn't want to do that, because I always have had animals and gardens.

Then I also came really close to becoming a biologist. I took some upper-level fisheries management courses, because when I went and talked to the professor, I saw a sign for it. I said, "Ooh, I want to take fisheries management," having no idea that it was the final class before you graduated as a biologist. For some reason, I went into his office and I said, "I'd like to take your class." And he said, "How come?" I said, "Because I like fish," and he thought that was really funny. He said, "Sure, go ahead." [laughs]

It was the hardest class I ever took in my whole life. It was statistics and everything, but I did really well. He actually hired me as an assistant for about three years, and I did fishery studies on Coho salmon in all the little local tributaries, floating around doing surveys and stuff. It was really fun, but I also again decided it's not quite my lifestyle of going wherever, you know, not being grounded in one place.

Rabkin: So you ended up getting a teaching credential.

Harlamoff: Yes.

Teaching

Rabkin: Tell me a bit about your first teaching jobs.

Harlamoff: I was really fortunate in that at the time San Jose State was really practice-based, so they would send you out to different schools all over the

county. Because I was from this area, they sent me to Prunedale; they sent me to Salinas. They sent me all over, trying different things in different schools with different teachers. I was really lucky, fortunate to be placed with a teacher in Prunedale who was very progressive. She was already doing gardening in schools, even though she hadn't heard about Life Lab or anything, and was very, very hands-on. I think if it weren't for her, I probably wouldn't have gone into teaching, because I was also placed with a lot of rote-memorization-type teachers. So when I needed a job, I applied at the school where she was, in Prunedale at Echo Valley, and I got hired. It was great.

Rabkin: When was that?

Harlamoff: 1987. I had a great principal. A principal can make or break a school. We had a terrific principal named Joan Roberts who was very collaborative in terms of allowing teachers to come up with creative ideas for teaching kids. And one of the things she did was she had learned about Life Lab and came to my friend Carol, who was my mentor teacher, and said, "There's this great program called Life Lab. Do you want to go to a workshop? I'll pay for it," and she did. And that was it.

Rabkin: Did that cause you to start doing different things with your students at the school?

Harlamoff: It did. We went and got a bunch of funding, and we set up a huge garden (I think it was a half an acre, or three-quarters of an acre), and had it

fenced, and set up beds, and learned how to do drip systems, and had kids do that.

It was one of those times in my life where I said, "This is really what's real." I always had an affinity with the special-ed kids. A lot of the special-ed kids were transitioning from their special day class into regular classes, and they often put them with me. I realize now I was a very kinesthetic person myself [laughs]. I think that's why I can get along with my crazy dogs and my goats, because it's activity and always needing something to do with your hands and learning a different way. When I was in school, I realized that I learned a different way than a lot of people, myself, in college. One of the things I learned was that a lot of people would read the chapter and then take notes. Then they'd read those over and over. That's how they learned, by memorizing this stuff. Well, I have never been able to memorize. When I was in elementary school, I remember every day having to do multiplication tables, and if you didn't get to the certain number, you didn't get your little pink candy heart that the teacher gave out. And I never did. Not once did I get a pink candy heart, because I couldn't memorize.

I remember as a child, my grandfather saying, "You need to practice memorizing, practice." He could remember things. He died at ninety-eight, and he could remember things that he learned as a child. He memorized poems and songs. I think part of it is because that's what you did at that time. There wasn't TV; there weren't cars; there wasn't extraneous stuff going on, movies and things. But I just couldn't memorize.

So when I got to the university, my first time I realized I needed to do something different is I sat with a friend, and then we studied, and we studied, and studied in this study group, and we read things, and we were memorizing. And I ended up getting a D on the test and everybody else got an A.

I went, “Uh-oh, I need to do something different.” I realized somehow (and I don’t know where I figured it out) that if I, in my classes, wrote down everything that the teacher said—which is tedious, but I wrote every single thing down. Even if I wasn’t really listening, I would write it all down. I would go home and transcribe it again into an outline form with colors. I always used colors. So if I was talking about one particular thing, I’d use pink, and then I’d do it on different colored papers and had these beautiful notes. When I was in a botany class, I drew these gorgeous pictures with colored pencils. My classmates would say, “I can’t believe you just do that,” you know, to have these beautiful notes, and I said, “Well, that’s how I study.” As soon as I started doing that, I started getting A’s. And I ended up getting straight A’s.

So like I said, back to elementary school, I had a real affinity with these kids who couldn’t fit with the classic way of education, where you memorize it and have to sit there and not move. So my class, one of the first things the principal did was she bought me round tables. At that time, whoo, it was a big thing to buy round tables. I got rid of all of the desks. I had round tables with chairs. I realized that for a lot of students it worked really, really well, because they could get up and sit on their knees and lean across the table and do all kinds of things. And then there were a few that it was better if they had been at a desk. [laughs]

But anyway, back to the gardening part of that, I also realized that that kind of activity was important to those kids that just could not excel academically *yet*. They might in the future. I don't know, because I didn't follow them all the way through. But there were two boys that were in special ed for years, and they transitioned them into my class when they became fourth graders so that they could get some experiences from my class. We had them putting in a drip system. They were down during recess and lunch putting in a drip system—very complicated, T-Tapes, and valves, and you name it. They did the whole thing. They came up to me one day and said, "Miss Harlamoff?" I said, "Yes?" They said, "We've decided that we're going to start a company when we get older together, and we're going to be drip system specialists." I said, "You know what? You are and you can do it." I cried. These were boys that couldn't even write their names on their papers. I always wanted to know if they actually did it.

Rabkin: You weren't able to track them?

Harlamoff: No. I know that one of the boys I had (a different boy), every time he spelled his name on his paper, if he could spell it, it was spelled differently.

Rabkin: Wow.

Harlamoff: He had one vocabulary word for— Like, I've got a bowl of fruit sitting in front of me that has plums and peaches and apricots and lemons. If you handed that to him and you said, "What are all of these things?" he'd say, "Fruit." You'd pick up the apricot and you'd say, "What is this?" "Fruit?" He

had no differentiation. I think probably now we would consider him a drug baby. But he excelled in the garden, too. He ended up graduating from high school and is doing quite well, and has a landscaping business, and has a wife and two children, and is doing okay.

Rabkin: These are wonderful examples. Can you think of any other memories of watching kids learning in the garden in ways they couldn't have in a classroom?

Harlamoff: Yes. Certain things made sense to them. Like, I was trying to teach them [the concept of] area. In a classroom, I had blocks and I would use little tiles. Some of them would get it. They'd look at it and go, "Oh, yeah, there's three times two. The area is six," or whatever. But some of them just could not get it.

So when we were out in the garden, suddenly we were talking about the area of a leaf, and the lights went [on], "Oh, it means how much space that leaf is taking up." It was really interesting to see them making connections that way. Measuring became much easier for them. Whereas measuring was just a bunch of lines on a ruler before, suddenly it had some importance. They were measuring to see if their plant was bigger than it was the day before. So it made sense. It wasn't just, "How long is that piece of paper and how long is *that* one?" It was like there was some connection there.

But the biggest thing I think was deeper than the mechanical parts of learning. It was intuitive and thoughtful. They started to analyze things. I have three examples.

One of them is we set up an experiment. I was playing with inquiry. Rather than just saying, "Put the red dye in the water and see what it does" (I was doing a lot of that, too, but) I was really playing with inquiry science, trying to get them to come up with their own ideas about what they wanted to know, and guide them to answering their own questions. I was experimenting with that for myself, because we had a science fair every year, and it drove me nuts that the ones that always won were the ones that were— To me, it was a canned experiment, and it was usually done by a parent. It was really pretty, very nicely packaged. I had been asked to judge some science fairs, and I had these horrible experiences where I would pick the two little girls with the messiest experiment, but who had thought about it and come up with some interesting ideas, and who came up with some unique conclusions based on their scientific data. So it was driving me crazy.

So one of the things we did was we changed our science fair to be a participation thing rather than a competition thing. I worked with teachers within the school, too, to talk about, what do kids want to know, and how can we set up experiments, or how they can set up experiments to answer their own questions? Because that's what real science is about. Even if they don't come up with the right answer and they come up with more questions, it's still real science. Rather than "Let me make a volcano." I judged so many volcanoes it drove me nuts.

And the prettiest one would win. It made no sense. It's not scientifically based. It's not, to me, real science.

I had a lot of second-language learners in my class, too, and some newcomers that didn't have any language. So I would mix them up in these tables and was trying to get them to look at beans. Beans are perfect. Beans are the perfect beginning experiment place, because you can soak them and see inside of them. You can watch them grow, and they're very forgiving. They'll grow in any environment, which was a lesson that I learned also, and the kids learned.

Anyway, I had each table investigate beans, look at them, and tear them apart, and play with them. You know, just spend a day playing with beans. Then I asked them to come up with a whole bunch of questions about what they wanted to know about beans. It was really interesting, because even my second language learners who were barely able to communicate came up with some really great questions. One of the boys said, "I've seen beans grow in different places, and some of them look different than others. I want to set up an experiment to see if they'll grow." He said, "I remember in first grade my teacher growing them in a closet, and we've learned about photosynthesis in my class." Now it was in fifth grade, and he wanted to know how that worked. "How can they grow in the closet?" So it was a deeper question than just, "Which one will grow best?"

So this table of kids, (laughs) which was really great, they set up this experiment. We talked about control. They had to have one outside and one inside, and one in the window, and one in the closet, and on and on and on. They

had them in all different places. They monitored their growth, and they were very diligent, because they really wanted to know.

