

LIVING ROOTS



French Lick eco village provides a diverse community with common values

BY CJ WOODRING
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSH MARSHALL

French Lick is internationally renowned for its historic hotels and highly acclaimed spas. The upscale setting of the French Lick Springs Hotel and the West Baden Springs Hotel attracts guests as diverse as golfers and gamers, bridal parties and bowlers.

But five miles and 10 minutes away from the majestic resort complex exists a different type of community, in which friends and neighbors grow much of their food, laboring side by side in the fields. A neighborhood in which residents primarily live off the grid. And where, in fair weather, they hang clothes out to dry.

THIS IS LIVING ROOTS ECOVILLAGE.

Founding member Michael Hicks serves as farm leader and holistic life coach. A Bedford native, Hicks established Indian Creek Farm in Jasper in 2004. Following two years in California, he returned to the Hoosier State, founding the Center for Community Empowerment in Jasper.

Living Roots, the 39-year-old says, is a culmination of those experiences. And at a time when just founding a farm can be daunting, Hicks has further challenged

himself by establishing a farm community.

“Farming is one of the most significant things we do, but it’s not all about farming,” he says. “We’re also showing that you can be successful in business and focusing on the opportunities people can have here. That’s our number one thing. The secondary thing is outreach, which will come as we get settled.”

The project began in 2011. “I needed to find members and then find land,” he says. “About a year-and-a-half ago I got the land,



Clockwise, Entrance to Living Roots. Eco villagers hang their clothes out to dry. A high tunnel garden. Eco village cabins.

Opposite page, from left: Tate Nielsen, Mecie Delffs, Sarah Leavesley, Chris Jarrett, Michael Hicks and Ali Mitchell.

In addition to building cabins, members have converted one of four barns to a community center, while also constructing three greenhouses, an outdoor kitchen and walk-in fridge, a produce shed and an earthen grow room. And more.

With the exception of some framing, very little of the work was outsourced, Hicks says.

Living Roots is intended to be completely self-sustaining. Toward that end, the founder is ever alert to additional produce and growers he'd like to include. The next move is toward getting more dairy animals, he says.

"We're also looking toward more orchards and perennial stuff, and have envisioned the people we want to attract," he explains. "For example, someone who cultivates mushrooms or a beekeeper. And we'd like to have our own nursery, so we're kind of moving toward that. I think a lot of it will come."

LIFE IN THE PAST LANE

Although not intended to parallel New Harmony, a Utopian society established in southwestern Indiana nearly 200 years ago, Living Roots nonetheless incorporates many of the aspects of the former Wabash River community: An independent lifestyle. Spaces for self-renewal and quiet meditation. An orderly, productive and self-sustaining society, in which members share the labor.

"We're not trying to be too communal," Hicks says, explaining that Living Roots is like "an alternative homeowners association. It's more intentional, a little more intimate — a balance between individual and community living."

The concept, he says, was based on eco villages he's visited worldwide, combining the best elements of each. "The big difference is in our farm," he says. "We're producing more food than any I know of, which has been hard for communities to do."

It's all about the farming style. "How

which was acquired collectively by three founding members."

Located five miles outside French Lick, the setting near Patoka and Spring Valley lakes is defined by rolling hills and surrounded by national forests. The historic farm is composed of woods, fields and pastureland, with remaining acreage dedicated to gardens, housing and smaller animals.

Hicks says, overall, there are about 30 plots, which can support approximately 100 people.

Members began moving in a year ago. "We currently have about 24 people, including three families," Hicks says. "The average resident is about 35, but they range from 2 to 71 years old. About nine of them are apprentices for programs such as farming and healing arts. We also have a building apprenticeship program."

Following a trial basis, full members pay an initial join fee and then a monthly housing fee, which includes utilities. Along with apprenticeships, regional employment

opportunities are available.

The community owns the entire property, Hicks says. "A full member gets a plot with a lifetime lease on which to build a home. Five cabins were built within the first 18 months, serving as temporary living until permanent homes are constructed."

Members operate a farm market and CSA where they purvey site-grown produce. They sell grass-fed beef, present workshops and host monthly potlucks and tours for the public.



Clockwise, Hicks in his eco village cabin. The community kitchen. The community dining table. Ali Mitchell.

often do you see a bunch of farmers working together in a field?" he asks. "This is sustainable, intensive growing and not a lot of tractor work. We have just four-and-a-half acres of produce, but because of our style, we're producing what an average 10 to 15 acres would yield.

