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### Hope's Two Acres

The accidental farmers grow kale and lettuce and flowers. Yet the most important work to be done is not on the land, but on themselves.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JENN ACKERMAN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

**REINVENTION** Alex Rodriguez, left, and Albert Lupo in the field.

By CARA BUCKLEY

GARRISON, N.Y.

**I**t was shortly after 8 a.m. on a sun-drenched July day in this idyllic hamlet 50 miles north of Manhattan, and a hulk of a man named Venice Crafton was lumbering between beds of arugula, leaving outsize footprints in his wake.

Mr. Crafton is 6-foot-2½ inches, 241 pounds and missing his two front teeth, all of which might have made him seem

menacing but for the wide-brimmed, slightly floppy straw hat on his head.

"Boy, if they could see me now in Brooklyn, they wouldn't believe it," said Mr. Crafton, who was raised in Brownsville. "This goes no further than this farm," he added to the half-dozen co-workers around him.

The men responded with grins and low grunts. They were immersed in their work, tugging heads of lettuce from the soil, culling the leaves and rinsing the

produce in a plastic pail filled with water. "I'm not used to doing this stuff," Mr. Crafton, 48, grumbled.

"You can't tell with that hat," came someone's retort.

It was all in a day's work at an unlikely flyspeck of a place: a two-acre organic vegetable farm bordered by a forest and gentle hills, where two dozen men were quietly fighting for their lives.

The farm is run by recovering addicts and alcoholics from New York City, men

whose various addictions, and repeated relapses, have left them sickened and homeless. Called Renewal Farm, the patch of land boasts neat rows of vegetables and bright flowers, as well as two greenhouses fashioned out of thick sheets of plastic.

The men's days are split into two very different parts. They tend the farm, lacing the air with locker-room banter and gentle ribbing. And then they exorcise their worries and voice their hopes at St. Christopher's Inn, a hilltop rehabilitation center nearby where they sleep.

The men's lives are shot through with such contrasts. They are urban, transplanted to the country. They have dark pasts, but they spend their days in bucolic surroundings. They come from the gritty streets, but they grow trendy produce, often for rarefied palates. In this patchwork existence, they do have one constant thread: the knowledge that they are teetering on the brink.

"It's a last resort," said one participant, James Fletcher, who is 58 but looks far older, his cheeks lined and eyes sunken by decades of heroin abuse.

The transition to the farm can be unnerving.

On that sunlit July morning, a man from Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, was leaning over rows of red kale, looking bewildered. He had been, he said, "addicted to everything, a garbage-head." He was also new to the farm, and did not want to talk much about his past, or reveal his name. Instead, he kept his eyes pinned on another program participant, Bernard Cole, who was cutting off wilting leaves from kale.

"Those leaves aren't good?" the man asked, perplexed.

"No," Mr. Cole replied gently. "But see this one, see how it's good?"

"No, I don't know nothing," the man replied dolefully. "I'm a newcomer."

Several feet away, Mr. Crafton was cleaning lettuce, and eyeing it suspiciously. He is not fond of vegetables, and as a rule, he said, doesn't trust any food that "doesn't already come in a bag."

"If it ain't on a McDonald's menu, I ain't eating it," Mr. Crafton declared proudly, peering out from beneath his straw brim, a wet, dripping head of lettuce in his hand. "I always been a picky eater."



Renewal Farm is run by Project Renewal, a Manhattan nonprofit that helps the homeless, the addicted and the mentally ill. The farm is headed by David Harrington, a 61-year-old horticulture expert, and Anthony DeArmas, a 45-year-old former crack addict and alcoholic. About two dozen men participate in the farm program at a time, usually for six to nine months. The farm is financed mostly by public dollars.