Well, this was a perfect lesson for me. We pulled them out at three weeks. The ones in the closet had etiolated, which means they were searching for the sun so much that they were long and spindly and yellow. The kids looked at me and said, "Well, I guess the ones in the closet are the best, because they're the biggest. They're the longest." That was one of those moments in my life where I was like, do I tell them? What do I say? This is one of those teaching moments.

I said, "Well, that could be true." I had them record what they look[ed] like, which was yellow and spindly and with few leaves. I said, "I wonder what would happen if we left them, because I'm not really sure that they are that much better. What do you think?" And they're like, "Well, they're not as green."

So I had to take that experiment with them on another three weeks. Of course, then the plant in the closet died. And they were like, "Aha."

Rabkin: [laughs]

Harlamoff: But they were able to go back and connect with what they had been shown in first grade. They were able to connect that they were wrong, because they wanted to finish the experiment. They were done. This plant in the closet was the best one. It was done. And it wasn't. [laughs] Anyway that was a perfect example. I had to put duct tape on my mouth, because I wanted to tell them. I

wanted to tell them, and really it was way more powerful that they came up with it themselves.

Another example is my favorite one, to finish up on my own classroom, on what the value of the garden and learning outside was. They learned to think. They were thinking about, why did those radishes grow better than those, even though they're outside in the garden? What's going on? They were really starting to think about things, and it started to apply to different areas of their lives, I think.

Sadly, we had to take the standardized test. I was lucky in the two years before, I was able to pilot a hands-on science test, which was incredible. They were piloting it; it was wonderful. They were given bags of plastic insects, and told to put them in Venn diagrams, which they did. I mean, all of these hands-on things. I think it ended up to be too labor intensive for people, but it was so great. It was science experiments that kids could do. And you could see that these students that would fail a standardized test were excelling and beyond brilliant on these hands-on, intuitive thinking tests. It was so inspiring. Then, of course, they dumped it.

So the third year I was there (I don't remember what year it was), I had to give my students a standardized test. Granted, I had been teaching them the same way. They didn't do very well in the end, in case anybody's wondering. They didn't score very high. But for me, the most important thing was that they were

so excited. They were like, “We are scientists. We cannot wait to take that science test, Miss Harlamoff. We can’t wait. We are going to ace it.”

I never told them they didn’t do very well, because to me, whether you can say, is that green or is that red, and fill in the right bubble, isn’t your aptitude in science. To me, what their aptitude was, was I handed them the test. And here they are, sitting there. And I’m not supposed to tell them any—I read them the directions, and they all had their little thingies. I let them all have whatever they wanted, if they had a worry bead or a key or whatever they had, because I know I can’t sit there and fill out bubbles and keep concentrating that long. (laughs) And gum. That was the only time they were allowed to have gum, was during the standardized test. Don’t tell anybody. [laughs] Gum and lollipops. They were so used to being active.

Rabkin: Like baseball players.

Harlamoff: Yes, exactly. You’re sitting there needing something to do. So anyway, I hand them the science test. They were pretty fried by that time, because they had already done the math and the language. Their little eyes were getting wider. I hand them this test, and they’re all sitting there. I read them the directions, and I go, “Okay, you may begin.” They all turn the page, and they’re all sitting there. I didn’t see a single pencil picked up. And all of a sudden, all of these little hands are going up in the air. I’m like, oh, no. I’m not supposed to answer any questions. I’m not supposed to help or whatever, but all these hands are up, and they’re all looking at me.

I said, "Okay, stop the test. Everybody, pencils down," (although none of them [had] picked them up). I said, "Okay, obviously there's a problem, because everybody's hand was up." They're all looking at me. I said, "Is there a problem?" And one of my boys (and this was one of my special ed students), he says, "You know, Mrs. Harlamoff, this test isn't written very well," I said, "What do you mean?" And he says, "Well, it just depends." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Have you read it?"

So I picked it up and I read the first question, and I don't remember it exactly, but it was something along [the lines] of: if a frog was to lay her eggs, would she lay them on the rocks at the edge of the lake, in the middle of the lake, or in the plants on the edge of the lake, something like that. Which one was it?

I'm sitting there, and they all went, "What kind of frog is it?" and, "It just depends, doesn't it?" [laughs] I went, "Yes!" (Another time I cried in front of my students.) I said, "You guys are so smart that you've thought beyond this test. You've thought beyond what they want you to think about." It was so moving. Every single one of them sat here and went, "Well, I don't know. What kind of frog are they talking about?"

They were all so interested in science suddenly that they were bringing in frogs from ponds. We had our classroom full of things that we were watching all the time. They knew that frogs *did* lay their eggs in puddles, in the dirt, that they *did* lay them on the side. It just depended on what kind of frog you're talking about. Was it a toad or a frog? That was another one. Were they talking toads or were

they talking frogs? I said, “Well, I think they’re talking frogs.” I couldn’t answer their question for them, but I said, “I want to tell you how proud I am of you that you have thought beyond that question.”

Also, it was exactly my own personal problem that I had in college. I had so many teachers tell me, professors, “Gail, just fill in the bubble.” And I go, “I know. I know I’m supposed to fill in the bubble. But if you take that question and you look at it, it can be that if it’s that scenario, that if it’s that scenario, or that if it’s that scenario.” They said, “Well, what did I tell you in class to memorize?” “Well, you told me this one.” “Well, then put that down.” I had so many professors tell me, [exasperated voice] “Just fill in the bubble, please. Don’t argue,” because I was always writing in the margins and saying, “Well, it would be this one if this,” and that messes them all up. So here, my students had done the same thing, and it was very empowering.

Rabkin: What a wonderful set of examples. Thank you.

Harlamoff: I have another one, too, [from] when I was mentoring teachers. The first year, Life Lab got a huge grant from the National Science Foundation for LASERS, which was Language Acquisition through Science Education at Rural Schools. And they were looking for schools to participate in this program which looked at science as a vehicle for helping children improve their language skills. Originally it was to help them learn English. And what we found later on, is it actually helped the English learners learn more English and the second language

students learn both academic and conversational language. It was an incredible program.

Of course, my principal, the progressive one, she snagged that. She came to me and said, “How would you like—” [laughs] I had no idea. I was like, “Oh, sure. That sounds good.” It was a really intense program and it was great. I did it for a year. I had a mentor who came, and he taught some lessons. He helped me teach some lessons. He watched me teach some lessons. We did a lot of monitoring of students.

During that first year, I got really, really sick. It turns out I had Lyme’s disease. I didn’t know what to do. I needed some time to regroup and try to figure out how I was going to get my body back, so I decided to take a leave of absence for a year from teaching.

Working for Life Lab’s Language Acquisition in Science Education for Rural Schools (LASERS) Program

Within a month, I think, Robbie called me, Robbie [Roberta] Jaffe who was the director of Life Lab, (laughs) and said, “Hi.” (laughs) I said hello. She said, “I heard you took the year off.” I said, yes. She said, “How’d you like a job?” I’m like, “Oh, no. (laughs) I’m not supposed to have a job.”²

But actually it worked out great, because I worked part time for LASERS.³ I was a mentor and I worked in some of the South County schools. I was mentoring

teachers in Castroville, and some in Salinas, and Aromas, and San Juan. It was really fun.

Rabkin: How did Robbie know about you?

Harlamoff: Through LASERS.

Rabkin: So when you were training to do the LASERS program in your own school, you connected up with Robbie.

Harlamoff: Yes. I don't remember the first meeting or anything, because I just did all the trainings and went to the things. I don't know. I must have done something. (laughs) I don't know how she knew me, other than just that first year of being the teacher in the program. She had also asked me before that to come and interview for a director of the project and be the teacher person on the panel.

Rabkin: For the LASERS program.

Harlamoff: Yes. And I did, and that was Joyce Hill who was still the director of the Monterey Bay Science Project LASERS program. So my initial contact with Robbie was through that.

Anyway I started mentoring, and I had some young, incredibly excellent teachers that I was helping through the LASERS project. It was an honor to watch them,

because they were way better teachers than I ever was in terms of their preparation. They walked in the classroom and were like, boom, ready to go, whereas it took me about a year or two to kind of like fumble around. They were incredible. And part of that was the New Teacher Project, which—

Rabkin: At UC Santa Cruz?

Harlamoff: Yes. I worked with them for a while, too. I worked part-time for LASERS and part-time with the New Teacher Project, mentoring. I didn't really have as much experience as they wanted, but I was there. I did that for a year, and it worked out fine. I kind of filled in some holes for them for a while.

Rabkin: This is during the time that you're supposedly not working, because you were taking care of your health?

Harlamoff: That's right. (laughs) I never did, but it was great. It was so inspiring. How can you not just keep moving forward when you're so inspired every day?

But anyway, one of the teachers that I mentored was in Castroville, Karen Olaiman. She was one of those brilliant teachers. She was a second-year teacher, and I went in to watch. She had first-grade, second-language learners, bilingual. I mean, we're talking she really had her hands full. Big classes, too. It was before they went down to twenty kids. My last year of teaching, I had thirty-eight students in my fifth grade class.

Rabkin: Oh, my goodness.

Harlamoff: So we were pretty impacted. But it was before they had twenty students in first grade. I was sitting there. She had taken them out to the garden, and they were looking at something, and they were talking about water and roots, and I don't know what. She wanted to do one of those posters (we had talked about it) where the students write what they know about a topic, what they want to know, and then what they're going to learn about it, or something like that.

So she was writing what they know. And the little kids, they were first graders. They were so cute. They said, "And the water goes into the leaves on the plants." They had just been out watering. They had little watering cans. I could see Karen. She froze. And she looks in the back of the room and she looks to me. I just looked at her and smiled like, what are you going to do?

