

# HELP WANTED — BUTLER GREEN FARM SCHOOL

By Erin Parker

My life was changed by a tomato. On a cool July morning at the Bainbridge Farmers Market, I watched a woman fondle a ripe heirloom tomato picked fresh that morning, ponder what she would make with it (maybe a sandwich or a caprese salad), remark on how lovely it was, weigh it and, finally, complain about the price. I wanted to defend the time and effort, the labor and love put into growing every tomato there, but a calm hand settled on my shoulder and a happy, low voice said to the woman, “It is a perfect tomato.”

Farmer Brian MacWhorter sold the woman that tomato and a bag full of produce. She had no idea about farming and the work took to put that tomato into her hand. Most people don’t. MacWhorter has dedicated his life to changing that. “My mission is to educate and prepare our next generation of successful local farmers,” said MacWhorter. He developed the Butler Green Farm School, where over the last 20 years he has hosted more than 75 young farmers as interns on 10 acres of public and privately leased farmland on Bainbridge Island. Their passion and dedication as young stewards is helping guarantee community access to delicious and healthy local food.

“He was always willing to make every moment like a teachable lesson,” said Zach Fulton, an intern turned full-time farmer who worked with MacWhorter from 2017-23. “He wanted us to work hard, but he was also there to stop and show us what we were seeing and explain why things were the way they were.”

In an interview with John Garfinkle, the former director of EduCulture, MacWhorter said, “Some of these kids who have just finished their undergraduate programs are no different from preschoolers. They’re out there with all these questions about what they’re going to do in life. And now it’s even more critical because of their age



Farmer Brian MacWhorter, Board President, Butler Green Farm School

– the pressure of trying to get their life together – with the pressure of college loans, their parents’ expectation. You go to class – you do the whole thing – but there’s really no one telling you what to do next or how to do it. You have all these things thrown at you through the years. These interns – 22, 24, 26 years old – they have no idea what to do next. You’re just taking all this stuff in just like you did in elementary school. The realization that I can impact them as much as I can impact the preschoolers is kind of mind boggling.”

MacWhorter embraced being an educator. Through a partnership with the EduCulture Program and WSU Extension’s Edible Educational Program (the first nationally accredited Edible Program for local schools in the US) Butler Green Farm School will provide garden plots for Bainbridge Island students in kindergarten through 4th grade. The students will get their hands in

the soil, plant seeds and care for the seedlings, and eventually eat carrots right from the field. The goal is to develop an early understanding of where good food comes from and develop healthy snacking habits early in life.

“He so clearly believes in the idea of feeding the community, and then growing food, that I think it’s like his passion,” said Renee Ziemann, Kitsap Fresh Board Co-President. Ziemann worked for MacWhorter from 2010-13. “The way he farms is so beautifully intuitive. I was inspired by his technical knowledge but he also made it seem possible to farm without having every detail nailed down. He’s got this big picture of what’s gonna happen.”

MacWhorter’s big picture includes several small parcels of land spread across the island, including about two acres on the historic Suyematsu Farm on Day Road. Founded in 1928, it is the oldest, most continuously farmed land in this region (with the exception of the period of Japanese-American exclusion during WWII) and is the last of the original family farms on Bainbridge. Akio Suyematsu was the eldest son of the original family and farmed the land since childhood. He died in 2012 at age 91 and is credited for guiding the farm into the 21st century. He was also a mentor to MacWhorter, who continues to pass those lessons on to the next generation of farmers.

“He was able to give me a really intimate look at what it takes to farm in these modern times,” said Fulton. “He has the history of Akio Suyematsu so it was like he was leaning on the history of farming that he learned from Akio and then was able to modernize it and teach us.” Through the years of working with interns and the desire to

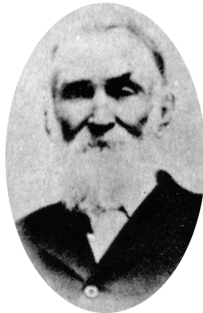
incorporate younger students into farm education, Butler Green Farm School developed an extensive curriculum to study biology in the living soil, as well as the chemical and physical properties of soil science. The curriculum is based on sound organic farming practices including IPM-integrated organic pest management, aerobic composting and compost teas, no-till weed control, and biodynamic practices incorporating seasonal extension techniques. Instruction is done through classes given by qualified staff, along with guided hands-on field instruction.

