

Q&A



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Questions?

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No man is an island

Several of you have asked what in the heck am I doing down in the Virgin Islands and “How do I get a job like that?”

Well here’s my story that started out turfy and then went to an even better place that has captured my heart. An Iowa State alumni living on St. John wanted advice on building a soccer field for the students at Gifft Hill School that could also be used by the community. You really have to live here to experience just how severely sloped and rocky the terrain is on St. John; flat land is rare and there is no soil as we know it stateside.

It took 4 years to fill a gulch with enough construction rock to make a flat spot suitable for a 22,000 sq. ft. field. The longest road on the 25-square mile island is 12 miles long and nearly impossible to exceed 35 mph because of the sharp turns and steep grades. Water is either desalinated from the sea or collected in cisterns from roof runoff, so irrigation was a major concern when deciding what type of surface to install. To irrigate a grass surface would require approximately \$60,000 in purchased water each year, so in the long run this coupled with the lack of trained personnel and equipment to manage a grass surface, the decision was made to install a synthetic turf. In its fourth year the Field-Turf surface has performed nicely with nearly no maintenance.

The only problem we are having is that the fibrillated white lines are wearing faster than the monofilament green turf. The kids love playing multiple sports on it and the school is proud to have the only synthetic surface in the Virgin Islands. St. Thomas and St. Croix are the two larger islands in the US Virgin Islands and they are faced with the same problem of managing their bermudagrass and hurricane grass with no irrigation. In

the wet season the grass performs nicely but in the dry season fields burn up and are mostly weak grass with some weeds and bare soil. Working with Carlos Robles, University of Virgin Islands extension agent, and Stanley Smith, parks & recreation assistant commissioner, we are testing seashore paspalum as a potential grass for baseball fields that will be irrigated with salt water, and we have plenty of that.

Now for the twist that caught this turf guy a little off guard. After the field project Gifft Hill School collaborated with Iowa State University to develop the Education And Resiliency Through Horticulture or EARTH Program. I am co-director of the EARTH Program and each semester two ISU students spend 15 weeks on the island teaching in both the indoor and outdoor classroom, along with a creative component project of their choosing. It basically follows the design of the “Edible School Yard” concept developed by Alice Waters that started in Berkley, CA.

The Gifft Hill EARTH Program has a garden and kitchen program that teaches sustainable concepts from smaller terraced gardens on the island to large corn fields of Iowa. The concept is to

let students know where food comes from, how to produce and prepare it, and how to feed themselves in a sustainable process. Students in grades 4-12 have been exposed to terrace farming, sheet mulching, composting, chicken tractors, edible landscapes, native plants for food and medicine, organic and commercial farming techniques, community supported agriculture, and how all this impacts the environmental microcosm were they live.

So I came to an island which I thought was a hideaway for the wealthy to get out of the winter, and there is some truth to that because it certainly is tourism that drives the economy and makes it possible for so many to work and live on the island. But the reality is I discovered a community of people—rich, poor and in between—that are dedicated to helping one another. There is hardly a day that goes by that I don’t hitch for a ride or pick up someone that needs a ride or borrow something; it is a throwback to a time when we cared more about helping than hurting and we lived with less fear and isolation. It has plenty of beautiful blue water and white sand beaches, but if you stick around long enough it is the people and their stories that you fall in love with, and that is what happened to me. ■

