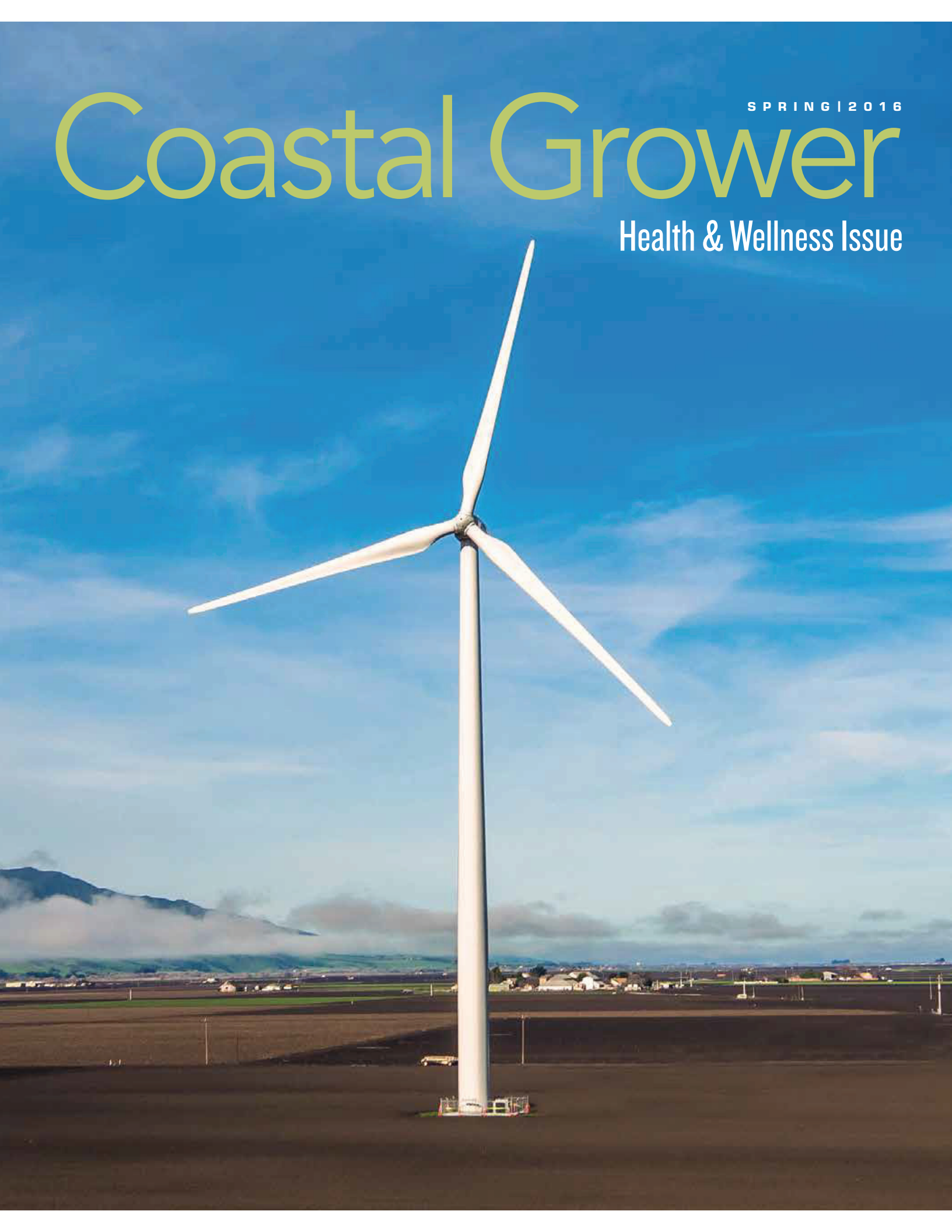


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Growing Green

A 'Working Title' That's All About the Work

BY ELIZABETH DIAZ WITH MAURY TRELEVEN

For the small, industrious Salinas Valley community of Gonzales, California, "Growing Green" is not the flavor of the week or trending catch phrase. In 2008, the community leaders of the City of Gonzales set out to embrace a working title for programs and projects that would be good for people, good for business, and good for the environment. The program name, "Gonzales Grows Green" or G3, is a nod to the community's rich agricultural heritage that is part of a vast network of farms, ranches, and vineyards that feed America and feed the world.

The community initiative focuses on three principles: maintaining sustainability of natural resources through environmental stewardship, increased opportunity through economic development, and preserving quality of life through social equity programs. "Growing Green" gave shape to a community vision founded on cooperation, innovation, and education that now permeates the lifestyle and economic development cultures of the community.

In a city populated predominantly with people under the age of thirty-five, it

became clear to community leaders that the social equity goals of the G3 sustainability initiative needed to be focused on workforce development, the creation of full-time, year-round jobs, and community values and programs centered around health, public safety, secure housing, clean water, investments in renewable energy, youth empowerment, educational parity, and environmental stewardship.

"On the eve of national economic disaster, community leaders did not hunker down but, rather, they decided to double down," says long-time city manager, René Mendez. "Their decision and commitment to do so still inspires me," he says. Gonzales sent word out that it was open for business and open to partner on projects with companies looking to invest in innovations in energy and technology. Relationships amongst community leaders and boards that once held court in very separate realms were rekindled with the goal of forming working partnerships and a willingness to cross over lines of established territory. Civic and education leaders began the dialogue of cooperation at newly established joint city

council and school board information sessions, agreeing that there might be opportunities for their respective staff to work together on behalf of young people and the families that they were jointly tasked with serving.

