



Ocean View Growing Grounds. Landowner Harold Georgiou "pays for all the water, gives us the land for \$1 a year, and he and his sister and mother come down to help with the weeding."

Image by [Matthew Suárez](#)

Mountain View backyard bent to his will

Five kinds of cherries, an apple tree, tangerines, plums, peaches, passion fruit, pomegranate, blue Java bananas, lemons, two varieties of grapes, a strawberry patch, and a seasonal vegetable garden

By Barbarella Fokos, May 9, 2018

Often found sporting a waistcoat and a woolen flat cap, James Gielow is a self-described “Neo-Renaissance man — an artist at heart and hand, with the soul of a scientist and a philosopher.” He spends his days as the senior mount maker at San Diego Museum of Art, and his afternoons and weekends tending his chickens, tilling the soil, and chronicling his urban farming adventures in his blog, *Mind Your Dirt*.

“I live in Mountain View. You know where that is? No? Most people don’t,” says Gielow, of the San Diego neighborhood named for its clear view of San Miguel Mountain. “It’s six miles east of downtown, super close and central. Also a total food desert. The shittiest examples of fast-food chains and poor grocery stores devoid of quality produce — except Northgate Market, that place is amazing. But apart from that, no farmers markets, no affordable, healthy food stuffs for miles.”

In a policy report by San Diego State University’s Department of Geography, researchers argue that instead of a food desert — “a neighborhood without convenient access to fresh and affordable foods”— Southeast San Diego is a food swamp, “characterized by an abundance of fast food restaurants and junk food retailers.” Their argument is that the prevalence of high-calorie, low-nutrition

food is just as damaging as the absence of food.



Gielow spends his afternoons and weekends tending his chickens.

IMAGE BY MATTHEW SUÁREZ

Prior to moving to Mountain View, Gielow says he “bounded from one meager apartment complex to another with only a pittance of growing spaces.” He made the most of his space limitations by exploring the miniature world of bonsai. He wrote in one of his many bonsai-related posts, “The art of bonsai is not for those with short attention spans, it takes decades to get a good specimen.”



Harold Georgiou, Paul Watson, James Gielow, Bill Oswald

IMAGE BY MATTHEW SUÁREZ

Upon settling into his new home with its 7000-square-foot yard, “I immediately panicked and made tons of mistakes. Growing the wrong things at the wrong time, not planting SoCal-specific plants, wasting too much water, etc.” But now, he is proud to say that after a few years, “I have it perfectly locked in and bent to my will.” His lush land currently includes a grafted tree with five kinds of cherries, an apple tree, tangerines, plums, peaches, passion fruit, pomegranate, blue Java bananas, lemons, two varieties of grapes, a strawberry patch, and a seasonal vegetable garden.



Gielow at waterfall. “The birds are happy, so what can you do?”

IMAGE BY MATTHEW SUÁREZ

That much land at an affordable price was a major draw, but it was a sign in a vacant

lot around the corner that solidified Gielow’s decision to buy a home in Mountain View. “It read, ‘Future site for the Ocean View Growing Grounds,’” he remembers. “A community garden was the final straw that made me want to live there.”

Ocean View Growing Grounds is situated on a 20,000 square-foot lot on Ocean View Boulevard a couple blocks west of Interstate 805, about a mile south of Highway 94. In 2012, was one of over 800 vacant lots in the San Diego area. University of California San Diego’s Bioregional Center for Sustainability and Science partnered with the Global Action Research Center to develop the land as a community garden and research and learning center.

Director of Global Action Research Center Paul Watson credits landowner Harold Georgiou for helping to make the project possible. “[Harold] really supported the initial development of this,” Watson says. “He pays for all the water, gives us the land for \$1 a year, and he and his sister and mother come down to help with the weeding. He even built the shed we have for tools.” It helped that the city of San Diego covered the \$20,000 cost of soil testing — the land was a “brownfield,” meaning it was once an industrial or commercial site, and therefore at risk for contamination.