“Brian is just one of those people that has this ability to kind of create this incredible community around him,” said Mae Tooey, an intern with Butler Green Farm from 2020 through 2021. “He has just a great ability to gather folks together from all different kinds of life and create a work atmosphere and experience that really encourages people to figure out what their assets are and then kind of go with that. It’s a lot of creativity and team building.” That community includes partnerships with the Harbour Public House (all of our salad greens are grown by Butler Green Farm), Kitsap Mentor Program (WSU Extension Program), the Conservation District, and the WSU Dept of Agriculture. Guest speakers from these organizations offer insight into their own personal studies in current agricultural research projects and practices. Butler Green Farm School also encourages and supports independent study projects for the interns that increase their own interests in other exciting fields of agriculture like growing mushrooms, aquaponics, and beekeeping.

“We’ve had about 75 interns in the past 20 years – individuals who for some reason wanted that experience of working on an organic farm, either for their resume, or because it’s a cool thing to do, or they’re fascinated, or they’re a foodie person,” said MacWhorter. “Then they live through that 6-month tour of a farm and, all the sudden, life has changed. They didn’t know that was available, that you can live that type of lifestyle.”

“Working with him influenced me to want to farm,” said Ziemann. She went on to start Full Tilth Farm in Poulsbo with another young farmer. “I felt like he really believed in me too. He helped me out acquiring tools when I moved to my farm, he was really encouraging.” And he demonstrated it is doable. It’s definitely gonna take every day of your life, yet Brian has the fortitude to push on through even the hardest, darkest days of winter.”

Last summer, fifteen years after the incident with the tomato lady, we sat on the front porch and looked out at the land I was farming. (I worked at Butler Green



Ambrose F. Grow

Ambrose Grow and his wife, Amanda, and their family came to Eagle Harbor in 1881. He was a Civil War veteran and came because of the descriptive letters he had read in the New York and Kansas papers telling of the virtues of Bainbridge Island. Selling his large farm in Manhattan, Kansas, he homesteaded 160 acres here along the waterfront. In addition to being a charter member of the Eagle Harbor Congregational Church and the Madrone Schools, he was a prolific correspondent to the happenings in Eagle Harbor and environs.



The Grow Family Homestead  
Still stands today as home to  
Harbour Public House

Farms from 2009-11). We’d spent the afternoon troubleshooting irrigation and were enjoying the warm sun and the buzz of bees. He told me that now it is our time, the time for all of us who value farming and our children’s health and the future of our country’s farmland, to help and support the huge endeavor of farm education.

“I was out in the strawberry field with my 2-year-old granddaughter, Gemma, for the first time, she was discovering the wonder of picking huge, sweet berries on her own,” MacWhorter said, grinning at the memory, “That smile of joy on her face as strawberry juice rushed down from her mouth was so heartfelt. I was immediately reminded of why I keep farming and why I get so excited when kids first find the garden wonderland.”

“If everyone who has ever spent time on a farm in their life takes time to remember how that has impacted their own life, and if they want their kids and their kids to have the same opportunity, then it is time to save what farms we have left. This is what gets me up in the morning,” said MacWhorter.

With continued support from the community, his momentum can carry on and shape the future of farming and help preserve precious farmland throughout our country. It takes more than one tomato and one farmer to create change.

**Donations for Butler Green Farm School, a 501(c)(3) Non-Profit Corporation, can be sent to PO BOX 4458 Rollingbay, WA 98061**



4th Grade Bainbridge Island Elementary Students participating in hands on farming practices growing strawberries with Educulture. “Even though they are not aware of it at the time, it will impact them.” - Brian MacWhorter