Rabkin: (laughter)

Harlamoff: [laughter] That's one of those things. She wanted to say, "No, it doesn't." So she said, "Let's think about that. What makes you think that water goes into the leaves of plants?" They said, "Well, because we water them from the top, and we pour water on the leaves and it goes on the leaves, and that's why the plant is still alive, because we know." (They knew that plants need sun, soil, water, and air from their little songs and everything, and they were studying water.) They knew. It was like: *they knew*.

She said, "Does anybody else have any other ideas?" She started to fish around. They were all like, "No. Water goes in the leaves. That's how the plant gets its water." She kept looking back at me and smiling. I'm shaking my head like, "What are you going to do? What are you going to do? Are you going to tell them? Because they won't remember if you tell them."

She said, "You know," she goes, "I hate to disagree," she said, "but I am not really sure that's true." She said, "I'm older than you, and I've learned a lot of things. I didn't think that water goes in leaves when you water it, and that's where they get their water." And they said, "Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah." She goes, "I thought the water came in from roots." "Oh, no." I mean, they were determined.

So they happened to have a bunch of little bean plants growing in cups. She said, "Well, why don't you prove it to me, or let's prove it to ourselves that water really goes—" She said, "We've got a little bean plant. Does anybody mind if we use it?" Nobody minded. "Because it might die. That's what happens in experiments." No, nobody minded.

So [laughs] she said, "What are we going to do? How can we experiment?" And they were all like, "Oh, oh, oh, oh! Pull it out of the dirt, shake off its roots and put its leaves into the water, and then that will prove that it's drinking up the water." She goes, "Okay."

So she had a couple of kids come up and clean off the roots. And they got a little cup of water, and they suspended this plant, leaf side down, inside this pot of

water, and they paper clipped it to the side and they left it there. I came back to see what had happened. Of course, a few days later, she did the follow-up with it, which is always really hard to do, because you get busy and you forget. But she did a follow-up. She said, “Well, here’s our experiment.” [laughs] They were like, “Plants don’t drink from their leaves.”

Rabkin: (laughs)

Harlamoff: Because the poor plant had totally mushed into this black sludge.

But I think those kids probably will forever remember. That was one of my favorites. I loved watching her teach, because she could do that. It’s so hard, and it’s so hard now, too. I’ve talked to so many people. Because you’re regimented. You’re being told you have to be on a certain page on a certain date, and you have to have this taught and that taught by this time. That kind of learning that she did and that my students did is not on a time schedule. It’s a, “Okay, we’d better look at this again” or, “We’d better keep going.” She spent a lot of time.

But believe me, those kids, those little kids weren’t going to come to me in fifth grade and say, “I don’t know anything about anything.” And you could see it. When we started implementing science in kindergarten (I was there at the school long enough I could see them rotating through)—I was able to really up my academics in science, because they had started in kindergarten, and they knew that. “We know that already.” “Oh. Okay, well let’s talk about this then.”

Suddenly photosynthesis made sense. Suddenly looking at minerals and how they conform made sense. Suddenly looking at molecules made sense. Whereas before, you're supposed to teach the periodic table in third grade according to the science standards, or at least expose—That makes no sense to them without any knowledge, without any knowledge of rocks and what they're looking at. We found that that spiraling of education was really important, and we did a lot of work, the whole district, we wrote science standards for our districts. I did my first couple of years there.

Life Lab's Curriculum and Publications

Rabkin: Are there also state standards that schools have to comply with?

Harlamoff: Yes.

Rabkin: How do you reconcile your local standards with the state standards?

Harlamoff: Well, right now, at the time, our state standards were reconciled with our local standards, because it was more child-centered. It made a lot more sense. Now it's sort of like, "Okay, fourth grade kids are all going to learn about the human body, period. And in third grade, they're going to learn about this, and in the second grade, they're going to learn about this." One of the Life Lab employees actually worked on the current state standards, and it was a beautiful document. I don't know who, but somebody up at the state level took it and

threw out a lot of stuff and said, “We need to be more academic,” and threw out the child-centered, progressive learning—

Rabkin: Experiential aspects.

Harlamoff: Experiential. There’s an experiment section that’s separate, which to me is just— You don’t teach kids how to experiment. They experiment to learn about the concepts. Now it’s a very cumbersome document. But those of us in the world who still want to do things like Life Lab, we’ve managed. We’ve shifted. Garden-based learning doesn’t always teach about the periodic table, but it can teach about a lot of different concepts.

Rabkin: I’m wondering if difficulties arise for Life Lab and teachers who want to use a Life Lab curriculum, who are also trying to comply with the state framework. Does that become an issue?

Harlamoff: We thought it was going to be a big issue at first. It was an issue for us in that the curriculum that we have, the Life Lab science curriculum, doesn’t meet the state standards anymore. There’re pieces missing. The Life Lab science curriculum was written to the national standards. At the time, the California state standards were aligned with the national standards. Well, now the California state standards are quite different. And so we thought, oh, boy, *Life Lab Science* is doomed. But we had someone align them for us, look at every single lesson and find out what standard it meets. Second grade is the closest. It was interesting, because at the time (and Robbie [Jaffe] would know more about

this), we turned in the second grade book to the state standards, whatever they are, the group that authorizes whether— Because if you're not certified, schools can't spend their money on that curriculum, their curriculum money. They can spend their money, but they can't spend their curriculum money. So we turned in second grade. I think mostly we did it to get the comments. We knew it wasn't probably going to— It was very interesting. The comments were very telling. It didn't pass the review board, so it couldn't be adopted. But the comments were, "This is how children should be learning. This is the type of learning that all California students should be doing." All that kind of comments about: this is the type of curriculum we want, but because it doesn't fit into the box, you can't use it.

Rabkin: And these are the people who enforce the box? This is the committee that makes decisions about whether something complies with the state framework or not. And they're saying, "This is what we want to see in the schools."

Harlamoff: "This is brilliant."

Rabkin: "Unfortunately, it doesn't comply with the standards we've established."

Harlamoff: The box, yes. I don't know if they established the standards or whether they brought a committee, and maybe that's why the comments. I think it was probably a group of teachers that were told, "Go through this stuff." "Oh,

this is what we really want to teach. But it doesn't quite match what we were told it has to match in order for it to pass."

So we were really worried about that, and we've wrangled with that for years. "Do we rewrite it?" We didn't rewrite *The Growing Classroom*, but we updated it this last year. It was a really tough decision for us, because we're more than California. We're national.

Rabkin: People all over the country are using this curriculum.

Harlamoff: So what we decided on *The Growing Classroom* book was that we would have a supplemental document that people can download off our website, that shows where and what lessons fit into which California standards. We paid somebody to do that for us and now it's on our website. But we didn't put it into the book, because we felt like we would be pigeonholing ourselves again, because we had people all over the country and the world buying *The Growing Classroom* book.

Now, *Life Lab Science*, surprisingly, is still being used as a supplement book. We sell a lot of it, particularly this last year because there was an infusion of money from the state for science materials and boosting the garden, because it was decided that this is a really valid way of learning and that it needed a boost in the schools. So every school that applied for money got money. A lot of them have spent it on Life Lab curriculum, some of our workshops, which is good, and

then materials—basic materials, shovels and that sort of thing. So it's been good. It's a big movement right now.

Rabkin: You mentioned *The Growing Classroom* and *Life Lab Science*. Are those two different publications?

Harlamoff: Yes, the first one that Life Lab ever published, I think it was in 1980 or '81, it was actually three books called *The Growing Classroom*.⁴ It came out of the Green Acres School, Robbie Jaffe and Gary Appel. A lot of the lessons were created by observing students in the garden. That book is still going strong. It's still around. We just republished it last year, a revised edition. We had to do a lot of revisions on the nutrition part of it, because we were still in the four food groups, and now we've got the pyramid and that sort of stuff. Some of it was dated, and we needed to upgrade it.

Rabkin: Is this a K-6 curriculum?

Harlamoff: It's K-6, but we have a lot of people using it even in upper grades.

Rabkin: Middle school, high school?

Harlamoff: Middle school, not so much high school, but we've used some of them in high school ourselves by upping it a little bit. It's surprising. It's a very friendly book for anybody who wants to use it. We have a lot of parents that use

it, a lot of home-school parents. We have a lot of garden coordinators who use it. It's a very easy book.

Life Lab Science sort of came out of *The Growing Classroom*, and it was written as a real curriculum so that kindergarten through fifth grade, each grade would have its own curriculum.⁵ It is a year-long curriculum, so it's much more classroom-science-based. Still the same Life Lab techniques, but each unit is based on a theme, and each unit has a pre-assessment lesson, and then all these lessons build up to a concept and then a post-assessment lesson. It's a really good curriculum, and we sell a lot of it throughout the country, and like I said, throughout the world. I've had curriculum shipped to Saudi Arabia, India, Guam. Australia is hot right now. There's a young man in Perth who ordered a bunch of curriculum. It was terribly hard to get it to him, but I finally got it to him. He has spread the word, and I'm getting orders all the time from people, and calls all the time.

New Zealand, too. I actually had a visit from one of their government Parliament members. They have mixed government. They have two Green Party members in the Parliament. And they are pushing for school gardens, too, There's a lot of people in New Zealand going, "What? Everybody has gardens." But I think they're starting to see that not everybody does anymore. It's interesting. When I talk to people even around here, like I talk to my aunt, and she's like, "What do you mean, gardens? Don't all kids have gardens? Isn't that just second nature to know some basic concepts in gardening?" and I said, "No, it actually isn't anymore. It isn't second nature to know what chard is." It's very interesting.