As for Georgiou, Watson says, “Real estate is his business. He owns property all over the world, and he has a number of parcels here [in San Diego], some vacant like this land we have, which he bought 30 years ago and never developed anything on it — it’s been vacant for that long. Just think about that length of time — it’s created more

problems for him than anything. People throw trash, dump old cars, periodically the city comes in and forces him to clean it up, which costs him money. For him, for a dollar a year, to do something positive with [the land] is worth it, and turns it into an asset for the community.”

Though he grew up with a garden nearby in rural Long Island, Watson always considered working in his grandmother’s garden a “chore that I didn’t like.” Years after leaving home and living in urban areas, he laughs with his community organizing partner, Dr. Bill Oswald, about the fact that he now looks forward to his time in the garden every Saturday morning.

When beginning this project, Watson and Oswald looked for people who were already growing food on their properties to help out, as they were just learning the ins and outs of gardening themselves. They didn’t have to look far, because Gielow was right around the corner. “I volunteered there for the first few years,” says Gielow, many of whose blogs are detailed do-it-yourself posts such as “How to repot a bonsai,” “Tried and true ways to get rid of gophers,” and “How to train your dog not to kill your chickens.”

Among other volunteer projects, Gielow oversaw the construction of a dozen 12-by-4-foot raised beds, doing much of the hauling and hammering himself. Overall, he says, he spent his time at Ocean View Growing Grounds “building what needed building, teaching what needed teaching, and just breaking my back trying to transform the soil. It was a great experience and a perfect way to fight the spreading food desert disease in lower income neighborhoods.”

The median annual income for residents in Mountain View is \$21,000.

There are 88 community gardens between Oceanside and the Tijuana border, the largest being the Tijuana River Valley Community Garden, which boasts 210 gardening plots, each 30-by-30 feet, and six quarter-acre plots which rent for \$1200 a year. That garden advertises that “on any given day, you can hear three or four different languages being spoken,” as well as plots that feature worldly crops including “nopales, Laotian cucumbers, and heirloom tomatoes.”

With funding from the UC Global Food Initiative and in partnership with the San Diego Community Garden Network, UCSD surveyed 120 people from eight of the 88 gardens. Though studies have detailed the health and economic benefits of such gardens, it was clear that people were drawn to these sites for other reasons. For example, when asked why they got involved in a community garden, 39 percent of respondents said it was to make new friends, and 61 percent claimed to have made new friendships. Though 90 percent believed their diet had improved as a result of growing their own produce, it was perhaps this next statistic that most interested Watson: 50 percent mentioned community connections as a direct benefit of their involvement with a community garden.

Watson says, “We’re an odd duck in [that] our focus is more about building civic engagement.... We wanted to see what it would take to organize a community around food production.”

We don't see large corporate grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods, Watson says, because, "they are afraid they won't generate enough revenue to make it profitable for them." Typically these areas have several mom-and-pop stores, but Watson says, "One, these small shops are more expensive, and two, they have a very limited variety of fresh fruits and vegetables."

For most community gardens, the crux of their existence is not community organization but something more practical: producing food. In UCSD's study of San Diego County community gardens, when asked what they do with their produce, 96 percent of respondents said they ate some of it at home, 55 percent said they gave produce to their extended family, 24 percent donated theirs, and 18 percent traded it for products and services. A smaller 12 percent said they sold some of their produce to buyers (despite many gardens' rules against selling).

Though many community gardens serve lower income neighborhoods, San Diegans who are growing their own food to consume and barter cross all demographics. Facebook groups for backyard growers, such as the San Diego Backyard Fruit Exchange (which has over 5000 members) includes members that are business owners, college professors, lawyers, and chefs, all looking to trade their backyard booty — not out of necessity so much as enjoyment.

Gielow is an active member in several of these backyard garden bartering groups. "Last year I traded my entire harvest [60 pounds worth] of Niagara grapes for a guy to turn into wine," he says. Though this

varietal of grape is the healthiest and most robust of the bunch, and their vines provide great shade in the summer, "they taste awful." In the end, the grapes made 24 bottles of wine. They split the finished product, which, unfortunately, turned out to be less than desirable. "All I could taste was the less than favorable Niagara grape sneaking back in with all its foxy sourness," Gielow wrote on his blog.

