

## **Green Hero for April, 2014: Abrah Dresdale, Coordinator of the Farm and Food Systems Program at GCC**

Published in Greenfield Recorder, April 2014

By Sandra Boston, Greening Greenfield

“So what is Greening Greenfield?” asks a tall, vibrant young woman in hiking boots and shorts as I am tabling outside the post office for the 10% Challenge. It’s 2010, a bright sunny Saturday in April, and instead of us calling out to passers-by, here is someone coming up to our table. It’s Abrah Dresdale. Little did I know that this new face in Greenfield would within 2 years be a dynamic leader in our town, our community college, and the whole region of the Pioneer Valley in Sustainability and Permaculture Design.

Abrah honed her skills studying architecture as an undergrad at Wesleyan University, followed by study of trees, plants, and medicinal herbs through the Wildflower School of Botanical Medicine certification program in Austin, TX in 2008, and graduate study at the Conway School of Landscape Design which she completed in 2010. From 2004-2011, she was a Senior Instructor and Program Coordinator for Wild Earth Programs in New Paltz, NY, where she taught survival skills to children and adolescent girls. Over four summers, starting in 2004, she helped in the development of a teen program focused on experiential learning at Omega Institute. That year she also connected with “The Art of Mentoring” training at Vermont Wilderness School, where she would join the staff the following year, and be introduced to an adjunct instructor from GCC, Walker Korby, and permaculture experts Dave Jacke and Jono Neiger. Contact with him gave her a strong impression of GCC as a progressive school with equal and affordable access to higher education—two strong values of hers. She was also attracted to the community engagement of that venue. She sent her resume but nothing came of it until Bob Pura hired Sandy Thomas to design a new program for the college in renewable energy and sustainable agriculture. Sandy came across a report of “Feed Northampton”, which Abrah had co-authored for her Masters thesis while at the Conway school. BINGO! Abrah was hired to teach 2 classes, Intro to Food Systems and Permaculture Design. So what, exactly is permaculture?

“It is the practice of observing patterns in Nature, and mimicking these benefits of relationship to design systems that meet human needs while also regenerating the land.”

“Landscape literacy” is seeing what is around you—soil, water, sun/shade patterns, micro elements-- seeing Nature as a classroom. It is recognizing patterns and replicating them to meet human needs for sustainable food and shelter. Her students have real clients from the community where they interview the client for goals and then design the site using permaculture strategies. The course description and student blogs are on the program website [www.gcc.mass.edu/farmandfoodsystems](http://www.gcc.mass.edu/farmandfoodsystems). There is also an internship program open to community residents that is connected to a USDA grant that covers tuition for the internship. In addition to the 2 courses and internship, Abrah’s program offers a permaculture club open to the community, where in exchange for watering and weeding through the whole academic year on Mondays 12-1, you can work with a mentor. There is also an internship open to all during the summer for credit, raising perennial vegetables, berries, root crops, herbs, and annual veggies on 1/8th acre working with a student instructor.

Abrah hopes the SAGE program (Sustainable Agriculture and Renewable Energy) will become a regional hub for best practices, professional development, conferences, and presentations for academics and community members using the infrastructure on campus. She is also excited about a new program with the Franklin County House of Corrections who have a grant for what is called "Inside-Out Model." A student intern will teach 3 courses at the jail: composting & organic gardening, farm and food coops, and issues of sustainability. Community people can attend these classes. There is also a grant supporting incarcerated men working at the Just Roots community farm to develop vocational skills. Abrah oversees these programs as coordinator of the Farm and Food System program and the person in charge of good community relations. For all she has contributed to GCC and our wider community in bringing us closer to an aware, vibrant and productive relationship with our natural world, Abrah Dresdale is our Green Hero for April.