

2011 Midwest Regional FCS Conference

Meeting Highlights Reported by IAFC Members



Straw Houses by Vicki Gustafson

I signed up for a workshop by D. Dean Isham, M.F.A., thinking it would be about gardening with children to promote partnering with them and encourage healthy eating. I'm not sure how I got that idea, but it was wrong!

Professor Isham's presentation was about building houses using straws bales as the main material. What came to the minds of most of us was "The Three Little Pigs." Before his time was over, I think most of us were convinced tightly a compacted straw bale was a viable material for building a house. Having the house anchored in a cement foundation and the bales sealed with three layers of stucco keeps the house secure and lasting for many years.

Professor Isham partnered with students on the campus of South Dakota State University to construct a straw building on the grounds of McCrory Gardens to use as an outdoor classroom and a meeting place. This 900 square foot general purpose building is the focus of a children's garden area that emphasizes sustainable gardening practices. Maybe that's where I got the idea of gardening with children! You know how your mind sifts through information and grabs what it understands? I guess a straw house was not something my mind was ready to understand.

Professor Isham shared the history of straw houses and pictures of straw houses from a few places around the country. He emphasized the sustainability

because of using dead grasses for the bales as well as planting grass roofs for the structures. This allows for soaking up more rain water run-off and keeps the sewer systems from being overloaded during downpours.

Google "Straw Houses" and you are given a plethora of Websites to convince you straw houses are the dwelling of the future, even though they are also from the past. They are energy efficient and make good use of a waste product as well as an attractive structure. Numerous plans are offered for various styles and sizes of straw houses and they can be built in a short amount of time. They are modern and give a feeling of warmth and comfort inside, as seen by the many pictures on the websites.

So, move over big bad wolf, I think the straw house of the future will withstand your huffs and puffs and the questions of nay-sayers.

Martha Hansen presented an educational look at the history of fashion from the late 1800's.



Cynthia Kenyon and Luann Alemao Johnson model outfits during the Saturday luncheon fashion show.



Dan Buettner, keynote speaker and author of *The Blue Zones*, autographs books after his presentation.

Blue Zone Vitality Project in Albert Lea

Presented by 3 members of the project committee, written by Jo Bodeker.

How would you like to add 3.1 years to your projected longevity, see health care claims among city and school employees drop by 32% and lose an average of 3 pounds without dieting? These were the results for a group of community members in Albert Lea, Minnesota when they participated in the Blue Zone Vitality Project, guided by Dan Buettner, author of *The Blue Zone*. By making small changes in their daily lives, many community members accomplished this in less than 1 year.

During the original initiative, 70 “walking maos” (groups of 4-10 walkers) were formed to walk together at least once a week. Participants from these groups also provided 2,200 hours of volunteer work such as walking dogs from the local animal shelter. A walking school bus program found parents and volunteers who walked with children to their schools sometimes with the children getting off of their actual school bus 1 mile from their school. This was done to encourage children to walk more, help build social networks, plus

provide safety for kids on their way to school. A few of the other features of the project were community gardens, purpose workshops, neighborhood picnics to encourage community building, encouraging employers to make work environments more aligned with practices leading to good health, healthy cooking classes and getting grocers to feature foods associated with better health and increased life expectancy.

Our speakers emphasized the importance of choosing small projects to begin with and the need to place emphasis on long term benefits rather than money. One of the first projects the town worked on was improving “walkability”. As a result, connecting sidewalks and a 5 mile walking path around one of their larger lakes were added to allow people convenient access to this healthy exercise. A sustainability committee has been put together for keeping practices put in place by the original project and enhancing possibilities for better health and life expectancy of community members.



IAFCS President, Margaret Van Ginkel, conducts the Annual Business Meeting during the Midwest Regional FCS Conference.