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Volume 7, Issue 2



## Inner-City Shangri-la

By Harriette Yahr

For 30 years a lush oasis has been thriving in the heart of Little Haiti

Miami is no stranger to inner-city roosters, but inner-city pigs and emus? Welcome to The Farm, a patch of paradise located in an unlikely place — just off 79th Street near N. Miami Avenue in Little Haiti. The Farm, sometimes called the Earth-N-Us Farm, sits on a two-acre lot

filled with an equal mix of characters, barnyard animals, groovy tree houses, and a very colorful history.

The property is owned by Ray Chasser, an uber-laid-back 50-something you might mistake for Jerry Garcia if you didn't get out much. "I guess some people have stereotypes,"

Ray laughs as he hoists a stack of hay to feed his goats. For the past 31 years, The Farm has hosted numerous school field trips, drum circles, potluck dinners, make-shift concerts, and even a few fire walks.

"If you didn't know this was Miami, you might think you'd dropped into

Woodstock," says David Goldbeck, an author and snowbird from the Woodstock, New York, who first visited The Farm last month. And for locals who wander in, especially Miami natives, words like "magical" and "this is so cool" surface

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Ray Chasser and the wood-burning barbecue: At big parties he's often The Farm's go-to chef."



City kids can interact with a variety of friendly critters.



Farm culture: Tolerance, fun, hard work.



Shawnee with brother Ray: She raised a family in her tree house.

BT photos by Silvia Ros

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after a shock to the geographic system. "Is this really Miami?"

Yes, this is Miami, and not far from the menacing sound of gunshots. About those weapons that have gone *boom* in the night? "Whenever anyone complains about animal noises," Ray says, "I ask them: What would you rather have, the sound of guns or chickens?"

Before you go thinking The Farm is a place where radicals sit around dropping acid and planning revolutions, let me tell you I first learned about it in the parking lot of a North Miami synagogue as I was leaving a bar mitzvah.

A guy loosening his tie walked up to me. "You look like a hippie," he said. "You should come to The Farm. Volleyball on Sundays." Volleyball I understood. But a farm? A hippie? Yeah, I know I have long hair and a predilection for jeans and flip-flops, but.... What exactly happens at this farm? Did I look

like a stoner or something? I asked the rabbi about this farm place. "What goes on there? Do they do drugs or something, because you know I'm not into —"

"Go," he stopped me. "It's nothing like that. You'll have fun."

A few days later I turned west on 79th Street and south a few blocks down and found a parking spot in front

**Ray built The Farm bit by bit, acquiring more land each year until 1986, when he owned the roughly half-block, two-acre property he does now.**

of a tree stump resting on a hollowed-out canoe. I walked around back, past a school bus decked out in peace-sign bumper stickers, and jumped onto a wooden deck. "Hi!" I said, greeting the five or so folks hanging out, laughing at a joke whose punch line I just missed. "I'm here to play volleyball."

That was 13 years ago. I've had a lot of fun at The Farm since then — none of it drug-related — and I've met some really interesting people, whose day jobs might be law or engineering or parenting or yoga, all hippies at heart, I suppose.

Ray built The Farm bit by bit. In 1978 he paid \$35,000 for an initial quarter-acre parcel located on the corner of NE 76th

Street and N. Miami Court. A year later he purchased another quarter-acre, and acquired more land each year until 1986, when he owned the roughly half-block, two-acre property he does now — in addition to "a few crack houses" across the street he cleaned up by turning

them into rental properties. Even as a white Jewish kid, Ray was familiar with the neighborhood. At age eight, back in the early 1960s, he helped his father after school at the family rag business on 77th Street. As an adult, he ran a second-hand furniture business on 79th Street with his father. Both businesses were

called "Kagan" in homage to the physician who tried to save the life of Ray's brother Bobby, who died at age four from a birth defect. Ray's phone number still remains the same as Kagan's — 305-754-0000 — and he's not getting rid of it.

"I had two requirements when I was looking for a place," Ray tells me, sipping a Bud Light in the kitchen of The Farm's main house as we lean on a handmade cedar table with pressed-flower inlays that he built with his four kids 25 years ago. "Enough room for a garden and a spot for volleyball. It was the gumbo limbos here that sold me." He steps outside, beyond a wood-burning grill, to indicate the huge gumbo limbo tree that first hooked him. An inviting hammock now hangs from it.

Jungle green is everywhere: papaya, barbados cherry, lychee trees, even an iguana hiding in a *pithecellobium*. Ray points out damage here and there from hurricanes. "After Andrew, it took us two

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Photos courtesy of Shawnee Chasser and Wren Levy



Scenes from life on The Farm (clockwise from top left): Shawnee holding baby Josh with young Wren; Ray and daughter Marney (with ball) and Josh; Ray's son Aubrey and daughter Sarah with Josh (center); Poppy and Lantana; Ray's son Justin (circa 1980) has recently moved back to The Farm.