Even on a personal level, my partner, my boyfriend, grew up in Santa Cruz, but without a garden, moved from apartment to apartment. And here, I'm thinking that everyone had gardens growing up, but he didn't. He's going to be fifty this year, and he had never had pattypan squash. He's never eaten chard, has no idea what to do with it. He's seen it before, but nobody's ever given it to him. He's never had Romano beans.

So the other day—my neighbor and I, we trade food. I give her goat milk; she gives me vegetables right now that she has. We had a dinner of fresh spinach and Romano beans and Pattypan squash and zucchini. And of all of those, he'd only had the zucchini before. He said, "Well, I've seen it, but I don't know what to do with it."

So that is where Life Lab [has headed] in the last couple of years. It's suddenly this awareness of food, and not only where it comes from and how it grows. We've gone from: This is the science in the garden; this is how it grows. This is the science concept, and this is what you learn, to: Where does your food come from, and how is it grown? And what does it taste like?

It's shocking. (laughs) We have started really observing [that] people don't know where their food is coming from. Like I said, here my boyfriend is fifty years old, and he never had chard, never had Pattypan squash, never had Romano beans. And he's vegetarian.

Rabkin: I'm wondering whether in this region, where so many of the school children are from farm worker families or immigrant Mexican families, whether this is an area where they have a different knowledge set from their Anglo classmates?

Harlamoff: I think so. I can't really speak for them. When I was teaching, I had farm worker parents come in and sit with me and talk to me about why their child is in the garden. [They'd say,] "This is not the life I want for my child. They're going to go to college." I spent a lot of time talking to them about the value of what they're doing, and the value of what they know. I ended up doing a lot of teaching around (someone told me the word one time and I use it to this day) "folk knowledge," about how valuable that is. We're losing that, and we don't value it as a society. For a long time, it felt like if you weren't a computer IT person, you weren't valued, when really there's so many people that have so much knowledge, and a lot of them are farm workers. They're brilliant, and thankfully, we live in an area where they have become some of our most valued small farmers at the farmers' markets. We're really, really lucky, and I think we need to not lose that.

But I don't know that those kids had any more knowledge of the diversity of eating than the rest of the kids. They ate what they brought home. And if you're working in a huge farm, you ate cucumbers or whatever. It's the small farm and the small garden, and that diversity within that garden. I think I'm seeing a value to society to not just focusing on big farms that do only milk, or do only wheat, or do only corn. The diversity is what's so critical. Life Lab is based on the Center

for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems. It's one of the premier places in the country that's showing people that: Yes, you can do organic gardening. You can do sustainable farming. You can support populations.

Designing the Children's Garden at Life Lab

Rabkin: Tell me about the relationships, formal or informal, between Life Lab and the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems.

Harlamoff: Well, it's growing all the time. Originally, Life Lab (I think it's twenty years ago now) bought a trailer, kind of gave it to the university. It was put on [a campus site shared with CASFS], and then we had a lease agreement. One of Life Lab's agreements in this lease agreement was that we would build a children's garden, a place for people to come and learn about children's gardening.

Originally, there was a little slope next to the trailer that was supposed to be the garden. Somebody had done a really nice drawing of that, and it was beautiful. It was very much pathways—you walking on pathways and looking at the butterfly garden, and then looking at the hummingbird garden and doing that sort of thing.

Well, Erika [Perloff] and I were brought up to the university by Life Lab to get that going and get money for it, because we were already pretty remiss in getting that going. We spent a lot of time traveling around the country, going to different botanic gardens and going to children's gardens all over, and looking at the

premier programs throughout the country. It was nice. It was really good. We saw a lot of good things going on. None of them quite fit Life Lab. I don't always know how to tell people that Life Lab is unique in a certain way in that it's a little messy, (laughs) I think is what I want to say. It's a little dirty, which is a good thing in my mind. Some people won't like it.

I remember sitting in one of the premier children's gardens. It was this incredible place. It had a huge learning center, and it had water fountains. We're talking really premiere. I decided I wanted to sit around and watch what was going on. They had a children's class out there, and they had this really cool giant Styrofoam flower with a giant centerpiece. And all the kids had these little hats on, and they were butterflies. So they had these little hats that were antennae, and they had little twisty tongues, and they had little Styrofoam balls that were pollen things, and they were doing these great things. I thought, wow, that is so cool. We could do something like that. We sat and watched and watched and watched, and the hours went by. The kids went on to the next task. They were spinning a carrot and being told to go to the next spot. And they'd spin the radish, and they'd go to the next spot. I suddenly turned to Erika (I don't know; the two of us came to the same conclusion at the same time), we looked at each other and went, "They're surrounded by butterflies, and not one of them saw it."

Rabkin: Interesting.

Harlamoff: It seemed like they were so fixated on playing with all of these things that were supposed to be learning devices, that they were missing the whole

point of everything. There were carrots growing, and they were spinning a plastic carrot. There was a butterfly garden surrounding this butterfly Styrofoam flower, and not one person said, "Check out all the butterflies on the plants." It was really interesting.

I'm not saying that's a bad thing. It's a different way, and it was what they were about. It was more like a museum. But what it did was it solidified for us that no, we're not a museum, and no, we're not going to ever be slick. We're kind of dirty. We're kind of grubby.

We loved seeing the music. There was music in the garden in one of the places we went to. I think it was done by Disney. Disney does a huge children's garden. They actually paid Life Lab to come out and do a *Growing Classroom* workshop for their employees. It was really inspiring. I was surprised.

Rabkin: I had no idea.

Harlamoff: And we said, "We need manure, because we're going to build a compost pile." And we made a compost pile with white rhinoceros poop. [Both laugh.] And for us, it was so different, because it was in Florida. Of course, we were totally amazed. We said, "We need some plants to plant and cover crop, and do all of this stuff," and they were bringing us these bizarre plants that we had never seen. We had to think on our feet the whole time, but it was fun. It was Life Lab transported to this really bizarre place. (laughs) They were interested in composting, and they were interested in sustainable harvest gardening, and how

do they interact with children in a garden setting, and how do their employees interact with kids that are coming through and looking at plants. I was really impressed that they did that.

We were really impressed with the four-inch-long grasshopper of multicolors that we found. We pulled it off. We were holding it. We couldn't believe it. And they were like, "Step on it." [Both laugh.]

Rabkin: So it sounds like your travels helped you crystallize your vision of what Life Lab does that's a strength, in terms of relating directly to whatever happens to be going on in the garden at the time, and allowing for a certain amount of, as you say, messiness and spontaneity.

Harlamoff: Yes, and teachable moments, we used to call them in teaching. That was a teachable moment, to suddenly go, "Whoa!" Like the other day in the garden, outside of the fence was a half-eaten deer. And here we have all of these summer camp kids, and we were like [gasps]. One of the counselors said, "What do we do? What do we do?" She was a young intern. I said, "We go show it to them." (laughs) I mean, it's life. It's like, "What do you think happened?"

We called the biologist on the campus, and she came down. And rather than take the kids away and let's not go look at it, we took the kids over, and the biologist talked about, "Well, this is how we're going to try to figure out what happened to it. We think it was coyotes, because of the way it was eaten. If it was a mountain lion, we would have seen this." Those kids were interested. They

weren't grossed out at all. They were just, "Wow." That's the thing they'll remember forever. That's a teachable moment.

Rabkin: Yes.

Harlamoff: So anyway, it did solidify our thoughts. And our thoughts were: We wanted a place that kids could feel like was theirs, that wasn't so spic and span that they couldn't touch it. We wanted it to be a model for other people to feel like they could come into the garden classroom and say, "You know what? I may not have all of this space, but I could do that. I can take that one little piece and take it back to my garden at my school. Even if it's in a windowsill, I could do that little piece."

So those were our big goals—a place for children and a place for teachers and educators. Amazingly, it turned out to be a place for people who loved to come, which we weren't expecting. I don't know why. We didn't think people would come and wander through and sit and have lunch and watch the birds and play with the chickens.

Rabkin: But they do?

Harlamoff: Oh, we had about ten thousand people our first year.

Rabkin: You mean, outside of your organized programs?

Harlamoff: No, including the organized programs.

Rabkin: That's a lot of people.

Harlamoff: Yes, about half of those were organized and half were just—

Rabkin: So originally the garden classroom was on this slope.

Harlamoff: Yes.

Rabkin: And then you and Erika went on this tour to formulate your ideas about what to develop, because there was a promise that there would be a more extensive garden classroom on the site?

Harlamoff: No, we decided that we didn't want to come in and take somebody else's drawing, even though it was great, and just implement it. We needed some knowledge behind what we were doing, to make sure that we were going to do it right. When we came back, we naively went around to different landscape architects and said, "We'd like to build a children's garden. What can you do for free?" (laughs) Pretty much everyone we talked to said, "Well, I've done playgrounds and I've done botanic gardens, and I've done this and that," until one day, we went down and met with Joni Janecki of Joni Janecki & Associates.

Rabkin: In Santa Cruz.

Harlamoff: In Santa Cruz. And we sat there and she went, “Wow. Oh, cool. Oh, yes. Oh, yes.” We had these brainstorming sessions of, “Oh! We can do this, and we can do this.” And she goes, “And how much money do we have?” and I said, “Nothing.” (laughs) And bless her heart, she took it on.

Erika and I had drawn these big maps of what we hoped to build on the slope, and Joni came out several times. They did a huge research pre-study, which I thought was brilliant, talking about connecting Life Lab to CASFS, connecting Life Lab to the university, connecting Life Lab to the community of Santa Cruz, connecting to the ocean. And how we fit into the world at large, rather than just in our little microcosm of our little slope.