From its inception in 1996 until 2007, the farm was at Camp La Guardia, a sprawling 1,000-bed shelter in Orange County that housed homeless men from New York City. Camp La Guardia closed in 2007, but Renewal Farm found new living quarters 25 miles away at St. Christopher's Inn, in Garrison off Route 9. The compound started as a Franciscan friary a hundred years ago, then morphed into a homeless shelter and, eventually, into a rehabilitation center, with 147 beds, a medical clinic and services like acupuncture and counseling.

As for the farmland, the nearby Garrison and Highlands country clubs donated the two acres, with the men in the program helping to clear the land, build a

deer fence and install a water line linked to a nearby reservoir. Much of the harvest is sold at the farm's road stand, which opened late last season, while some is served to the residents of St. Christopher's and some sold in the inn's thrift shop. About 1,200 pounds of the produce is provided to the two country clubs annually in exchange for the donated land.

At the country clubs in particular, the food finds its way to a world far distant from the men's. The Tavern, the restaurant at the Highlands Country Club, serves the farm's lettuce in the \$9 Cranberries and Blue salad (greens, cranberries and blue cheese made from local sheep's milk, in a white balsamic vinaigrette) and with the pan-seared diver scallops dinner, which costs \$27.



The morning that Mr. Crafton was yearning for McDonald's, he watched as the other men rinsed heads of lettuce, one by one, in a pail of water. Then he intervened, showing off some previously acquired knowledge. He piled a load of lettuce into a plastic basket, and dunked the whole thing in the bucket in one efficient swoop.

"Genius, man, genius," said one of his co-workers, Manfred Long.

"That was an old trick I learned back in 2000," Mr. Crafton said, smiling with satisfaction.

Mr. Crafton was enrolled in Project Renewal before, in 2000, and when he left he thought his crack and alcohol problems were licked. But, after some relapses and some good years, he found himself starting his mornings with six-packs of beer. By December of last year, he was back at Renewal Farm.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENN ACKERMAN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Washing lettuce; Manfred Long planting; and Project Renewal men after a meeting.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENN ACKERMAN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

**PLACID ROUTINE** Top, in the greenhouse; above, after farming, the men discuss their fights with addiction. At top right, a bit of the harvest.

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No one knows how many graduates of Renewal Farm have stayed clean. About 450 have cycled through in its 13 years, but their progress has not been tracked, both because it would be expensive and because the men tend to move around a lot. Still, based on anecdotal responses, Mr. Harrington, the program director, guesses that about 65 percent stayed off drugs and alcohol at least a year. The program's strengths, he believes, are its length and the structure it gives the men's lives.

Dr. David A. Deitch, the chief clinical officer with Phoenix House, said the 65 percent rate is high, relatively speaking; on average, he said, the one-year success rate

is closer to one-third. "Regardless of the outcome," he added, "the idea that they're doing something, and it's self-supporting, keeping them clean longer, and being good for the community as a whole, and that they're earning their keep as opposed to being treated as though they're horizontal patients somewhere in a hospital. These are very good, exciting features."

The men seem to have an easier time at St. Christopher's Inn than they did at Camp La Guardia, where there was some drinking and drugs among the 1,000 residents, and where the two dozen Project Renewal participants were among the few in recovery. At St. Christopher's, all of the shelter's roughly 150 residents are in recovery.

"It was a lot more chaotic," Mr. DeArmas said of Camp La Guardia. "A lot more temptation there, too."

The program's success rate seems to bear out this impression. In the year and a half since Renewal Farm opened at Garrison, just 4 percent of the men have tested positive for alcohol and drugs, a result that leads to dismissal. The men are tested randomly, and also whenever they leave St. Christopher's on unescorted trips. At Camp La Guardia, the number of Renewal men who failed those tests was roughly 20 percent.

The Renewal men, and the other men who stay there, call St. Christopher's "the holy mountain." Its grounds are thick with crosses, crucifixes and statues of saints. Many of them also want to believe, almost desperately, that miracles happen there.