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 to three months of chain-sawing just to walk through the yard," he recalls with the all-in-a-day's-labor attitude emblematic of his work ethic and deference to Mother Nature. His creed: "If you're not just thinking about yourself, everything will work out."

A total of nine goats, 120 chickens, four geese, two emus, two pigs, a few

cats, a dog, and a snake I want nothing to do with call The Farm home. Many people do too. Ray rents about 30 rooms scattered around the property, including the school bus in which he used to live. Today he sleeps on his sailboat, docked at the Boat House, a home he rents out on the Little River, just a few blocks north.

Nestled next to the bus is a tool shed and work area flush up against a soda vending machine — a Farm mainstay — that

actually requires change (50 cents). A picture of Ray's father, Poppy, sporting a long beard just like his son, hangs on a nearby wall. Poppy passed away last year.

Assorted wood stumps double as school chairs. The Farm hosts school field trips in which youngsters learn about medicinal plants like comfrey (good for treating bruises) and peppermint (the oil helps headaches), and about tending to the goats in a way that makes

you think connecting with more than video games is a good thing for kids.

Ray and I walk from the main house to the rear of the property. There's the Honey Room on the left (more on that later) and a massive tree house to the right. We walk past an outdoor shower and a composting toilet (there are regular ones too), and find our way back to the

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garden. "This is some of the best soil in Miami," Ray insists, opening an iron gate to reveal rows of organic chard, tomatoes, eggplants — more than 50 different vegetables. "Not many people would believe that."

There has always been some kind of organic garden at The Farm, fed by water from a deep well Ray installed the day before he moved here in 1978. Today the garden has grown, entered the digital age, and is playing a role in the urban-sustainability movement.

"Powerful Community Forming For Organic Lifestyles!" declares The Farm's MySpace profile, created by Marcus Thomson — male, Miami, 30 years old. Marcus moved to The Farm from Fort Lauderdale this past January to dig into his dream of community

**If you've been around Miami long enough, you probably remember Little River Honey. Ray bottled the honey and distributed it in recycled glass jars.**

living. He's taken on the position of farm organizer, a loose title, as titles go around here. He's in the garden today preparing compost, mixing in seaweed he canoed out to Biscayne Bay to gather. "Seaweed contains many nutrients to properly nourish the soil," he says. Healthy dirt, he adds, is essential to "creating healthy plants which ultimately feed and create healthy people."

Marcus's goals are not your run-of-the-mill backyard garden variety. His eco-dreams are big. They encompass the elements, from water (rain catchment and gray-water recycling systems) to sun (photovoltaic cells) to air (harnessing wind power) to earth (permaculture gardens, sustainable homes, and more). He also wants to show others that living green doesn't have to be overwhelming. "People complain their hands are full, that they work nine-to-five, that they don't have time," he says. "I think people need to let go of more, to free up their hands to find more meaning in their life."

Global warming, climate change — call it what you will, there's an environmental transformation taking place on our planet. Food production is a hot topic. Chime into best-selling author and food

guru Michael Pollan or Google average citizens taking charge of their health and finances, like InnerCityFarmer.com or PathtoFreedom.com, and you'll see the urban garden is catching on. Living self-sufficiently isn't just a trend, it's becoming a necessity, "and it totally makes sense," Marcus says.

Many would agree. More than 100,000 people signed a petition in support of an organic garden now being planted on the White House lawn, and even mainstream Hollywood celebrated the urban garden with the nomination of *The Garden* for an Academy Award this year. That documentary film chronicles a slightly different story — Big Business vs. Everyday People. It's set against the backdrop of a Los Angeles garden, and mirrors the kind of land use associated with stand-alone vegetable gardens located on municipal property, like those you find now in Overtown, not the community-living vibe of Ray's farm. But they all share the same mission: taking control of your own food production in a group setting.

Ray's niece Wren Levy, who grew up on The Farm and lives in North Miami, spearheaded the community-garden idea. She sent out an e-mail-blast (ORGANIC GARDENING WORKSHOP) to the social network to which she broadcasts The Farm's drum circles. That's how Marcus found out about The Farm. The first meeting had 15 people. Ray spoke about things like how to compost food scraps (compost can be brought to The Farm if there's no other place to put it), what companion planting is all about (for instance, tomatoes, marigolds, and basil ought to be planted together), and how to claim your own plot in the garden.