Maury Treleven, a consulting project manager for the G3 community initiative explained that there was a bit of a learning curve when it came to finding the best way to relate concepts of conservation to the community. "I think many of us thought that if we just got the word out there and put out some recycling containers, sent out a flyer, and had a few meetings that people would just start recycling and doing the right thing when it came to reducing consumption and participating in programs designed for a sustainable community." Treleven, who manages many of the conservation programs and activities for the community, says that what they realized quite quickly was that the only chance they had for imbedding concepts of conservation into the community culture was to connect in a meaningful way with the community's youth. The born educator with a passion for the private business sector realized she had a once in a lifetime opportunity to do what she had always dreamed of doing...teach! "In a large number of our households, the young people are the generation in their family with the most access to information and have the opportunity to achieve the highest level of understanding and buy-in when it comes to these concepts." She says that in many ways, they are the only conduits of information into their households. "It is a great opportunity, and we had to learn to recognize this," says Treleven.

In 2010, the city recreation programs director, Sara Papineau-Brandt asked Treleven to work with her to create what would become an award winning middle school summer education program, Environmental Leadership Academy. Since that time, the academy offering has evolved and grown so much that it has

Clockwise from top left: Maury Treleven and Sara Papineau-Brandt with Environmental Leadership Academy students. Maury Treleven teaches students at La Gloria School about the importance of recycling.

become an umbrella for many programs. One such program, “Outdoor Adventures” was funded by a 2013 grant from the Foundation for Youth Investment. This program, designed to address nature deficit disorder in youth living in a rural agriculture setting, has provided high school aged youth with opportunities to engage with the natural world. This includes being able to send youth and youth counselors to Ventana Wilderness campouts and weeklong summer camps at regional lake recreation areas. Chaperoned by city staff and city council members, Gonzales youth have been kayaking, camping in Big Sur, hiking in the redwoods, stargazing at Fremont’s Peak, and on a high ropes tree course. “While this sounds like fun and games,” says Papineau-Brandt, “we are on a very serious mission here when it comes to helping our youth see beyond that city limit sign.” She explains that it is all too common to take young people from Gonzales on a trip and have up to 50 percent of them reveal that it is their first time visiting the ocean or their first time camping.

Understanding that education and economic development went hand-in-hand, school district and city staff members excitedly sat down to collaborate on “Cradle to Career” education opportunities with city consultant, Michelle Slade of C4 Consulting. Slade had previously been tapped by four south county cities to work with their police departments in

a regional collaborative, 4 Cities 4 Peace. There she was tasked with assisting Salinas Valley cities in developing youth programs aimed at providing opportunities for leadership that would offer youth an alternative to gangs.

As the Gonzales teams met, Slade was able to successfully assist community leaders in giving shape to projects that were emerging as a product of their collaborative efforts. In 2014, this resulted in a city/district youth leadership

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development program that provides for two paid youth summer internships with the City of Gonzales. The two youth additionally serve terms as youth representatives appointed to both the Gonzales City Council and the school district’s Board of Trustees. They also chair a newly formed youth leadership council comprised of middle school and high school students. In 2015, the City Council and Board of Trustees were able to establish an innovative, co-funded, full-time job opening for an individual that will lead community youth development programs both as an educator and civic leader. The position is expected to be filled in 2016.

The next phase of the charge enthusiastically led by Michelle Slade will be to establish relationships of support within the Gonzales business and agriculture community as she develops the framework for a youth summer job internship program. The program will be developed with the objective of addressing youth underemployment, giving youth experiences in the world of work, and exposing Gonzales youth to the diversity of career options available and their collegiate and trade school pathways.

Members of this collaborative effort share that it is gratifying for them as community leaders to sit down at workshop meetings where leaders such as the police chief, the

recreation director, the coordinator of the adult school, and even city council members show up to take their seat alongside the city manager, the school superintendent, and the principal and vice principal from each school. “These two to three hour sessions can get pretty rowdy when the breakout groups get going,” says Treleven. She says that she is looking forward to this Spring as a portion of the group will be attending a conference to learn more about bringing a “Linked Learning” program approach to education. This approach integrates rigorous academics with career-based learning and real world workplace experiences. “This is the next place where our collaborative efforts can result in real game changers for young people in our community,” says Treleven.

Working together in 2015, educator and academic coach Tina Raeder VanStirum and Treleven were able to support a number of Gonzales High School students in the rigorous application and interview process for the prestigious Monterey Bay Aquarium program, Teen Conservation Leaders. As a result of their participation in this summer program, the two seniors who were selected are now applying for paid summer jobs with the aquarium and are leading the charge to send more youth from Gonzales High School to discover the wonders of the ocean and marine biology on the Monterey Bay. “Participating in this program changed the course of my life,” says senior, Tabitha Hernandez. “I really thought I wanted to go to medical school,” she says. After attending the summer program at the aquarium, she says she realized that she could be even more passionate about marine biology. When applying for college, she switched her major and applied at schools with marine biology programs.

“This is what the social justice component of the G3 program is all about,” says Treleven. “We want our youth to understand the breadth of opportunities that are on the table and have the chance to consider them all. They can’t do that if we aren’t constantly opening the door, opening the window, or breaking the city limit with them every chance we get!” **CG**