Jim Leap⁶, in particular, who is the manager of CASFS, the Farm part of it—one day, we were wandering through, and he looked and he said, “You know, it really makes a lot more sense if you built the garden out on this other side, on this big flat area that we’re not using anymore.” (That was the original spot for all of this farming, but then they had spread out and moved.) He said, “It really makes more sense.” And of course, we went, “Okay,” and we took it.

It was hard. It was hard for us, because we were kind of caught between wanting to create a space that was usable for everyone, and we had to work within the University standards of compliance—and then not stepping on the toes of the Farm people, who had a deep connection with the soil. So here, we’re proposing a new garden on top of soil that has very historical significance in terms of the Farm, and then having to comply with the university and the state standards for

ADA compliance. It was really hard. It was hard for everyone. It was hard for the Farm to see suddenly, one day, twenty-six loads of broken concrete being dumped onto this precious soil. What it is, is a spiral, and it's built on recycled concrete sidewalks that were actually the original Mission Street sidewalks. One day the contractor saw it and said, "Hey, they're digging up Mission Street," and so we took it. That's what our raised beds are made out of.

It worked out well, and it's a great spot now. But I always tell people, "Never underestimate the connections people have with soil, and this precious piece of land." Once things were there and grown, it was fine, and the Farm personnel were great, even though they would like practically be crying, "They're pouring concrete." Because we had to. We had to build these ADA-compliant paths. And I'm so glad we did, because we have a lot of children that are disabled or wheelchair-bound, and they can come up to the garden and actually work in it.

Relationship between Life Lab and the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems

From that relationship came where we could suddenly do more programs. So we hired John Fisher, who was the publicity person for CASFS. We felt like we were stealing him in a way, because he's so great. He's brilliant in terms of working with children and coming up with these brilliant ideas for programming. He hired on with us, but he is part-time with the University. So he's a shared position, basically.

So Life Lab took on all of the summer camps, and things that he used to do on the Farm are now actually Life Lab summer camps, but I consider them shared. We share these resources. We collectively say, “We have 250 kids that come every summer for summer camp.” It’s turned out to be this great resource. We have field trips every fall, and now winter and spring as well, that are all different. In the fall, we have our harvesting, life-on-the-farm, eating type of field trip. In the winter, we have a nutrition field trip. And then in the spring, we have standards-based field trips, that are based on a standard for third grade and second grade. They sign up for their grade.

Rabkin: So these are teachers bringing their classes up to the Life Lab garden and surrounding area to learn?

Harlamoff: Yes. We’ve created a little mini curriculum we send each teacher. They have two or three lessons before they come on the field trip. They do about three or four lessons on the field trip, plus chicken time. We have chickens, so they have to always have chicken time and bee time. There’s bees, an observational beehive. And then they have lessons that they can do when they go back. So once they go on this field trip, if they do everything, they have completed a whole unit of study, which is really neat, that meets a current California science standard.

Rabkin: Do you have classes coming who do have access to school gardens at their own schools?

Harlamoff: Yes.

Rabkin: Do you also have classes come who do not have school gardens?

Harlamoff: Yes.

Rabkin: And it can work for both.

Harlamoff: It works for both. We manage them a little differently. I mean, we don't do it on purpose, but you find yourself sort of managing— You may be spending a little bit more time looking at how that carrot comes out of the soil, or— It's basically the same field trip, but it's interesting. You can definitely tell a difference. Like I can always tell, sitting in my office, a class that hasn't been outside a lot.

Rabkin: How do you tell?

Harlamoff: They're wild. [Both laugh.] They're so amped up. They're like, "Whee!" They're really enthusiastic, but it's definitely a different feeling. Whereas the ones that do it on a regular basis and come up as a supplement to come to Life Lab, they're much more scientific about it and ask questions. They're not any different than if they were in a classroom.

The ones that are new to this, it takes a little more management. They're running around. What we do is we have an internship program. We have a set of interns

who work different days. We do a full-on, week-long training with them on how to do the different field trips. With our assistance in partnering, they run the field trips.

Rabkin: Wearing my hat as a UCSC environmental studies faculty person, I've had a number of students who've fallen in love with teaching by doing those internships.

Harlamoff: Yes.

Rabkin: So we're deep into talking about your work at Life Lab, but we never really caught up [with] that piece of how you became the executive director at Life Lab.

Executive Director of Life Lab

Harlamoff: Oh. (laughs) The joke is that everybody stepped back, and I was still standing.

Rabkin: (laughter)

Harlamoff: No. That's not really the case. I became the director of the garden classroom once it was built. Because it suddenly took on a life of its own. I don't think that any of us really could see into the future as to what impact this garden classroom was going to have, this little half-acre, which is now probably a two-

acre garden. We had no idea. Suddenly we've got field trips, and we've got camps, and we've got after-school programs, and we've got teacher trainings. It opened up this whole new world for Life Lab. And somebody needed to manage that part of the program.

Before that, we were always site-based. We were always out in schools. I remember we'd have one or two little Life Lab workshops where people would come up, and we had one little bed outside the office. And that was it. Now we've got this hub. And it *is* a hub. That was our goal, too, to become the center of a network of people, and that's how we proposed it to the Packard Foundation for funding, Packard and the Goldman Fund (they were the big funders), that we would be this hub. And we have far exceeded that. Life Lab, the garden classroom, is now one of the centers for garden-based education in California. There's three, I think, two or three. We get funding from the California Department of Ed for doing this dissemination work. And we do a lot of that.

Rabkin: So do you train teachers from around the state?

Harlamoff: We train teachers from around the country and the world. Our last workshop that was in the garden classroom, we had two women from North Carolina, two women from Australia, a woman from Germany—they were all over—and then some from California, some from our backyard. So it was really neat, because they all bring experiences, and we spend a lot of time sharing experiences and that sort of thing in our workshops, too. That's one of the things

that I strongly believe. People that are there, I don't want to open their heads and pour in information. If they share, you really learn a lot that way.

We became this hub. So there needed to be a garden director, which turned out to be me, and Erika was the education director. She did a lot of the workshops and the curriculum-type stuff; I was trying to keep the garden going. I managed a budget, and worked hard to make it sustainable, that it would self-sustain.

And then the director we had decided to take a job in New York.

Rabkin: You were left standing. [laughs]

Harlamoff: I hate to say that. It sounds so pessimistic. Originally I used to laugh, "Everybody else ran away, and I was still there. And they said, 'Okay, you're It.'" But I think it was a good fit. Because John [Fisher] was fairly new, and he is into the programming part, and I love doing budgets and that sort of thing. It's sort of my thing. And because I was the garden director, I'd been involved in strategic planning. I had been involved in a fundraising plan and audit that we had done. People would say, "Okay, Gail, somebody needs to meet with a fundraising consultant. Here, you do it." So I had a lot of background.

Rabkin: Had you ever gone back to the classroom after that year that you took off?

Harlamoff: No, other than just to mentor people. I've thought about it. I think I needed to go back in a different climate though, and I think that climate's changing. I don't want to be told which page I need to be on, on which day. I've talked to a lot of older teachers, who are friends of mine, who are saying it's so difficult to be held to these really strict— There's so many factors in teaching, and being graded on a test is unrealistic, in my mind.

Rabkin: Do you foresee that pendulum beginning to swing back towards experiential education?

Harlamoff: Yes, I do. I don't know that it's formally in terms of our government. But I certainly see it in California. [California First Lady] Maria Shriver is a huge advocate of school gardens. A lot of money has been kept in the sciences, like the California Science Project. Some of the other projects have been cut, and the science remains. I think in California we know that we need to keep plugging away. There's the California School Garden Network that started, which is incredible. We're part of that. John Fisher has been going to that, and [we] just published a new book that every teacher in California can get for free by going to the California Department of Ed's site. It's a creating and sustaining your school garden type of book. It's like our *Getting Started*, but it's been updated, and it's *beautiful*. There's a lot of resources for school gardens right now in California.

I have faith that even though the powers that be, the government, says, "You must do this," that the people actually in the classroom get to a point (and not all

of them), but there's some really, really good teachers out there who say, "My students need more."

Rabkin: So they have seen the limits of this kind of rote, product-based education. Interesting.

Harlamoff: I think it's swinging back a little bit.

Rabkin: How about funding? It sounds like a lot of your funding comes from a variety of grant sources. Have you seen a shift in the funding available for garden-based education?

Harlamoff: Yes. When I took over—

Rabkin: Which was?

Harlamoff: Well, I started in Life Lab in '96. I think it was 1996.

Rabkin: As the director.

Harlamoff: No, as the garden classroom director. I've only been the director, I think it's four years, not that long, four or five. When I started, I was looking at budgets, too, in the garden classroom, because I was in charge of making sure that we had enough money to build this garden. But when I took over the executive directorship, one of the things I noticed and one of the things I had

learned from this fundraising audit and report, was that Life Lab's sole funding source pretty much was grants. And I have observed, because I'd been there long enough, that when you get one giant grant, it's great. It's so great. You get to do so much work. But in terms of a sustainable organization, it's very hard to maintain that. If you're given a million dollars, you can hire a bunch of staff, but then they're let go. That may or may not be good, but I really wanted to have a core staff.

In the past, you didn't really need as much of a core staff, because you could hire trainers to go out to schools and train; you could hire people to do certain projects for grants. Whereas when I came on, we suddenly had this whole shift in perspective, in goals, where we suddenly had the garden classroom to maintain. And not only the garden classroom, we had this huge responsibility of maintaining this site. Suddenly there's programs to run and people to run them, and an office that's more than just a place where people can make copies. So I had to really look at, "Okay, what's a healthy way that the organization can move?" We went from— I think we made two hundred dollars the first year. I don't remember—before I started, but now in terms of donations, it's a pretty healthy—I like to call it a pie chart. Originally the whole pie was a grant.

