

# profile

## Gretchen Ferenz

LEADER, ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AREA

I've always had a passion for people, education, plants and the outdoors. I guess it goes back to when I was thirteen and was working in a commercial greenhouse. I just loved it, although I missed having people around. There were a couple other workers and occasionally clients. Then, while I was a sophomore in college, I was studying horticulture. I worked for a commercial landscaping operation. I had to get the job myself so I could obtain credit through a cooperative education program at the college. Through that experience, I met an extension educator from Rutgers who served as my sponsor. At the time, she was one of only five female agriculture agents in New Jersey. Her work was very inspiring to me. It was through this relationship that I learned about cooperative extension. I knew then that that was what I wanted to pursue as a career. So I went on to get my master's in environmental horticulture at the University of California–Davis to become better prepared for an extension profession. It was not so much a route to community education as it was to nurture and educate in the context of plants and the outdoors. Agriculture and horticulture was the entrée.

I started working with Cornell University Cooperative Extension–New York City (CUCE-NYC) programs over fifteen years ago. I was hired as its first commercial horticulture specialist which was really a terrific opportunity in that I could develop some new education programs. I was working with

professionals throughout the city who came from different fields. They were involved in different sectors of business and government. I helped them address business management needs, landscape plant design and management needs. There were many other staff involved in consumer horticulture, primarily doing community horticulture work with individuals and community gardens and schools. We were all part of the Urban Horticulture Program. I worked primarily with professionals, and they were working more with community residents. Again, that was a unique experience to me.

As I was working with the professionals on business management needs and commercial production, their priority needs began to focus on issues related to the environment. My work began to shift and, at the same time, I was fortunate to be part of a team here that provided leadership to the organization in a reorganization of CUCE-NYC as an issues-focused, team-based organization. Our intent was that we would be more problem-oriented and more responsive to needs. At the same time, we were trying to focus on very relevant issues and on delivery methods so that we could have the greatest impact using the limited resources we had available. Community horticulture had been a part of our history, and we had a great deal of credibility in this area. The needs remained, so as part of the reorganization, the staff resources and the successful approaches we'd used in our urban horticulture work became part of the larger environmental issues



**Profile developed by Nancy Franz and Gretchen Ferenz**

umbrella. It is what we now refer to as the Environmental Revitalization & Management Issues Area that I provide leadership for.

Every four years, we go through an intensive needs assessment process, and we determine what our long-term strategic goals and objectives are for the entire organization, including our issues area. Needs get assessed, and objectives are revised and updated on an ongoing basis. Primarily, the two areas of focus in environmental issues are natural resources and environmental management and science education, technology and environmental health. When the opportunity to collaborate in the Garden Mosaics project was presented to us, we considered our involvement. We saw links through community horticulture to sustainable methods of improving environmental quality at the community level and educating youth and adult participants in some of the ecological and science-based practices that had sustainable value. That also helped to address individual and community needs through urban gardening such as wanting to come together for social purposes, wanting to grow food for their own use, improving their local neighborhood environment through urban gardening. This project tied into the work that we were doing in our plan of work. It fit in very nicely.

The implementation of Garden Mosaics didn't begin until October of 1999. But it started a long time before that. At least a year before that, my colleague Marianne Krasny, who is an associate professor in the Department of Natural Resources at Cornell, first conceptualized Garden Mosaics and developed a proposal to the National Science Foundation (NSF). It was an integrated research and education proposal. She had done an excellent literature review. She was particularly interested in practices of urban garden-

ers who were using sustainable ag techniques that were brought with them here to the U.S. from their home countries or from the south. She saw the opportunity for children to learn from the elder immigrants as they were practicing their garden methods here in inner-city neighborhoods and also to record and to learn the history of cultural practices that have been passed down through generations.

When Marianne was waiting to hear back from NSF — or shortly after she received a rejection notice, I'm not sure which came first — she contacted us in the city to see if we had an interest in working with her in modifying the program proposal and resubmitting it to NSF. This is how we first got involved. We considered our mutual interest. We considered our collective expertise and available resources as well as other resources we might tap. We considered how a project like this might support our broader objectives in the Environmental Issues Area. When we are deciding which projects to get involved in or to develop, we also think about how it might strengthen our capacity for the future. This related back to our history with the Urban Horticulture Program, but also, as we were moving towards sustainable environmental management at the community level, we had an interest in the relationship of this project to meeting those objectives. We're always trying to better examine what might come up because it is important to be relevant, to be prepared and to be responsive.