The best trade he can remember making was exchanging his surplus passion fruit for Wow Wow Waffles. "Have you tried those waffles? They take like a thousand days to make. I may be exaggerating on the time, but they are slow batched in some waffle form or fashion."

His new one-eyed hen, named Pirate, came along with "a bribe of cotton seeds and dragon fruit plants to sweeten the deal."

Gielow's typical surplus items are grapes and satsuma tangerines. "I like being able to turn a giant harvest of one thing into potentially a bunch of things," he says. "Smaller urban gardeners can't have all the stuff they want to eat or bake with all the time, so bartering allows you to mix it up a bit. Like juicing, for example — I want to have lemons, greens, apples, and cucumbers as a base for juice; none of these bastards will grow at the same time in my yard, so I'm always wanting for a certain item." Trading solicitations posted in backyard growers bartering groups often specify what a trader does not want. "It's a lot of feast or famine in this bartering world," says Gielow. "Everyone has citrus all at the same time."

Organizations such as Global ARC need to be extra careful about what they barter.

“None of the food can be prepared,” says Oswald. “That would have to be done in a certified kitchen, approved by the Department of Health.” Gielow echoes this sentiment: “There’s so many variables in this modern world, and many of them involve litigation and excessive toxicity. I can see how having people bartering for food stuffs could lead to a sticky situation, regulations-wise.”

But changing laws is what community organization is all about. “In terms of regulations, we are a member of the San Diego Food System Alliance, which is a group of folks working on the whole food system in the county,” says Watson. Notable members of the alliance include representatives from larger farms, the fishing industry, the County of San Diego, UCSD, San Diego Food Bank, and the San Diego Hunger Coalition. “All of the folks that have any impact on the food delivery system in the county sit around that table.”

Last year, this group managed to get the city to pass a law allowing a tax break for landowners like Georgiou, who lease their land to community gardens. The alliance created a web site (uaizsd.com) to help people identify these Urban Agriculture Incentive Zones — landowners can see if their land qualifies, and potential community garden organizers can find plots using an interactive map containing over 2000 qualifying parcels. According to a city report, if all of these properties took advantage of this new law, the city would lose \$1.35 million. But the Food System Alliance stresses the gains would include “numerous benefits, not only to those growing food, but also to the cities and neighborhoods in which it happens.” Among them: “vibrant green spaces and

recreation, education about fresh food and the effort it takes to produce it, ecological benefits for the city, sites that help build community, and a source of local economic development.”

The City of Carlsbad Community Garden charges \$120 a year to rent one of their 48 plots, and they have a “use it or lose it” clause, enforced by the Garden Committee, which takes monthly walk-throughs to check for compliance. The set up at Ocean View Growing Grounds is different from other community gardens. Watson explains that with most gardens, “Typically, you’ll find a number of raised beds, and anyone in the community can come in and rent one of those beds. Most gardens will set up ground rules that everyone follows. When you rent it, for a nominal fee, \$5 a month or something, a person can come in, grow whatever they want on their own raised bed, harvest whenever they want to, it’s basically theirs.”

That was a good model, but it didn’t really fit with what we were trying to do. We wanted to see the garden become more of a hub for learning, for information sharing within that neighborhood. Our dream was to be able to have people coming in, meeting one another, talk about growing, looking at further development in the neighborhood, and what other kinds of things they could work on collectively. So we came up with a communal model — nobody rents an individual bed. There are regular work sessions on Saturday morning, and we go out constantly into the neighborhood to get people to participate. There’s an annual crop list of what we’re going to grow, and if there are things they want to eat, we put it on the list. When we

do harvest, which is almost every Saturday, the produce is distributed amongst all the people that contributed.”