Rabkin: A grant.

Harlamoff: Or two.

Rabkin: Wow.

Harlamoff: I think we had \$236 in donations when I first started. And we didn't sell anything. So we had no sales, no donations, so to speak. And like I said, it worked really well for what it was. But we suddenly had this shift. So one of the things I wanted to do was to make a more diverse pie chart, to where one slice of the pie is donations; one slice of the pie is consulting work, which we've just started doing recently.

Rabkin: Consulting to educators?

Harlamoff: Educators. Or schools, a lot of schools. John Fisher has been doing a lot of that. Like, UC Davis wanted us to act as a consultant on some of their workshop preparation type stuff.

Rabkin: And you'll charge a fee for that.

Harlamoff: Yes. So we've got consulting. We've got product sales, which we've never had before. We sell our books directly out of Life Lab now, which actually is really helpful. We charge fee for service on our field trips and camps and that sort of thing. A piece of the pie is grants, donations. So it's more diverse.

Rabkin: How were your curriculum texts being sold before you began selling them directly out of Life Lab?

Harlamoff: Different publishers had them. *Life Lab Science* had one publisher. Carolina Biological [published] another one. What we did in the last couple of

years, is we teamed up with the National Gardening Association, and they published the *Growing Classroom* book for us, the new revised version. So that's been a really great collaboration with them. We're trying to do more of that.

We're working on a nutrition book. Although they are, too. So it may be that when we get ours done that they'll already have one and say, "We don't need a second one." But I have a feeling they'll be different enough, that ours will be the Life Lab one, which is sort of "Life Lab-y." But they've been a great collaboration, and we're just proposing to them to collaborate on some national workshops at particular sites, where we split the profits with them if they can help us advertise and that sort of thing. Because they're great advertisers, and they're on the other side of the country.

Rabkin: Great.

Harlamoff: We still subsidize a lot of things. I always have to look and decide. Like, we had a great grant for three years in Pajaro Valley which was working to train teams of teachers from different schools on nutrition education for students using a garden, and came up with a great model where we brought them to a training, went in and supported them, took interns from the UCSC and the Agroecology program, the PICA program⁷, and took them out to schools so that they got to see gardens in schools and education in schools, and helped revitalize that garden at the same time. And then we did additional training, and the teachers trained the other teachers at the schools.

That was one of those grants where you just know it's going to cost *that much*, and you only get half of what you— But we did it anyway, just because it was valuable and something we wanted to do. Now we have a model that we hope to be able to take to somebody else and say, “Can you help us continue this model of good education for kids and teachers?”

Food, What?! Youth Empowerment Program

Rabkin: I've been hearing recently about the Food, What?! program.⁸

Harlamoff: (laughs)

Rabkin: Can you tell me about that?

Harlamoff: Food, What?! You have to say it like a teenager: “Food, What?!” [laughs] Life Lab has always created something, and then gone out and [sought] funding for it. This is the first time ever somebody came to me and said, “I have this great program, and you should do it.” It actually started off with a past apprentice, Doron Comerchero. He's the Food, What?! project director. He was an apprentice, and while he was an apprentice—

Rabkin: This was at CASFS.

Harlamoff: At CASFS. So you see, the connections are getting tighter and tighter all the time. While he was an apprentice at CASFS, he wanted to do a youth

program on the Farm. So he did a one-day, what they called a Youth Day, and they brought teens from the inner cities—Oakland, San Jose, the San Francisco Bay Area inner city—brought them to the Farm, had them help with the Farm chores and harvest and cook food, again, to show people where their food comes from, and that actually it is good food, too. It's not just icky.

Rabkin: Just a one-day thing?

Harlamoff: It was just one day. That was the original. Then when Doron graduated from the CASFS apprenticeship program (he had worked in New York in Brooklyn and the Bronx, doing food project type work, working with inner city youth and gardens and that sort of thing), he wanted to start what he called the Santa Cruz Youth Farm, and that is its other name. It kind of has two names.

Rabkin: Food, What?! And—

Harlamoff: The Santa Cruz Youth Farm. He came to me one day and said, "I really want to do this, and this is my plan. I want to bring youth, and I want them to learn about social justice, and make it more of a program than just working. And I want to be able to give them a stipend for working. I want them to do some service learning in the community. I've teamed up with the Homeless Garden Project. They're willing to take teens to work in their garden. I want to go down to the Teen Center and recruit students from there." He had all of these great ideas. He said, "Would Life Lab be willing to be the fiscal agent?"

Originally I said, “Sure, I think this is a great idea.” But then I started thinking, and John and I were talking, and the staff were talking. And we were like, “Wow, Life Lab’s strategic plan has said for years that we would branch out older than just sixth grade elementary kids.” We’re really, really good at that. We’ve had some middle-school programs we’ve teamed up with other people to do, but we really needed to actually have a Life Lab program. And that was proving difficult for Doron to find funding. Because hardly anybody wants to fund something that isn’t already existing and doesn’t really have a base.

So I said, “Well, we would be willing to take it on, but it’s got to be part of Life Lab, and it’s got to be with our input.” It progressed through there. So that’s why I said it was the first time ever somebody came and said, “I want to do this.” I don’t know that I would do that again (mark my words), because it’s difficult. I had to say, “Okay, I’m going to commit this much money to this program and hope it works,” and that’s kind of a precarious thing for a nonprofit to do. But in this case, it was perfect, and in this case, it worked absolutely brilliantly. We’ve piloted one year, and we’ve already— I don’t know if he’s tripled the number of youth worked with this year.

Rabkin: Just in the second year over the first year.

Harlamoff: Yes.

Rabkin: Wow.

Harlamoff: And we have more and more and more. It's a really unique program. In the spring, the youth come after school up to the Farm, and they do various things.

Rabkin: Are these now local youth from the Santa Cruz area?

Harlamoff: Santa Cruz and Watsonville.

Rabkin: So he's not bringing them down any longer from the San Francisco Bay Area?

Harlamoff: They come down for days, but they don't come down every day. So the after-school program, they prepare the garden. We gave them the slope. The original slope that was the Life Lab garden is now the Food, What?! Youth Farm. It's about a half an acre, and we're always trying to find more land for them, because what we found is that's a limiting factor because they're actually farming. And what they're doing with their farming, is they're cooking every day. So every day, they cook a meal from what they harvest. They donate a lot of their produce to the shelters. They've gone down to the Teen Center and cooked meals from the food they've harvested, and provided meals for the Teen Center youth. They've gone to the Homeless Garden Project⁹ and worked in their garden alongside homeless people. It's very moving to hear these teens talk about, "You know, I was talking to Joe and he's homeless. It's amazing to hear about things that he did that changed the path of his life. I'm not going to go that way." [exhales] It's pretty moving. They do youth empowerment training on

themselves. They do a lot of activities. Doron has trained our staff on all of these activities that he does with the Food, What?! youth so that we understand what they're going through as teens, and their voices.

They do activities like taste tests. He brought six different drinks and had them taste it, and then decide which one they like best. And interestingly enough, it was the fruit juice, the organic Santa Cruz natural fruit juice. But he takes it a step farther. Instead of just saying, "Okay, isn't that great? It's fruit juice, and it's better for you than the soda," his philosophy (and ours, too) is that you give them all the information and you let them decide. So rather than saying, "Don't drink soda, it's got sixteen teaspoons of sugar in it," he does the experiment, which is a Life Lab one, where you measure out and you say, "Guess how many teaspoons of sugar is in this cup of soda," and it's like sixteen or something. It's outrageous. And then, here's the comparison of the juice, which you preferred. Of course, because they're teens, they're like, "It's too expensive. I can't get it." Then Doron, being Doron, pulls out the receipt and says, "Okay, this is how much we spent on this juice" (which was three dollars), "this is how much a can of soda— Let's figure out what the cost comparison is."

They're looking at their own advocacy, their own dollar worth. They're looking at learning how to work together. Every day they journal-write, and every day they do what's called straight talk, where they sit face to face with each other and say, "This is something that I value about you, and this is what I appreciate. And here is something that is an improvable." He calls them improvable. Boy, I tell

you, [exhales] sitting and watching these teens after three or four weeks after doing that—they're brilliant, and they're very empowered.

And then, the other thing, too, is that they're also held to a strict code of conduct and work ethic. Like they must be there at 10:00. In the summer, they work all day long, every day. In the fall they do a fall program, which is kind of like the spring, where they do these advocacy things—work a little bit on the Farm. But in the summer, they're actually working every day and they're farming and they're going to other farms and interning there. They're doing all kinds of things, and they get a stipend for doing that. If they're late, they get docked twenty-five dollars. And they have a really serious set of consequences that they have to read and sign and do all this stuff.

I was talking to Doron the other day, and he said, "I had one boy that was kind of 'Yeah, give me the paper. I'll sign it.'" He said, "No, I'm not going to let you sign it until you really read it and really understand it. Because we will hold you to it. Basically the bottom line is if you don't follow all the rules that are set up, not just by us but by themselves, you get fired, and you don't get your money." Because they get their stipend at the end of the—

So this boy's like, "Whoo. I'd better go read it." Then a couple of others were like, "Oh, I'd better go read it." And it was interesting, because he came back and chose to do it. He said, "I can do this," and Doron's like "Great." But another one came back, "No, I don't want to do it." He was like, "Okay, that's your choice." They're at that stage where they need to start making those decisions.