From this point on, we were engaged in ongoing conversations and program development with Marianne. We formulated objectives, outcomes, methods and educational strategies. We began considering our potential partners, both campus faculty and extension educators located in other cities throughout the country. Also, particular to NYC, we began considering po-

tential community partners. We worked on targeting the audience, considering how they would benefit, how they would be involved in shaping the program, what our research and our extension objectives might be and how results would be applied with our audience. Then we began thinking about PAR [participatory action research] as a major component. We considered where we would get funding and other support, program duration, our roles, and the roles of others.

Marianne learned from NSF that the original proposal had not actually been reviewed by the NSF granting program to which she had submitted it, so it wasn't selected for funding support. She learned from a program officer there that it would be better to submit to an alternate granting program. I think it had originally been submitted to the informal science education program; they suggested that it would be best to submit to a professional development program at NSF with modification to the proposal. We were on a mission to redevelop the proposal and secure funding. Marianne had been working on it for a very long time. Now we'd been engaged in working on it for a long time with her. We were still considering NSF as a potential funding source, but at the same time we learned of some program objectives and funding support that was being made available through Sustainable Agriculture Research Education (SARE). We decided to target that source since it seemed to clearly align with our objectives. SARE's objectives focused on professional development of extension educators and others. This district was the northeast. We tailored our program to this audience — extension educators and others, which was my preference — working closely with extension educators in other cities.

Marianne asked us to be involved in two primary ways: first to collabo-

rate in the overall program proposal development, including my serving as a co-principal investigator along with her, conducting recruitment for cooperators from multiple cities in the northeast, contributing to the program planning and the evaluation, and collaboratively planning and conducting a primary training session for all of the cooperators from the northeastern cities who would be involved in the project which would be held in our offices in NYC. That was all in the program development realm. The second was to have NYC serve as a site for project implementation. We agreed that we would have two project sites within the city, and that we would ask the other cities that would be involved to each conduct one project.

Shortly after we submitted the proposal to SARE, we also submitted a version of the proposed program to the directors of CCE and the Ag Experiment Station through a funding mechanism involving the SPC's [Statewide Program Committees]. The Request for Proposals was for integrated research and extension education. We felt very strongly again that our proposed project met this criteria. At that time, we didn't have a clue as to where the proposal stood with the SARE review process. After three years of really hard work, especially Marianne's diligence working on this project, we were all very enthusiastic about it. We thought it was a strong program. We thought it addressed important needs of extension and community educators and youth and adults in urban communities. We also thought that it would help to address the needs of residents and communities in utilizing sustainable approaches to environmental management as well as to engage youth in civic responsibilities to be good stewards in their neighborhoods and the environment.

The staffing structure that we use

is that Caroline Tse, who is our program associate, Barbara Smits, who is our executive staff assistant, and I comprise an administrative team. Caroline works very closely with me on long-term strategic planning, program development, and fund development. I provide overall visioning, leadership and support to all of the professional staff in the area. Also, we have program work teams. The teams vary in their composition, what types of positions comprise the teams, and which specific individuals and what expertise they bring to the table. The staff that comprise project teams are program staff; they implement

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the projects. When Caroline and I are doing program development and developing a proposal, it is very broad. It is a conceptual plan, a framework. It has parameters and, hopefully, it will have funding attached to it. Once a project is selected for funding, it primarily becomes the responsibility of one of our team coordinators to provide that day-to-day leadership in project implementation. They guide the other team members through delivery of the program, and they do all the fine-tune planning of a project, the delivery of the project and evaluation of it. It is rare that I get out of the office and have the opportunity to do teaching. On occasion, I will visit a community site. The opportunity to teach comes up every once in a blue moon, and it's a great reward.

About three years ago, we put out about eight proposals — nothing, nothing, nothing. I hired a new team coordinator; he comes on board, and I said, "You'll be great providing leadership to this and that (which is now pending), if it comes through. This area will further develop your strengths or interests that you have," and so forth. Then we waited, and we waited, and we waited. Two months passed, three months passed, four months passed — nothing. Entire proposal review processes were getting postponed to the point that he came and said, "You've got to give me something else to do while I'm waiting."

I said, "Believe me, if and when they happen, you are going to be swamped." Just knowing that we have these kinds of experiences, that these things happen, adds an important perspective to planning.

It turned out that after that person left, Ainsley filled that position. Ainsley started with us in July. We'd been working on the Garden Mosaics program development for three years at that point. It must have been May, June, or July that we learned from SARE that it was funded. It was selected for funding by SARE and by SPC for a project start date of October 1. The timing with Ainsley's start date was perfect. That just never happens! It just fell into place. With Ainsley on board, he could become familiar with the history and the work and have extra planning time, as well as visit communities to get a sense of their interest to be engaged in the project. We weren't rushed, and he just fit right into it. It was fabulous.

