



Mek arwe go pong tory

News from the Lacey family in Antigua

...special Seasonal Edition... This time of year brings with it not only the excitement and anticipation of Christmas, but also the anniversary of GARD Center – now a ripe old age of 23! As many have asked us to give more information about the history of the Center, this newsletter is a special “Seasonal Edition” focusing upon its journey from past to present .

One of our more usual newsletters will follow next year – but for now, allow us to wish you all a very happy Christmas and New Year. We’ll be celebrating Christmas Day Antiguan-style with our boss, Roberta, and her family; and then exploring further in the Caribbean with a trip to the Dominican Republic over New Year. We look forward to seeing you in 2013... **C&V.**

The concept of "Ministry" is something that one often primarily associates with church buildings, ordained ministers and Sunday services. But the GARD Center, based in Antigua, has been ministering to a vast array of individuals for more than 20 years outside of these usual boundaries.

Its origins stem from 24th October 1989, when the MCCA Conference - under the leadership of the late Rev. Eric Clarke - approved a proposal to partner with the Canadian Government and the Government of Antigua and Barbuda,

to instigate a training project for young farmers. Under this project, the MCCA contributed five acres of land for the creation of a demonstration farm on the historic Gilbert’s Estate in Antigua, together with classroom and office facilities at the Gilbert Ecumenical Centre. The Canada Training Awards Project (CTAP) provided funds for staff and equipment, and the Ministry of Agriculture provided technicians as tutors and equipment for land preparation.

The mission of this pilot project was to train young people in practical agriculture and to demonstrate and promote farming as a worthy and viable occupation – evolving from recognition of the fact that the average age of Caribbean farmers was 50 years, and it was apparent that the younger generation was not selecting agriculture or its related industries as an occupational choice. Farming was viewed by many young people as drudgery, high risk and not a viable means to increase one's standard of living. But the

project saw then, as the Center still does today, the vast opportunities in the agricultural sector for young people – in terms of realising employment, raising self esteem, and providing opportunities for youths to better themselves and become productive members of society.

Following the success of the two-year pilot project, in which a 500-layer



Beekeeping Trainees in 1995

poultry unit, a rabbitry and plant nursery were constructed for demonstration purposes, and nineteen individuals graduated with skills in crop production, farm management, budding and grafting, the MCCA saw the need to broaden its objectives and establish a full time training and rural development center. As a result, the Gilbert Agricultural and Rural Development Center was born – named in honour of Nathaniel Gilbert, who introduced Methodism to the Caribbean, and upon whose former estate the project had been launched.

As a rural development and training center, the GARD Center has needed to respond to changing trends as it tries to prevent a threatened drop in the standard of living. Since 1993, the Center has offered agricultural and enterprise training to youth between the ages of sixteen and thirty, and in 1996 it also began targeting the training of unemployed and low-income women. This training focused on life skills and entrepreneurial skills with specific emphasis on the use of natural resources in agriculture and other forms of rural enterprises.

As a result of the positive experiences and outcomes of combining life skills and entrepreneurial skills with classical vocational training, the Center found itself with an ever-increasing calling to serve vulnerable youth, for whom this kind of training had been found to make fundamental differences in morale, motivation and self-esteem. Consequently, in 2008, it was nominated to be a *Partnership in Opportunities for Employment through Technology in the Americas* (POETA) Center providing training for “youth at risk,” combining training in computer literacy, life skills, job-readiness and business management. In 2009, it further expanded its programs for these youth, forging strategic partnerships with the *United States Agency for International Development* (USAID) and the *International Youth Foundation*, as part of a regional project entitled the *Caribbean Youth Empowerment Program*. Under this programme, a number of new initiatives were introduced: more diverse skills training (including such subjects as Cosmetology, Office Administration, Small Engine Repair and Sound Engineering), the formation of a Job Placement Unit, and a Business Mentoring programme.

It is around this focus of vulnerable youth that the majority of the Center’s work now takes place – reaching out to young people in Antigua and Barbuda, providing second chances to those who have dropped out of school or been in trouble with the law, and helping them to improve their attitudes of self-worth. Much of this is done through teaching of the Center’s Life Skills curriculum, covering four core competencies: Personal Development (e.g. developing self-confidence, setting goals, building leadership skills), Problem Solving (e.g. asking questions and listening, managing bullying, and managing conflicts), Healthy Lifestyles (e.g. managing risky behavior, youth reproductive health), and Workplace Success (working in teams, managing projects, and time and financial management).



Getting to know the students well, and being able to respond to their questions, issues and problems is a factor of key importance for the Center. The Principal, Joycelyn Humphreys (funded by the Methodist Church in Britain), together with the other staff, lead daily devotions which provide a time for some bible study, reflection, and talking through any issues that confront the groups. And the occasional sound of fifty voices – many of whom have little or no Church background – raising praises to God in song is an amazing way to start the day!

During the previous round of training, the times of devotions were further enhanced on a weekly basis by the leadership of Rev. Roger Deane from the MCCA, who also stayed around for the entire morning to chat to students and provide an opportunity for one-to-one counselling.

Cynrica is a graduate from the Office Practice course, who – following training – was offered a job at a leading insurance company in Antigua. When asked how she felt she had benefited from the GARD Center experience, she replied:

“Before I went to the GARD Center, I was at home and lost – I didn’t feel like I had goals and dreams... I was aimless. I don’t have a mother, and I don’t know my father, and didn’t have the means to afford school financially. But I felt comfortable at the GARD – and now I feel equipped because I know for a fact I’m capable of achieving my goals, because of the training I received.”

Being able to reach out to people like Cynrica is why the GARD Center continues to do what it does. A recent consultation held by the Methodist Church in Britain, in which the former MCCA President, Rev Dr. George Mulrain was actively involved, concluded:

"The Missio Dei is not just about God bringing the universe to birth in creation, it is also about the redemption, restoration and transformation of human lives and of the world in which those lives are lived".

The "transformation of human lives" is the area of ministry in which the GARD Center is attempting to serve. It is mission not in the sense of bashing people round the heads with bibles; it's about practically helping to transform people's lives - under and in the name of God. It was for this purpose, through the mechanism of the MCCA, that the Gilbert Agricultural and Rural Development Center was created as a social investment in people.



...prayer points... Please pray for:

- The successful completion of internships for all of our trainees currently "out in the field".
- New tutors (Maths, English, ICT, Life Skills) and members of staff (Project Manager, PR Coordinator, Business Development Officer, Admin Assistant) which we're currently recruiting and training.
- The new programmes and courses due to commence at the Center in 2013.

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Chris and Véra Lacey are working at the Gilbert Agricultural and Rural Development Center in Antigua, providing IT and management support and training.

*Please get in touch if you're interested:
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The Methodist Church 