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Mr. Long was shaking water off some lettuce, and the droplets were catching the sun and spraying a few men standing nearby. He laid the heads in a box bound for the farm stand.

As often happens during the slow hours in the field, the talk drifted back to the men's former lives.

Mr. Crafton was speaking about the old Project Renewal farm truck, which was crushed on Sept. 11, 2001. Mr. DeArmas had driven it to the city that day to deliver produce to a farmers' market near the World Trade Center, and fled on foot when the first tower fell.

"That truck was destroyed," Mr. Crafton said to the others.

The group fell silent for a moment. Then: "I bet the drug dealers were having a field day that day," Mr. Long said.

"No cops," Mr. Crafton said.

Then another man had a thought.

"No cellphones," he said.

"Oh yeah," Mr. Long said.

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Nine men were sitting in a circle in a room at St. Christopher's Inn for a therapy session. After a brief meditation, Michael Boccia, the social worker leading the group, began a discussion about old habits, and the men started talking about how they had drowned their anxieties with drinks and drugs.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JENN ACKERMAN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

**SPARTAN SURROUNDINGS** *Sleeping quarters at St. Christopher's Inn.*

"My worst fear is leaving this mountain the way I came in, doing things in half measures," said William Chapman, a recovering crack addict from Brooklyn. "I worked too hard to get where I am now."

Like the rest of the men, Mr. Chapman was wearing a photo ID taken the day he entered the program. It showed a terrified man with downcast eyes.

Fear and hope are undercurrents at Renewal, even for Mr. Crafton. Despite all his city slicker bravura, he admitted privately that he liked being out of New York and loved the peaceful rhythms of the farm. He has found serenity in Garrison, he said, and now possesses, he believes, the peace of mind he needs to stay sober when he leaves.

"I'm too old to be coming in and out of

these places," Mr. Crafton said. "I got insight now into what I need. This is my last time. I know it."

There was a snake on the loose somewhere in the hoop house, the long, low greenhouse made out of arched tubing and plastic sheets. But the men had no time to find it; they had work to do.

Mr. Fletcher walked over to the flower beds with Mr. DeArmas, crouched down and began snipping blooms — celosias, nasturtiums, snapdragons — to sell at the farm stand. Another man helped. "Here you go, flower maiden," he said, handing Mr. Fletcher a bloom.

"Thank you," Mr. Fletcher said, and moved to another plant, accidentally drop-

ping a flower. "Sweetheart, you dropped one," the man said.

Mr. Fletcher shook his head. "Sweetheart," he muttered.

Mr. Crafton began arranging the picked blooms into bouquets. "You usually want a little color," he explained to Mr. Fletcher. "See? I put that one in the middle. The red one. Then this one. And this pink one. Look! A bouquet." He held the arrangement at arm's length, surveyed his work, and nodded.

"This one?" Mr. Fletcher asked, offering him a yellow snapdragon.

"No," Mr. Crafton said. "It doesn't go."



Renewal Farm's roadside stand sits at the corner of Route 9 and Snake Hill Road, and at midmorning one weekday Mr. DeArmas and a few men unloaded the van, setting out baskets of squash, herbs, lettuce, Swiss chard, tomato plants and Mr. Crafton's bouquets. Sales at the farm stand have been slow this year, partly because of the near-daily downpours. Mr. Long, who had been helping unpack the produce, waved at a passing car, grinning widely, a gesture that sometimes draws in customers.

"I always wave at everybody," he said. The car slowed but did not stop.

Mr. DeArmas left the men to tend their stand and drove back to the farm. It was time for the men there to wrap up their day's work.

As the van arrived at the farm, Mr. Crafton was waiting with news.

"I came across the snake!" he cried. "It was a garter snake, but it was big."

"Yeah," said one of the men. "The snake ran one way; he ran the other way."

Mr. DeArmas guffawed, and then he told the men to hop into the van. It was time to go back to St. Christopher's, back to the holy mountain.