A perfect example was one of the girls who was kind of unsure of herself when she started, a great kid, but a little shy. What we've found is the first crew, there's always a certain number of them each time that want to continue on and become youth leaders. So we've had to expand the program to include youth leaders. And we had a winter internship for three of the young women who wanted to stay and said, "We've got to stay." One of them did an internship on the Farm with the farming. One of them did an internship where she really wanted to do outreach to other teens about this program, and about this type of eating and living and advocacy type— And then the other one wanted to do an internship on fundraising, and how you go about talking. That was this [shy girl]. She created a fundraising letter from her own language. She sent it out to all of these businesses. She followed up with phone calls and thank you notes. It was incredible.

She was also the one that kept getting— She'd get later and later every day. Doron was telling me, he said, "I finally went to her and I said, 'If you're late one more time, I have to fire you. We need to decide what we're going to do about this. You've been in this program a year. I don't want to fire you, but I have to, because what are we going to do? What are we going to do?'"

And she looked him straight in the face, because that's what they've learned to do, is real communication. She looked at him and she said, "Doron, it's not *we*. I need to figure out how I'm going to be here every day. I need to decide how to do it. And I'm going to do that." She's never been late a day.

Rabkin: Wow.

Harlamoff: Yes, a sixteen-year-old kid.

Rabkin: A great story.

Harlamoff: They're youth from all different walks of life. We had a boy with Tourette's. We've had learning disabled. We've had very diverse students, some high school, some home-schooled, some Watsonville, a lot of community, alternative high schools. These youth, they come together, and they learn to work in these diverse situations with diverse populations. It's amazing.

What they've started to do, is add to the program. Doron's of course, there, and now Abby. He brought in Abby Bell who also helped him to begin with. We finally hired her, because we needed more help. The two of them are a great team. But the youth did what they called a Strawberry Health Blast. They organized, with the alternative schools in Santa Cruz County and some of the other schools, to bus the youth up to the Farm during a school day, and spend the day there doing these health activities that the Food, What?! kids came up with. They did smoothies that were healthy, and then looked at the nutrition. They did the power of the dollar. They videotaped each other interviewing—they had interview questions about food and their traditions and where they got their food and what their thoughts were about food. They did cartoon strips about a healthy vegetable. I don't remember what it was, but we have some really great examples. They did some gardening and did some farming. They did

some really fun physical activity things. There were about a hundred there from all over our county.

Rabkin: That sounds like a great way to bring in future participants in the program, too.

Harlamoff: Yes. And more than that, it was a great way to see these kids trying grilled beets and chard. They made chard rolls. We said, “Pick a favorite recipe that you’re going to make.” Oh, and they made fruit tarts with yogurt and whole wheat. And the kids were just eating them up. It was amazing.

And one of my favorite cartoons— One of the boys in the program has never eaten a vegetable in his life, which is true. And they’re always poking and prodding each other, especially in the beginning. They’re teasing each other. This little girl wrote this cartoon about [the boy who hadn’t eaten vegetables]. “This is [so-and so]. He’s never eaten a vegetable in his life. One day, he tried a chard roll and said, ‘Hmm, that’s not so bad.’ And now, Andrew has billions and billions and billions of muscles [both laugh] and is very healthy, and he loves vegetables now.” It is true. He had never eaten a vegetable. And here he was on the Farm.

It’s funny, because my office sits—my window opens, and there’s a sink right below my window. So they’re washing their hands and washing dishes, and I get a really unique— Because they sort of pretend like I’m not there. I sit up higher. They see me, but they just ignore me, like I’m not there. So I get the real comments. Like, there was this one boy. It was the first day, and they were

making spanikopita. So they went out and picked spinach. I actually took my goats up last year, and they learned to milk goats, and they made boiled farm cheese. We're talking like, the whole meal was pretty much from the Farm. It was incredible. Grated carrots in it made it— It was so good. They brought me some. (laughs)

There was this boy, and he was all tough. Normally if you saw him walking down the street— And that's one of the things we talk about, too, these kids, perception of them is not good, and their own perceptions of themselves is not very good. But anyway, he's standing there, and he's all being tough, and he's washing dishes at the sink. And this other guy is standing there, and one of them leans over, and he goes, "Man, what'd you think of that meal?" and the other one's washing dishes. He goes, "Well, that was the best f-ing meal I've ever had in my life." [whispers]

Rabkin: [laughter]

Harlamoff: "Yeah, me, too." [loud laughter] But it was like nobody wanted to say it out loud. But it was so funny, because it was like not cool.

Then they had another Farm Day where they had all of these kids from the Bay Area come. And that's when I brought the goats, and they made all this cheese, and they went out and cut herbs from the garden and spiced it. These kids from the Bay Area are sitting there going, "I'm not eating that. That's nasty," and they're like, "No, you know what? It's really good. We thought so, too, until we

actually made it ourselves.” Every person on that farm had crumbled goat cheese and beets. So that’s the power of food.

Rabkin: Wow. Well, I don’t want to keep you too much longer. Do you have time for a couple of closing questions?

Harlamoff: I have no time limits. I know I talk a lot. (laughs)

Rabkin: It’s all wonderful, everything you’ve said.

Harlamoff: Okay. Did I make you cry? I make myself cry.

Rabkin: A few times, yes.

Harlamoff: I know it’s pretty special.

Other Aspects of Life Lab

Rabkin: So I’m wondering if there are aspects of your work with Life Lab that we haven’t touched on yet that seem like they would be important to talk about.

Harlamoff: Life Lab is so diverse. Sometimes people come in and they say, “I don’t know how you guys do it all.” That’s always a concern of mine, because my goal is also to make Life Lab a really wonderful place to work, as well as the programs. I mean, just because it’s great work, you still have to take care of

people's needs. I'm only following what I felt like was the premise that Robbie and Gary started off with, which was that we look at the needs of people. That's one of the things that's been a side product of being executive director that I wasn't expecting. But I'm really happy that it's turned out to be that way. One of the things is making it a family-friendly place. It was always set up to be, but we have babies, people are allowed to bring their babies.

Rabkin: Employees.

Harlamoff: Yes. So employees bring babies. And we have a retirement system now. And we have our own minimum wage, which is based on the living wage in Santa Cruz. Which is still not a lot, but still, it's better than saying, we're going to hire you at minimum wage. Just trying to make it so that we're taking care of the needs of the people that are doing these incredible programs. Doing incredible programs isn't always enough. So that's one of the things.

Then the other thing is the diversity of our programs. We're now the Monterey Bay Science Project, our site. When LASERS phased out on funding, the California Science Project was like, "This is such great work. We've got to keep it going." So they've been giving money to Life Lab to keep those programs on a scaled-back version, but still that same intensive teacher training program. So that's been great.

We're still running a waste-free school program in terms of the education part. It's collaboration with the county, and Ecology Action in the schools, and Life

Lab. And we do the education. We go in and teach kids and teachers on recycling practices within schools, and actually implementing it so that they've reduced their wastes a huge amount.

And not only has the waste been diverted from the landfill, but also it's saving the schools hundreds of thousands of dollars. That's a really cool program.

And then this year, we ventured into another collaboration with Ecology Action. For the first time ever, we did a water-type program. We were kind of a contractor with Ecology Action to do the teacher training on watersheds, taking some really good, locally written watershed curriculum. It was a great program. Unfortunately there isn't any continued funding for that, but it is something that we know we could do if need be, and how it fits into our mission and our vision and all that. And we've got Food, What?! Then we've got the garden and all the garden programs. So it's quite diverse.

Rabkin: Are there aspects of the work that ever keep you up at night or cause anxiety?

Harlamoff: Yes! (laughs) Yes. Knowing that I am responsible for the employment of twelve people and their livelihood is a huge burden. Fortunately, I've been pretty good at compartmentalizing, looking at budgets and saying, "Okay." I go into the office sometimes, and I will have a complete and total panic attack by myself, and where my feet go cold and my hands go cold. I don't think that's unusual for an executive director. Our projected budget next year is eight

hundred thousand. I can do all the charts and figurings and projections and wishing that I want, but we're still going to need to raise a good portion of that somehow.

So to me, that's the biggest thing. When I took over, there were a couple of times in my first six months of working where my bookkeeper would come in and go, "Gail, there's no money in the bank." (laughs) Literally. That's terrifying. It's funny, because now we've got actually a little bit of cash, because we've diversified our funding. But it's still that same feeling. And if anything, I panic even more now sometimes, because I don't want to ever have to go back there again, and because we've got such a huge responsibility. We've got a responsibility to the community, and the university, and the Center for Agroecology, and of course, my employees. It would be so great to have somebody say, "Here's a couple of million dollars. Make it last." I would make it last. I'd figure out some way that we would work on programs and live on that interest forever.

I think that's the biggest thing with nonprofits that I hear about: it's this flux of funding. It's here; it's there. It's not there; it's here. You never know from day to day. So that's the biggest stress.

Also—well, I wouldn't say it's a stress to me: To me, it's a great challenge that we have so many different types of people working in the organization. Working with people so that not only are they doing the best job for the organization but

also for themselves, is a challenge. But that's not the same as the panic of, "Where am I going to find that money?" (laughs) Yes, that's the biggest stress.

Rabkin: So Life Lab is doing garden-based science education.

Harlamoff: Every kind of education.

Rabkin: As you know, this oral history project we're doing is, in the biggest sense, looking at the development of sustainable agriculture. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about the bridge between those two things, about how doing this kind of education connects to developing sustainable agriculture in general.

