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## All for intelligent design: Sustainable Living Coalition draws from nature's wisdom

By Linda Egenes

It started in 2004 when a few people in Fairfield were looking for a sponsor for an environmental conference.

"We decided to form our own non-profit and called it the Sustainable Living Coalition," says Diana Krystofiak, a founding board member of the SLC. "The goal was to combine people from different sectors to create a more sustainable Fairfield, which could then become a model for other communities."

From the start, a driving force behind the SLC's vision and educational initiatives was Lonnie Gamble, who with permaculture expert Grover Stock, began teaching a ten-week permaculture course called Big Green Summer. Hundreds of interns trained with Gamble and Stock, living in Gamble's home. But Gamble and his wife, Valerie, couldn't donate their time, money and home to educate interns indefinitely. A campus was needed.



Submitted  
The Sustainable Living Coalition built this 1,200-square-foot straw-bale, post-and-beam barn as a main classroom and administrative space.

### A permaculture demonstration site

Fast forward to the fall of 2009. It's a warm November day at the newly inaugurated SLC campus on the north edge of Fairfield. Briggs Shore and Frank Cicela, two administrators, are there.

Shore, a 27-year-old dynamo who trained as an SLC intern and was hired last year as administrative coordinator, is clearly passionate about her job.

"We bought the land in 2006 with a grant from Iowa's Great Places," she says.

The purpose of the campus, she explains, is to become a working permaculture farm and educational center with classes and internships.

Shore explains, "permaculture is a way to take the principles of intelligent design, found in nature, and apply it to absolutely everything in your life — how you get your food, water, shelter, heat (and) power, and (how you) dispose of waste."

Cicela adds, "we want this to be a model, to establish best practices for natural building and rural farming that people can take back to their own communities."

At age 40, Cicela brings a wealth of experience to the SLC, having established a similar nonprofit called Sustainable Indiana, and shows remarkable dedication by taking an unpaid leave from his job at Clipper Wind Power in Cedar Rapids to spend every other week working for the SLC.

Shore points to the 1,200-square-foot straw-bale, post and beam barn that is the main classroom and administrative space for the campus. "We broke ground in January 2009," she says.

The building is functional but awaiting funds for plastering the outer walls, covering the gravel floor with flagstone and completing a five-room dormitory loft. It was erected in just four months with the help of an Amish construction crew for the foundation and dozens of volunteers who provided the massive man hours necessary for straw-bale building.

"We're completely off the grid, and we provide our own power and water," says Shore. She points to the rain catchment system, ten photovoltaic solar panels and one-kilowatt wind turbine that supply electricity and high-speed Internet. "We're high-tech while being sustainable, rustic while still being modern."

### A spirit of collaboration

"One of our missions is to partner with other people and organizations," says Cicela.

Collaboration takes many forms. The campus adjoins and makes use of two other sustainable sites for its workshops: the Abundance Eco Village and the Mullenneaux extended-family acreage, which includes three sustainable cob, straw and clay homes.

"We're a few off-the-grid communities who happen to be close together and really good friends," explains Shore.

Other collaborators include Grinnell College and Maharishi University of Management.

### A vision for the future

Future projects include building four-season dormitory space to house 50 interns, a hospitality center, an elderhostel, underground cisterns to store drinking water from the rain catchment system, wetland waste management system, permaculture food forest, edible landscaping, and seed money to extend educational offerings.

But ambitious as these plans are, Gamble sees a more visionary goal. "The SLC is a way to foster ecological, micro-enterprises," he says.

As an example, the SLC bought equipment and loaned it to help a local baker get started, and launched the Edible Cityscapes Project, an eco-business that sells fruit trees and provides free labor to plant them properly.

Another project in the works: a micro-enterprise center, to help fund sustainable businesses. And the SLC is providing land and sponsorship to a John Jeavons mini-farm center, one of three in the U.S. to be established this spring.

*For more information about the SLC, contact Briggs Shore at [briggsshore@gmail.com](mailto:briggsshore@gmail.com) or visit [sustainablelivingcoalition.org](http://sustainablelivingcoalition.org).*

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