Alison Krochina, an energetic 29-year-old transplant from Anchorage, Alaska, is now living in Wren's old cottage on The Farm (thanks to an ad on Craigslist). She says her vision extends beyond The Farm's fence: "I'd love to get to the point we can give out seed starting kits to our neighbors so they can start their own gardens too."

Lest you think this is a puff piece on Utopia, or that I believe the grass is always greener, it's true there can be trouble in paradise. Renters don't always get along, and "there's a lot of heavy

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Like many things at The Farm, the volleyball rules encourage teamwork and reward effort.

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pecking going on” with the roosters, as Ray puts it. At The Farm, neighborhood kids are free to come and go. It’s part of what the place is all about — a refuge, a safe haven. The kids usually behave themselves; some even sign on to goat-feeding duty. But sometimes things are not so cool, like when teens are caught smoking in the bushes, or when beers go missing from the fridge. And then there’s the stack of cash from Ray’s tenants that disappeared from his office. Ray had a solid idea who took it. The new sneakers a few neighborhood kids were wearing tipped him off. The ordeal turned into a mess after Ray’s good intentions — work it out with the families instead of calling the cops — backfired. The parents gave their kids a beating. “Not what I had in mind,” he says.

It’s worth noting the said money-stealing crime occurred in the Honey Room. No, it’s not some kind of love shack. It actually is — or was — a honey production room. Now it’s Ray’s office, his desk peppered with utility bills and odds and ends on his fix-it list. On a back wall, a picture of Albert Einstein hangs above a cot for napping. Assorted construction tools are strewn about (Ray is currently rebuilding the deck), and piles of pennies wait their turn to be rolled.

This was once the sweet spot on The Farm, where Ray extracted honey from hives. “But the bees all died,” he says, then offers up more about “someone introducing the African bee to make a more

productive bee — you know, more honey, more money,” and how out of control things got when an exotic beetle ended up killing off all the native bees.

One result of our global ecological problems is habitat crisis, which now includes the widespread collapse of bee colonies. What this means on a local level is that the best honey you ever tasted is history. If you’ve been around Miami long enough, you probably remember Little River Honey. Until about 2000, 50 beehives dotted The Farm. Ray bottled the honey and distributed it via word-of-mouth in recycled glass jars — from pickles to tomato sauce — friends left at his place instead tossing in the garbage.

A few years after the honey business faded, Ray decided to sell off his Little River Wood Company, a business

**No story about The Farm can be complete without a section devoted to Shawnee Chasser, who lived in the massive, three-level tree house for 15 years.**

he started as a hobby many years ago, and which thrived between 1999 and 2005. If you ate pizza at Chef Allen’s or Norman’s during that time, there’s a good chance it was fired up on the pine prepared right at The Farm.

Three years later, in 2008, Ray’s father passed away. Ray likely inherited his zesty DNA from Poppy, who, until age 85, helped Ray with the wood business: unloading it from trucks, sawing,



View from the tree house: For Ray Chasser, The Farm is a unique community asset and the place he wants to be.

splitting, preparing it for restaurant delivery. But when Poppy died, something shifted in Ray. “I was feeling it was time to move on,” he recalls, “time to explore more of life.”

For a while Ray talked about selling The Farm (a deal fell through) and sailing around the world (he has a captain’s license). He couldn’t pinpoint exactly what was going on. His dad had just died, he was recently single, life was moving swiftly by him. Then he came back around, back home: “I realized the potential of what The Farm could be for Miami, and how lucky we are to live here.” He decided to stay. “You know, I’ve lived here over half my life. I don’t want to die anywhere else.”

No story about The Farm can be complete without a section devoted to Shawnee

Chasser, Ray’s sister, who lived in the massive, three-level tree house for 15 years. Shawnee is the kind of singular person that easy taglines fail, like Ray. She was “the hippie living in the tree house,” featured on CNN and Home and Garden TV. She’s quick to point out that it’s

“hippie in the more profound sense of the word.” You know, a person who wants to make positive change in the world, someone like Shawnee, who once walked across the country for nuclear disarmament.

Today Shawnee runs a landscape business called Plant More Flowers, and is building on her dream to own a healing center. And in the “some things stay the same, others change” department, she is no longer living on The Farm. That would have been hard to

imagine even two years ago. Shawnee and the tree house seemed synonymous. Her kids, Josh and Wren, grew up on The Farm. Her young adopted child Lantana frolicked freely there, doing things kids do — finding worms in the dirt, swinging from branches.

Shawnee’s tree house was like an oasis. I enjoyed lying in her hammock, detoxing from hours in front of the computer. Last year, after a complicated and deeply personal brother-sister disagreement (which made its way to the pages of the local news in an appallingly one-dimensional “hippies have long hair and bare feet” kind of way), Shawnee moved out.