Sustainable Food Systems Issues

Harlamoff: Well, yes! That's why I corrected you when you said science. Because, see, when I came on, it was mostly science, and we talked about other things. But now, we really have moved into more the food systems, sustainability issues, particularly with the older students who can understand that. I think it's completely and totally connected. Because, I may be totally wrong, but my own personal view is that our country, our world, our society, whatever you want to call it, is going to have to move towards sustainable agriculture within the community. And unless we make sure that everyone is comfortable with that, that it's not some foreign thing that I can't do, that So-and-So can't do, because I don't know how to plant, it's not going to happen.

We're raising this whole generation of students who wander out in the garden and they pick a beet and they wash it off, and they're sitting there, crunching on them raw as they're sitting in the garden classroom. To me, that *is* sustainable, because it all goes full circle. They're learning how to make compost and how that nourishes the soil. They're learning about chickens and that you nourish them with the leftover plants, and that their manure can then go into the compost, which then goes into the garden, and that those chickens give us eggs, which we then make into omelets, which we then pick the vegetables [for], which we grew from the compost, which we made from the chicken manure.

They're getting this. And they're comfortable. I think that's the biggest thing. It's really interesting to me. There was a whole range (in my family included) of people that sort of grew up with gardens, but then in schools it wasn't—you were a hick if you gardened. It was like, it's not what you do. You go on and become electricians, or whatever you do. I find that with teachers and with the public, too. They're afraid: "I don't know how to plant a seed. I don't know how to grow a bean. I don't know *why* it's not growing. I don't know what to do." It didn't grow the first time. Something ate it, and they panic. So they fall back on, "Well, it's easier and cheaper for me to buy grapes from Mexico than grow my own." I'm like, "Really, it's not. It's not, if you look at the cost."

We are so ingrained into CASFS, we've become more of a voice for sustainable agriculture than we used to [be]. A long time ago, we had to be really, really careful. Because you had a lot of students that you were teaching in schools whose parents were big business farmers and spraying. You had to be a little

careful. Nobody wanted to say “organic,” because you might offend somebody else. That’s why I love the word “sustainable,” because it’s opened up a door for people. You know how words become— It’s like, in our culture today an environmentalist is a bad person, and yet I know people who are more environmentalist than anybody else, but they refuse to say that, because it’s a bad word. It’s like “liberal” is a bad word, or whatever.

Not that “organic” is a bad word, but for a long time there were farmers that would go, “Ah, don’t talk to me about those newfangled practices.” Whereas, if you say “sustainable,” and we’re able to teach kids sustainable practices, I’ve noticed a lot less people resisting it: “Oh, you’re just the hippies on the hill teaching my kids weird stuff.” Now it’s like, “Oh, yes. Compost. That’s a good way to get rid of my garbage *and* feed my garden *and* keep the soil healthy. Wow, that makes sense.” And it’s not just the hippies on the hill thinking that. It’s the community. I think as a community we’ve got to get people comfortable being in the soil. We’ve got to get our communities comfortable with seeing a vegetable garden in a front yard.

I’ve lived here my whole life. So I’ve got forty-six years of observation. When I grew up, it was kind of like, “Why do you guys want to live way out there? Who in the heck goes out and lives in Soquel? It’s so rundown. It’s the blighted community.” It was considered blighted. But in our own community, my friends down the road thought we were the rich people at the end of the road, because we had the house at the top and we had a car, whereas they had a horse and buggy, literally. I swear it’s true, a horse and buggy. And yet I look back and go,

“Wow, we didn’t have very much money, but we grew everything and we canned everything.” My mom gleaned from fields, and she begged from farmers, and we would pick up truckloads of fallen apples and make cider. I mean, all that kind of stuff.

When my grandfather passed away, I stayed in this house that I’m living in now. I went back to doing agriculture. And the community grew up around me. You see over there, there’s million-dollar mansions surrounding my little plot of dirt. For a long time, people would actually come to me and say, “Would you mind if I sent my gardener over? I can’t stand looking at the grass.” Or, “Would you please trim the bushes around your front yard? They look unsightly.” Or, “We’re so sick of this bumpy road. We’re all going to pool our resources and spend fifty thousand dollars to do a new road.” It was a constant pressure, and I was always feeling like, “Oh, my gosh. Oh, my gosh. Oh, my gosh. What am I going to do? What am I going to do?” I was always tippy-toeing around, because you know, dogs couldn’t bark, grass couldn’t grow, bushes couldn’t be left to grow too big and couldn’t be not pruned, because they had to look uniform.

In the last few years, probably three years, I’ve seen this transformation. I’ve tried to figure it out. My neighbor says it’s me, in that I invite people in. I’m not sure that that’s totally true. I think it’s a bigger issue with our community, where people are suddenly going, “You know what? Our culinary students don’t know where eggs come from. Our grandchildren have never grown anything.”

I have goats. I milk my goats, and I sell the milk to a pet food co-op in San Francisco for people who are feeding their animals raw meat and a natural diet, which includes, for some, raw goat milk. I started inviting people in. I would say that ninety percent of the adults had never seen a goat outside of a petting zoo or at Disneyland, and that one hundred percent of those people thought that they were animals that clawed you and nipped your clothes and ate tin cans. Because that's what you see at a petting zoo. You see animals that the only time they're fed is whatever they're fed, and they're wild and they butt you. The rest of them thought that goats butted you and knocked you over. And here I'm saying, "Come on in. Bring your kids and see these goats. They're gentle. They have teeth only on one side." I open their mouths so they can see them. The adults are like, "Wow," and the kids are like, "Wow." I show them how they eat, and we talk about their stomachs. I've created my own learning community here of all of these people. And suddenly there's a shift. I don't think it's all me. I think it's our society saying, "We've got to get back." Last Sunday, I counted. There were fifty people that came on Sunday to see the goats.

Rabkin: Had you extended a formal invitation, or was this word of mouth?

Harlamoff: It's word of mouth. People come, and every time I see somebody new, I go out and I say, "Hello, I'm Gail, and these are my goats," and they're like, "Ooh." They're all worried, "Is it okay?" "Yes, go ahead. Go on in. You can pet them." There's one little boy that didn't walk for a long, long time. And when he started learning to walk, he loved being in the goats, because he'd fall down

on a goat who's laying out there. I watched him one day. He pulled himself up on old Mina, Mina the Goat.

Rabkin: (laughs)

Harlamoff: She's standing there, chewing her cud, going, "Oh, yeah. That's nice. He's massaging me."

So anyway, my point is that people are yearning for that sustainability, and that's back to being able to feed themselves. It's really neat. Eric who just came in [during the interview], he and his wife are going to sell their house in Santa Cruz. They live off of Mission, and they want to buy a little plot of land because they want to produce their own food and create a sustainable farm for themselves. My neighbor down the street, she's growing things, and we share. She makes cheese, and I make cheese, and she makes bread. The other night, we had a meal that was just our farm.

Rabkin: Wow.

Harlamoff: Yes.

The Future of Life Lab

Rabkin: Let me ask you one more question, going back to Life Lab. What are your biggest plans and hopes for the future of Life Lab and its programs?

Harlamoff: I'd love to have it totally sustainable. (laughs) My first thing is always financial. My goal is to keep an organization that looks at the needs of the community and doesn't change our mission and vision, but meets the needs. Like, if the community starts saying, "We need this," to meet those needs somehow. I think we'll always be an education program. I'd love to see more and more programs in the garden. I'd love to see a satellite Life Lab sometime, maybe based in some underserved communities. Like, right now, Food, What?!, one of the things the youth recognized and we recognized is that the Beach Flats community in Santa Cruz doesn't have a lot of access to fresh fruits and vegetables. So we've teamed up with their community center, and the San Jose Nurses Association who comes and does health clinics, and the bookmobile. Every Friday, our youth harvest on the Farm and take all the fruits and vegetables down and sell them at a reasonable price to the Beach Flats community at the same time that the bookmobile is there and the music is there.

Rabkin: So they have a little farm cart in Beach Flats?

Harlamoff: Yes. So we've got a farm cart. That was one of the things that the youth said last year. They said, "The one thing we really want to do is we want to learn more about business, and learn more about commerce, and how do we sell our things, and make money for the program that we love and want to keep going." And serving the community, but not just taking bunches of flowers and dropping them off somewhere, like they did last year. They wanted to do something really valuable and useful. So that's our goal. I'd love to see more of that type of thing.

Our goal is moving more and more towards nutrition and sustainable agriculture. That's what we're doing. We're being pushed that way, even though we're not abandoning everything else, but we realized that it's not all in isolation. It's one thing to grow a bean, but it's even more important to see that bean fruit and eat that bean. And then that gives context to the nutrition of a bean.

Rabkin: Well, thank you very much, Gail. This has been wonderful.

Harlamoff: You're welcome.

¹ See the oral history with Erika Perloff in this series.

² See the oral history with Robbie Jaffe in this series.

³ See <http://www.lifelab.org/index.php?page=mbsp> for more on the LASERS Program.

⁴ *The Growing Classroom Garden-Based Science and Nutrition Activity Guide*. See <http://www.lifelab.org/index.php?page=curriculum&lls=1#tgc>

⁵ See <http://www.lifelab.org/index.php?page=curriculum&lls=1#k5c>

⁶ See the oral history with Jim Leap in this series.

⁷ PICA, the Program in Community and Agroecology, is an experimental living/learning program located at UC Santa Cruz. PICA's primary academic mission is to engage students with sustainability through practical experience and the sharing of community based knowledge. Through seminars, practical training in agroecology and organic gardening, student involvement in campus and community gardens, and the development of local composting projects, PICA students are able to integrate classroom instruction with hands-on learning.

⁸ See <http://gardenclassroom.googlepages.com/home> for more on the Food, What?! Program.

⁹ See the oral histories with Darrie Ganzhorn and Paul Glowaski of the Homeless Garden Project in this series.