Also, we had some staffing changes going on here in the office. To meet an organizational need, I had to give up four community educators who were each working in the Environmen-

tal Issues Area either at 20 or 40 percent of their time. That totaled a full FTE. Then, I was given the approval to create a new position for a full FTE, and I created a resource educator position focusing on community horticulture hoping, indeed, that this project would be supported, along with supporting other related initiatives that were either on board or pending. That got approved. That person had just started in February and was working on some other projects. When this project got approved, Ainsley came on board. So here we had Veronique, Roz (who was already on board), and Ainsley all geared up and ready to go. What makes me happy? When those things work. It doesn't always happen that way.

Projects are indeed the great learning that happens under the direction of great people on staff who are very competent, very talented and very resourceful. They carry out the project within the parameters to meet the broad objectives and intended outcomes of proposed program proposals, but they're doing day-to-day tweaking. They need to be because you can't determine any situation clearly in advance, and we're always trying to be responsive. There are always unanticipated things that come up. My role, and the roles of others here who work closely with me, is very much a supportive role. We are back in the office. We're helping to do the program marketing. We're helping to get resources that weren't otherwise anticipated. We're helping to troubleshoot problems (although the staff are great at doing that on their feet anyhow). It's a leadership role that is long-term leadership and planning and then very much a support role. It's not any different for this project than for any others.

Since the SARE-funded proposal was targeted to the northeast, we were recruiting extension educators as potential partners from Philadelphia to Bos-

ton. Caroline did all the recruiting work. I gave her some suggestions of folks to contact, either individuals whom I'd worked with or extension programs I was familiar with. She would contact them and promote the opportunity to get involved and gauge their interest and their potential to be effectively involved in the project. There was the recruitment of potential partners in the cities. We fleshed out some criteria for what kind of partner and project site and participants would be needed to address the objectives and be suitable to the project such as the level of capacity they would need to have for the experience. I think that was a good guide for Caroline, as she did much of the recruitment effort on the telephone. I don't know how many cities we started with, maybe ten or twelve.

We ended up selecting five cities besides NYC. Four months into the funded project term, we held the big training session. At that session, we got a sense that the city partners — extension educators and community partners — were in different places on the board. Even though we had fleshed out the criteria, we soon realized that they didn't meet all of the criteria, and so we were unable to move forward. We learned through that interaction. There's nothing negative about it. We're constantly learning, and we love learning, making mistakes and learning from them. But we learned at that point that we should have taken — and will in the future take — additional steps to make sure that they fit the criteria and that they understand why the criteria is important, that they take certain measures to meet the criteria prior to getting to what would have been stage two. For example, one or two groups from cities came there not having a clue who their community partner would have been. It was intended to be a collaborative effort at the city level — both the extension educators

and the community organization with its community educators, its gardeners, its gardening site and its youth. They came to the training session unprepared. It could take four to six months to make the progress needed. These are the kinds of things we learn day-to-day in the projects. Sometimes you can apply it from one project to another, and sometimes you can't.

What would we do differently? We would be more specific, more definitive about the criteria and ensure that people were on board. Sometimes, you can look at this approach and it seems kind of negative. But on the other hand, we are accountable for external funds. We've got our own resources that we've got to be accountable for how we're applying them. We have a limited timeframe with a job to do, and a bunch of other people who are involved and want to accomplish the outcomes within the timeframe. It's very difficult to bring another group to the point you need them at if they are lagging behind that much.

Marianne also had identified a couple of individuals and groups that she thought would be good to be involved in the project, and she made those contacts. One of these was a non-profit organization here in the city that had a good reputation for its work and was already collaborating with CUCENYC on another project, working with another staff member here in the office.

There was quite an unexpected outcome that resulted in working with this partner. We had asked this organization to be involved in planning for and participating in this big training session to be held here in the NYC office. It was one of the first major tasks of the Garden Mosaics project. It was intended to involve extension educators and community partners from all the six cities. In responding to a suggestion that the participants learn how to be sensitive to and use appropriate

strategies with cultural audiences, we asked this organization to conduct a presentation for the session participants on this topic. They were intent on using an appropriate approach to present this topic and insisted that they do it and that they involve city gardeners in the presentation. We were thrilled about that. We said great! It would be a double benefit in that we would have at least some gardeners in attendance at the workshop since it was going to be held during regular working hours when most gardeners would be working at jobs. They are usually gardening in their spare time and would likely be unavailable and unable to participate in the workshop. We were thrilled about that. We also asked them if they would be willing to serve on the NYC team, addressing the implementation aspects of the project, contributing to the planning and the implementation of the two projects at the two sites that were yet to be selected in the city. We asked them if they could help identify potential sites that met our criteria through an existing network that they had in place, and they agreed to do that as well. They asked for funds to cover their costs for delivering on those tasks. Marianne and I agreed to contract with them based on a scope of work.