Since then the tree house has lost some of its charm. It’s quieter now and bit bedraggled. There are fewer kids running around, the waterhole where the ducks hung out has run down, the string of colored lights illuminating flowered paths is dismantled. But if life on a farm teaches you anything, it’s that the world changes, new beginnings are always possible. Marcus moved into the middle level of the tree house and is sure that “everything will be renewed and restored.” Alison has turned the ground level — what used to double as the kitchen and living room — into her painting studio. And Ray is guiding the focus of The Farm back to the community, and the future.

On a recent Saturday night, Ray’s friend Melie Viera, a Miami attorney, celebrated her 50th birthday at The Farm. Ray called earlier in the week to say there was going to be a fire walk — where brave souls stroll across hot coals. When I showed up with my vegetarian frank and beans in hand, like a dutiful potluck,

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the backyard was afoot with Farm magic. Melie went all out. Local band Live Bait cranked out 1960s favorites, and Mr. Paella cooked up a Miami meal for more than 100 friends, freeing Ray from his usual role as go-to potluck chef.

As the band played Van Morrison, Ray put on his wood-guy bandana and tended to the oak heating up the coals. Soon Cork Kallen, lawyer-turned-fire-walking-coach, inspired revelers to throw their fears into the flames and take a walk on the hot side. Melie conquered the heat, charging up her friends to follow suit. It felt like old times at The Farm, mostly. Even Shawnee was there. But something was missing.

Josh Levy, Shawnee's 31-year-old son — Ray's nephew, Wren's brother, one of the nicest guys you could ever meet — had recently and very suddenly passed away. Josh's death was a shock, not something a birthday party could completely overshadow. Shawnee would soon hold a memorial for him, attended

**Ray sees leaders of the sustainability movement coming to lecture, kids continuing to be exposed to nature, and everyone sharing in the overflowing garden.**

by a huge crowd, at her new home, another tree house oasis (some things never change) in North Miami.

An avid volleyball player, Josh juggled three games a week: South Beach on Mondays, Miami Shores on Thursdays, and The Farm on Sundays. He was a little more schooled than others who show up just for fun. The rules are free-form at Farm volleyball. There's no traditional three-hit rule, you can pass the ball around as much as you'd like, and the point stays alive as long as the ball doesn't touch the ground. This means old Little River Wood stumps and *Noah's Arc*, a 38-foot sailboat parked nearby, are all fair game — if the ball hits them, that's cool, just keep the point alive.

When I first joined in the volleyball games 13 years ago, bets were on, and losers bought sushi dinner at Katana's in Normandy Isle. Today bets are off, but Ray still dives to the ground to chase down a point. Later a ball lands in a giant coconut palm. All attempts

to pry it loose with a long stick of bamboo fail, so Ray fetches an old ball, weathered from the years but still full of enough life to play.

At a post-volleyball powwow, Ray and Marcus discuss tasks that lie ahead for the week. Top of the list: Fix the goat fence. Down the line: Get the pond up and running. A large aquaculture pond, a complete biodynamic habitat, long a dream of Ray's that's broken ground since Marcus showed up, is in the works. Listening in is Christian Meyer, a 25-year-old "woofer" from Munich, Germany, a Farm volunteer from an organization called (note the mnemonic) World-Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms. Marcus listed The Farm on wwoof.org, and since then South Beach is not the only local destination beckoning young globetrotters.

Ray's girlfriend, Leslie Aronson, is also relaxing post-volleyball. Her knee is feeling better. Just two days earlier, Ray gave Leslie "bee-venom therapy" — he stung her with a bee on purpose (she agreed) — to ease her muscle pain. Ray has been itching to don his beekeeper hat again, for the health of it ("Beekeepers never get arthritis!" he chirps) and the honey everyone's been missing. One hive, located in a spot where invasive plant species have been cleared, is starting to buzz with life. "A lot of beekeepers are using coumophos, a poison, to get hives going," he notes. "We won't do that, but we'll hopefully find a way."

You get the sense that Ray *will* somehow figure a way through the beehive challenge. Everything seems possible when you're nurturing a swath of green into an inner-city Shangri-la.

Ray is hoping to gain nonprofit status for The Farm to better support educational opportunities (he welcomes all help). He sees leaders of the sustainability movement coming to lecture, kids continuing to be exposed to nature, and everyone sharing in the bounty of an overflowing garden. "My mother taught me that anything you want to do, you can," he says. "Shoot high, there'll be lots of rocky roads, learn from your mistakes."

As he jumps up to take in one last volleyball game before the sun sets, he adds with a smile: "And never get discouraged!"

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