Columns
Environment



A booth at the Green Fair Folk Festival selling locally produced sunflower oils (Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls)



by Jan Kilian

Contributor

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Editor's note: *It's the five-year anniversary of* "Laudato Si'*, on Care of Our Common Home,*" *Pope Francis*' *landmark encyclical on the environment. Read about other things sisters are doing for the environment on GSR and follow NCR's Laudato Si' anniversary coverage on EarthBeat here.*

One difference between the Minnesota State Fair and the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota's "Green Fair" is the food we serve. Vendors at the State Fair serve deep fried everything: deep fried tacos, deep fried cookie dough, deep fried tater tot hot dish — and all served on a stick.

Over 300 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches made with 25 loaves of homemade bread were the food highlight of the Franciscan Sisters' Green Fair Folk Festival!

St. Francis Convent employees' Green Committee initiated the Green Fair Folk Festival in 2006 with "the hope to inform and inspire members of the St. Francis community and the community of Little Falls with tools to live lives that are earth-friendly." Last August, in its 14th year, the festival provided information and ideas through 67 exhibitors and vendors whose tents took over the convent parking lot for the day. The 1,000-plus visitors needed to park out by the gardens or the barn.

Our employees, volunteers and community have taken St. Francis of Assisi out of the bird bath and put him into the heart of the movement for environmental justice. St. Francis "never was simply a quiet bird watcher; he was an outspoken and controversial social activist."

The degradation of Earth continues to be a major concern for all species of life, including those living in or dependent upon clean water. One of the activities of St. Francis Convent Green Committee was to champion the reuse of water collected in dehumidifiers and promote use of rain barrels to collect run-off water to water plants and flower gardens.

Little Falls was built on the Mississippi River, which is critical for more than 350 species of mammals, birds and other wildlife. The Nature Conservancy booth at the fair was staffed this year by Elizabeth Mboutchom, who is filled with passion and information about the value of our river. Our economy and future generations depend on this river. The Mississippi provides drinking water to more than a million Minnesotans. "This water-rich area is important for agriculture, forestry,

manufacturing, tourism and recreation, all key sectors of our lives," she said.

Advertisement

The St. Clare Seed Library booth featured information new to many visitors. "The purpose of most seed libraries is to provide an alternative to genetically modified seed, increase biodiversity and build plant resilience," states librarian, Elise Carey. The library's brochure further states, "As caretakers of seeds, we cooperate with nature in carrying on priceless genetic material for future generations. Seeds are a sacred trust passed down to us by our ancestors. … By growing a plant from seed, eating its fruit and returning it back to seed, we become fully engaged in the rhythm of nature." Genetically modified seeds do not reproduce year after year and so new seeds have to be purchased, creating dependence on suppliers. Visitors to the St. Clare Seed Library booth were invited to check out packets of seeds, specifically suited to the regional or are heirloom varieties. They will then plant, grow, harvest and return some dried seeds to the library for others to use the next season.

When I asked Dave Sperstad of the Touright Bicycle Shop why he was at the fair, he said, "Riding a bike is very healthy and environmentally friendly and ought to be promoted." His special Strider bikes were small two-wheelers without pedals or training wheels. Small children moved them with their feet on the ground and learned to balance. They can move on from these to full-sized bicycles without going through training wheel models. Needless to say, Dave and his wife, Sue, served as babysitters when parents left children with the bicycles while they checked out other booths.



One of many children enjoying the fair (Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls)

There were many other activities for children, including having their faces painted or doing their own painting, drawing, creating with play dough and being entertained by soap bubbles. Untold numbers of sisters and other volunteers helped with all this.

The Tiny School of Art and Design was a big attraction. Heidi Jeub long dreamed of bringing her art studio (not just supplies for a project) to those she taught as she traveled throughout the state, teaching art to rural and marginalized communities. She created an art studio on our lawn with desks for small artists to work on creations of their choice. Heidi wants students "to understand the arts, not through project-based activities, but through exposure to the way an artist thinks and plays." This was a much-enjoyed educational addition to the Green Fair Folk Festival.

The Backwards Bread Company booth was one of many booths featuring local products for sale. This bread features long fermented sourdough bread which avoids commercialized yeasts and hard to digest wheats. These bread makers use "quality fresh milled organic wheat along with the long ferment process that makes the bread more nutritious and easier to digest." They never put a genetically modified ingredient in their foods.

Other booths featuring local products for sale included food co-ops, makers of natural skin care products, natural house cleaning and dishwashing products. Attendees were able to purchase home-canned jams, fruits and vegetables, and many other home-made products in this family friendly, creative and inspiring environment. Fresh and locally grown produce was also available at the Green Fair. It would take a book to describe them all. But I can't close before I tell you about the music!



Students from Summer Music Camp formed this URock group, one of several performing at the Fair. (Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls)

St. Francis Music Center is co-sponsor of this annual event. Beginning in June prior to the August festival, the center's staff offer URock Summer Camp. Guitarists, drummers, bassists, vocals, keyboardists and other musicians who want to form a band are invited to attend. URock Summer Camp prepares musicians in grades five to 12 to show off accomplishments in concerts during the festival. These young musicians perform on a stage that convent employees built at the edge of the parking lot. URock bands are a highlight of the Green Fair Folk Festival as evidenced by the number of attendees occupying seats in this outdoor auditorium.

For the 2019 Green Fair Folk Festival the URock bands and St. Francis Music Center's Percussion Ensemble were opening acts for the performer, Levi Pelzer. Levi himself was once a Franciscan employee, working as a youngster in the convent dish washing room. He studied at St. Francis Music Center, then in Nashville and is now a well-known country music artist. Levi was pleased to be part of the Music Center's

40th anniversary celebration, though probably not as pleased as we were to have him back with us.

Each day I receive "Verse and Voice" from Sojourners. The verse for October 15, 2019, from Isaiah, and the voice from Soren Kierkegaard seemed to sum up this experience:

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

—Isaiah 43:18-19

Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.

—Soren Kierkegaard

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  Franciscan Srs. Julien Dirkes and Ruth Lentner sold 300 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at the fair. (Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls)

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Sister Trudy enjoyed the Sprout Booth with local garden produce. She was one of many who found the setting easy for handicapped visitors to get around. (Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls)

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Children enjoy making their own art with the Tiny School of Art and Design. (Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls)

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Beautiful horses pulled the wagon for fair attendees touring convent grounds (Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls)

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Country Music star, Levi Pelzer, featured musician at Green Fair Folk Festival (Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls)

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  The Hydroponic Mobile Garden from Central Lakes College displays the method of growing plants without soil by instead using mineral nutrients in water. (Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls)

[Jan Kilian is a Franciscan Sister of Little Falls, Minnesota. She has an academic background in hospital medical records, human development, and spiritual direction, and her ministries have included hospital medical records, counseling, hospital and motherhouse administration, justice and peace work, core staff for a house of prayer, and a team member for Clare's Well Retreat Center. She now shares her retirement with the Franciscan Community Volunteers at Welcoming House in St. Cloud, Minnesota.]