Well, talk about unmet expectations! Their presence during the training was so minimal. Two staff members were there for only a short time during one of the two and a half days of the workshop, and they did not bring any gardeners to participate in the workshop or to help in the presentation. The presentation was very clearly not well prepared and did not focus on the topic of cultural communication that we had agreed to, but rather focused on what the organization's work entailed. It was so canned that we were shocked. Marianne and I were standing at opposite ends of the room. I was in the back corner because I was running in and out

to take care of errands. She was up near the front, and I kept trying to catch her glance to signal to her that we needed to intervene and get them on track with the presentation. That didn't work.

It was a real loss. It was clear that the participants saw no relevance of the presentation to the agenda topic. Our workshop was so tightly packed that we didn't even have the opportunity to address the topic at a later time in the remaining day. Afterwards, we went to a group dinner. Marianne and I spoke privately, and she agreed with me that we thought the contract was clearly written and understood by this organization. She was so upset by the circum-

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stances that she went right over to the director who had also joined us for dinner and told her that they would not be compensated as intended. I think it was the right thing to do.

A positive aspect of our teamwork was that we could effectively provide each other feedback and support. Marianne has said that she values that. We could put our heads together and say, what did you understand? Did we clearly reflect what the intention was? Were we sure that they understood? I think if you work together, you have a certain level of understanding with each other and give gut reaction feedback. This has happened in different circumstances on projects that we have worked on together. I think we have a great deal of respect for each other. We've learned a lot working together. I think it is because we are very out-right honest with each other. We don't

beat around the bush. I tend to be very direct. I say what I'm thinking and what I feel. I trust Marianne very much so that I am comfortable doing so, and I think she is comfortable with that. It took a few years before we got to this level of comfort. I think it is all part of relationship building. I'm comfortable stretching limits, taking risks and trying things for the first time. I think Marianne's and my experiences and expertise are so different that we get each other going, inspiring each other. We learn a lot from each other. We get excited about a project, and then it's a go. We do it very quickly and productively, and we have lots of fun. I think

we are working on four projects right now.

Clearly, the strategies that we chose to use in the delivery of the program are extremely educational. We are still developing the program. We wanted to be sure through integrated research and education that

there were real valued and direct benefits for the audiences that we were going to target, particularly community residents, as well as extension educators and community educators. So we decided to use a PAR approach to ensure that they were involved in shaping the agenda of the program, planning the specific delivery of the program, and the application of whatever was collectively learned in the program to meet some of their needs and the needs of the community. Using a PAR approach was very educational.

In most of the cities, the youth who were involved in our project were slightly younger than we think would be beneficial. For the PAR technique, we think the project would best be delivered with a slightly older audience. However we do think that the kids who were involved gained a great deal in learning basic research techniques —

making observations and interviewing to gain information from the elders who were practicing these gardening practices that had some cultural relationship and ecological significance. Even though the kids were young, they understood that. They understood that you generate a research question and how you simply go about gaining information to help you draw conclusions related to that question. They developed skills in doing it as well, like communication skills, teamwork, who would do what?, which question to ask of which gardener?, for what purpose? and so forth. That was highly educational. Also, the self-esteem that develops through educational processes like this is just insurmountable.

The community partners or community educators would be the facilitator or leader of the community group. They would bring the youth to the garden. Sometimes, there was also a head of a garden as well as the gardeners. The project is educational for them as well. We saw relationships being further developed in the community between an individual who was from the community center and a gardener at the garden, and among gardeners themselves. The project was looking at cultural gardening practices with diverse ethnic backgrounds, and so that's what we had. We had this flavor of gardeners from different areas in a garden who hadn't necessarily gardened together in the same space. So we also saw them coming together for the purpose of educating the kids and supporting the kids' research efforts. That was educational for them.

Regarding the educators from the six cities, we all practice extension differently everywhere, yet we have such commonality in our philosophies, some of the methodologies, and certainly, in our commitment and dedication to our work. I think the issues are the same everywhere; it's just the context that is

different. But every project is unique. Every audience and every situation is unique. Educational strategies and so forth that you use are unique. Each extension educator's background and their experiences and their expertise are unique. We all learn from each other as well. We had a workshop in November of 2000 (following one year of project implementation) where we did sharing. A few youth and gardeners came to the workshop, as did the extension educators from all the six cities. That was very enlightening. We learned how things were done differently for different areas, what were the benefits, what were the obstacles. It's

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just wonderful sharing amongst each other because it helps to enhance our efforts if we're going to replicate the same program. Often it is also very relevant toward applying what's been learned to another project. Organizationally, that is what we learned as educators.