"The whole project is organic and chemical-free," he adds. "We don't get certified anymore; it's just too much paperwork. But we have grass-fed beef ... no hormones or antibiotics."

Nonetheless, he stresses, EcoVillage is much more than a standard organic farm.

"It's really about redeveloping our relationship with farming and finding out why young people aren't becoming farmers," he says. "How do we change that? This is something that needs to be addressed."

It was the farming aspect that drew resi-

dent Chris Jarrett to the Indiana setting. A south Florida native educated as a culinary professional, Jarrett serves as assistant farm and community kitchen manager.

Jarrett says he grew tired of the corporate philosophy of working too many hours for a paycheck — which was soon spent — getting to sleep late at night and then having to do it all over again the next day.

"Plus, I was cooking all this food and had no connection to where it was coming from," he adds. "So it made me think and look within myself to what I really wanted to do."

The answer, he says, was organic farming.

Although he'd never been involved with communal living, per se, Jarrett had participated in the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, which, he says, was very structured.

"We were living at a campsite, which

was treated as a small community, and it appealed to me," he says. "So I began looking at different apprenticeship programs that different farms offered throughout the country, and when I read about Living Roots, it just felt right.

"Not only was there a farm, but I'd be living holistically with the land. So I sent Michael an email, and the rest is history."

Jarrett arrived last Halloween from his North Carolina home, initially signing up for a year's stay. "I found similar things here that I related to from Occupy, and I told Michael I wanted to be completely immersed and see the entire year here ... the changing of the seasons," he says. "Now that's completely changed, and I want to stay permanently."

Hicks acknowledges the lifestyle may not appeal to everyone. "It's very creative stuff,

and it's very fulfilling," he says, "and there's a lot of satisfaction in that. But it's just a lot closer relationships than you'd find in a traditional neighborhood.

"You're living where you're working, and you're also working alongside friends as well as someone you're married to or in a relationship with," he explains. "So there really are multiple relationships."

Although farming is hard work, a sometimes slower-paced lifestyle can co-exist, moving in rhythm with the seasons. "Everything slows down here," Jarrett says, "even when it comes to drying your clothes on the line outdoors in summer or indoors over wood stoves in winter."

'TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL'

Julie Montgomery moved to Living Roots from Shoals. While admitting it's been an



Left, Michael Kuhn and Michael Hicks

adjustment in lifestyle and living accommodations, it's a move she hasn't regretted.

It's all about a mother's love.

"This is mainly for my son, Nick, and what kind of experiences I can give him that he can hang on to and apply to his life, and that will benefit him," she says. "I think this is one of the best things I've ever done for him. It's a somewhat controlled environment, but he'll be learning about work ethics, sustainable living and energy, and about healthy living practices."

Montgomery first learned about Hicks 10 years ago when he was featured in a newspaper article about organic gardening. In 2010, she worked with him for six months, during which time he shared his vision for the project.

"After he discussed it, I knew that I wanted to be there and participate in some way and to some degree, so we moved here in December."

Montgomery says she discussed the lifestyle with 14-year-old Nick, and they visited the setting. He agreed to try it for a year.

"This is an opportunity for him to gain some skills for the future," she says. "There's a great diversity of people here ... so much music and art and relationship building.

"This summer is going to be where he really gets into the program, working with the apprentices," she adds. "He's also found

people to play cards and chess with, so has really enjoyed it so far. We're in a diverse community with common values, so it's very positive."

Overall, she believes Living Roots is a beneficial environment for youngsters. "Working with nature is very positive," she explains. "And it teaches them where their food comes from and how to grow it, which is empowering. I definitely would recommend it."

When asked how he envisions the eco village when it's completed, Hicks says that will never happen: It's an ongoing project, constantly evolving.

"It's been my goal and my thing to do, and I'm going to make it happen," he says. "It's a nice piece of property, a good location with good soil and lots of springs. We have good customers around, and local communities have accepted us because we sell produce to restaurants and grocery stores.

"People around here are an open kind of people who aren't isolated. ... We may be defined as 'rustic' and 'earthy,' but we're also working at growing food, and food speaks and connects people. And I'm from the area. So I have a lot of connections who know who I am and what kind of person I am."

Living Roots Inc. is located at 5907 W. County Road 375S, French Lick. For more information, visit indianacommunity.org or call (812) 639-3170.

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