In the two years since the first crop was planted, Watson estimates 130 locals have been in and out of the garden. Most Saturdays, the garden will see between 5 and 20 volunteers contributing to tend 20 raised beds and two “food forests.” These seven-layer gardens are designed to mimic the ecosystem of a natural forest, and therefore don’t require as much maintenance as the beds. To be considered a proper food forest, it must contain all seven layers: a canopy (fruit and nut trees), a lower tree layer, shrub layer (berries), herbaceous layer (herbs and leafy greens), root crops (carrots, potatoes, etc.), a cover crop (grass, wheat, etc.), and finally, a vertical layer (vines). Watson plans to add an outdoor kitchen for nutrition classes. “We’re developing [the grounds] into what we call a neighborhood learning center,” says Watson. “With workshops about how to grow food, with everything from composting to water harvesting. We’ll also do work around questions like food justice and why is it we have food disparities and food deserts, and what we can do at a neighborhood level to push back against those things.”

Residents around the garden have begun to take notice, and Watson believes that, after watching it grow from a vacant lot to a lush garden, they have come to see Ocean View Growing Grounds as a hub for positive activity. Despite not having a fence, Watson points out, “We’ve never had problems with theft, graffiti, or any of those things.”

Oswald says it’s rewarding to see how well the community is treating this shared

space. “The only thing that has been stolen is food,” he says. “I had to wait for two crops of watermelons before we got any, and last year our peaches got eaten. But what I know as a community organizer for 40 years is that the way this place is treated means it has importance to the neighborhood. There’s no destruction, no tagging: we’ve left wheelbarrows, shovels, and equipment out, and it hasn’t been touched.”

The San Diego Community Garden Network says the two greatest obstacles for any community garden is funding and having a mechanism for sustained participation. Last year, City Heights Community Garden offered free lunch as a way to draw more volunteers. As with most gardens, participation at Ocean View Growing Grounds ebbs and flows. “We go out into the neighborhood every week,” says Oswald. “If you don’t do that, people stop coming.” To encourage more gathering at the grounds, Watson wanted to build a small amphitheater for shade and a seating area, but city regulations forbid permanent structures. “It’s another regulation we’ve got our eyes on changing,” says Watson.

In the meantime, he wouldn’t mind if some of those backyard growing groups used the space to meet and barter their personal gardens’ bounty. But even with the modest regular attendance, Watson has seen encounters that warm his heart. Because of the partnership with UCSD, “On Saturdays, we’ll see a smattering of University students doing projects and work,” Watson says.

At the garden, students have a living lab to experiment with new technologies. In one recent university report, the documented

explorations included “installing digesters to produce biogas from campus food waste, incorporating small-scale aquaculture systems into the garden, and unitizing nutrients in the fish waste to grow plants.”

When young people visit, Watson often asks them what they want to do with their lives. “I remember this particular young man, and he wasn’t quite sure whether he wanted to go on to college or not. I decided, rather than me talk to him, I paired him up with one of the college students.... She really helped him to see a clear pathway to going to college, and how to approach it. That kind of thing really excited me as an organizer.”

The young man is now attending City College. “He lives across the street from the garden, so I can still keep track of him.”

Now that it’s up and running, Gielow doesn’t spend as much time at Ocean View Growing Grounds as he does in his own backyard garden. He finally completed building the “fancy new chicken run” he’d designed last year. Because local law forbids keeping roosters on plots smaller than a half acre, all of his chickens are hens.

“My favorite part is always the section that I’m upgrading at the time, so right now, my favorite part is the chicken coop and run,” he says. “Every time I’m working on a section, I find myself out there at all hours, just sitting, planning, and staring at the project.”

His other favorite part of his garden is also his least favorite: the waterfalls. “It’s my most favorite, because it brings critters and harmonious sounds to the whole yard; a total zen and critter magnet that sets the tone throughout my space. It’s my least favorite, because it needs constant attention and is not water-wise for SoCal at all. It’s a needy little cash and water waster. Even now it calls to me to fish out soggy leaves and clean gummy filters caked in sludge and odd benthic organisms. It tests me. But the birds are happy, so what can you do?”

Gielow spends about 16 to 20 hours a week working in his yard. “Five years ago it was a dirt lot. Now it’s slowly healing itself. Seeing nature return to a wasteland is so fascinating to behold,” he says. “To be the person actually making it happen is a glorious feeling.”