We learn over and over again through our collaborative efforts with faculty and staff on the campus. I think we find that we very much value what each other has to bring to a program. Each experience is different. Each faculty member and each department has resources that are different, and expertise that is different, and perspectives that are different, as are ours. That's always educational, and that is so much of what I do. So I'm always learning, and I just love it.

We have phenomenal working relationships with faculty throughout the university for all of our different projects. Each one is positive. Some don't always go as smoothly as you'd like. The progress is not what you'd like it to be, but there is always something educational about it. We're always learning from the relationships and experiences we have working collaboratively both with the university collaborators and extension educators in other regions or other counties and certainly, with our community partners.

Now that we're in the second year of the two-year project term, we're in the process of developing an educators'

guide or manual for the program so that we can share this broadly around the country with others who may be interested in doing Garden Mosaics. This is where we have a lot of work to do. We need to incorporate what we've learned. We've got to be sure that we suggest what we think is the right criteria for a potential

partner or strongly recommend that the project directors ensure that that criteria is met before confirming the selection of a partner.

My role is focused on providing a long-term vision for where the Environmental Issues Area is going and a strategic plan for how we will get there — which staff positions we need to have to do it, what configuration of staff and work teams are needed, what fiscal resources, and so forth. I do the long-term planning and strategic resource generation — funds and people and other needed things. I think the major parts of my work are in long-term strategic planning, program development and fund development.

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ously looking for help finding concise words in English that says what it is we do. We say our work is rewarding, we say we help people through non-formal education strategies or approaches or something to address critical needs. It just sounds like jargon you know. We work with people, we help with their non-formal learning.

My husband and I have these really close friends. We are social friends and also do some volunteer work together. They had a vague understanding of what I did in cooperative extension. About five years ago, they were at my house and saw on the coffee table a copy of an extension newsletter. That particular issue had lots of articles relating to the Environmental Issues Area and our projects here in the city. I was in one of the photographs and quoted in different articles. They asked for the copy and took it home. The next time we spoke, they said, "Oh my God, now I know what you do! Great work!" It reminds you that no one has a clue because we are not able to articulate what it is we do.

Extension people are caring, passionate, committed people, willing to give of themselves for the good of others — people persons, from an interpersonal perspective. They have good communication skills, verbal and written skills, a willingness to listen and to learn what people's needs are, and particularly, to be sensitive to and interested in helping people who have the

greatest needs.

I feel very strongly about extension staff having strong competencies. There are many people in the nonprofit sector who do fabulous work, such as caring individuals. They are so committed and dedicated, and they make things happen. They are right there on the front lines. What I think distinguishes us in extension is our relationship to the land-grant university, the research university, and our role as educators in higher education. We are community educators working in a profession related to higher education, and I believe very strongly in having and maintaining strong competencies in the technical and in the process areas.

I think it's so hard to recruit people because I'm always looking for so many things. I'm looking for the person who has it in their heart. I'm looking for the person who has strong competencies, has talent, is resourceful, can apply what they've learned and are committed to continuously learning through their work. I'm also looking for the person who is committed to the organization, who has an understanding of the broad organizational philosophies and goals (meaning cooperative extension, the land-grant, the university), who has the research and education background and is committed to people and communities and helping those who are less fortunate learn and thrive. It's a lot. It's very challenging. Recruitment and retention of

quality staff is one of the things that I value most of the work that I do. It is certainly one of the most challenging. I think we have the best staff here at the Environmental Issues Area in NYC, and I'm really proud of it. It is a big challenge to find them and keep them, but they just do phenomenal work.

Where extension educators get their skills relates a lot to different things. Their parents, home and neighborhood environments help to shape who they are. Their past experiences, their life experiences. Their academic training is a very important component. It certainly is not enough, but it is a very important component in ensuring that what we do is grounded, real, cutting edge, innovative and so forth.

Sometimes, folks are coming in more at the learning level, like an intern or program assistant. They gain experience working in communities and addressing problems that are perceived by residents as being of critical importance. They gain skills through experience, and sometimes, from working with other organizations. That's good too. The combination of bringing that, and what is learned here, is wonderful. Like me — being here over fifteen years, I gained most of my professional work experience right here on the job.

Extension is helping others help themselves. Helping others to care and improve their quality of life. It is very difficult to tell the tale of extension and what it is.