

# An Apprenticeship in Green Living

by Courtney Rosser

“You know, we just don’t recognize the most significant moments of our lives while they’re happening,” says Moonlight Graham in *Field of Dreams*. *Field of Dreams* has always been one of my favorite movies, and that quotation has always resonated with me. As I participate in this beautiful life, I realize just how much truth there is to Graham’s statement.

Permaculture (from “permanent agriculture” and “permanent culture”) is a way of living life in which we aim to exist in harmony with nature, making as little impact on our environment as possible. Based on the ethics of “earth care,” “people care,” and “fair share,” permaculture teaches us to create cycles that enable us to live sustainably and enrich the earth rather than destroy it.

Nature, of which we are a part, functions in cycles. Unfortunately, human beings tend to break those cycles, creating linear progressions that cause us to lose sight of where things come from and where they go when we are done with them. In permaculture we strive to recreate those cycles in an attempt to give back to the earth as much as we take.

Looking back, it is hard for me to believe that “permaculture” was not always a presence in my life. I already knew certain ideals were important to me: simplicity, anti-consumerism, anti-corporatism, using natural products, avoiding foods with chemicals, promoting the fair treatment of animals and people, and caring for the environment. In short, I was already considered a “hippie” by most of my friends. I simply did not realize that all of these ideals are incorporated in the principles of permaculture. Taking a course on permaculture helped to organize my values, give structure to my future, and provide me with a vocabulary, knowledge base, and ability to pursue these ideas and to manifest them in my life. But it was not simply the act of studying it that changed my life. Rather, it is the particular way in which I studied it.

I participated in the six-week Green Apprenticeship Training at Kibbutz Lotan in Israel ([www.kibbutzlotan.com](http://www.kibbutzlotan.com)). Located in the Arava Desert, forty kilometers north of Eilat, and approximately fifty meters west of Jordan, Kibbutz Lotan is a member of the Global Ecovillage Network. Kibbutz Lotan’s Center for Creative Ecology offers “Green Apprenticeship Training,” an internationally recognized certification course for permaculture and ecovillage design. The apprenticeship teaches all the necessary theory and techniques required to attain a Permaculture Design Certificate and an Ecovillage Design Certificate. But that is where its similarity to other courses ends, and that is where its influence on my life begins.

We lived in an eco-neighborhood on the Kibbutz for the duration of the course. This allowed us to fully immerse ourselves in everything we were learning. We were able to forget our “other lives” for six weeks and completely open ourselves up to a new way of thinking and living, which is what permaculture is all about: looking at the (continued on page 81)



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world in a new way.

We lived in an eco-neighborhood called the Bustan, which means “orchard” in Hebrew. It consists of ten geodesic dome structures insulated with straw bales and plastered with mud. These domes were our homes for the six weeks we were there. Built by students of previous green apprenticeship courses, the domes serve as a testament to the ever-evolving status of the Bustan. As each new apprenticeship group contributes in some way, the neighborhood becomes a living inspiration for students during their time at Kibbutz Lotan. At present, along with the domes, the Bustan includes a mud-plastered kitchen, solar oven, mud oven, organic gardens, active compost, worm compost, compost toilets, solar panels, and solar-heated water for the showers. Utilizing these facilities on a daily basis allowed us to live and breathe permaculture.

In addition to the hands-on experience we gained by simply living in the Bustan, we also studied and worked full-time, five days a week. We learned the principles and techniques involved in permaculture, and then we went out and built our own compost piles, planted our own gardens and watched them grow, and built a bench out of old tires, trash, and mud plaster. One of the basic tenets of permaculture is the idea that each of us has the ability to “just do it.” Whatever particular task “it” refers to, permaculture encourages us to get out there and make it happen. This quality of the course is what made the apprenticeship one of the most empowering experiences I have ever had. Here I was, surrounded by like-minded

people, being encouraged by knowledgeable mentors, and studying something about which I was passionate. On a daily basis I got to experience my ability to go out there and “just do it.” I realized that we are often held back by our fear of failure. But in reality, making mistakes is the best way to learn, and the only way to “fail” at anything in this life is to not act. My experience at Kibbutz Lotan gave me the confidence to manifest my dreams.

In addition to learning permaculture techniques, the apprenticeship group learned about community design through a component based on the internationally recognized Gaia Education Ecovillage Design Curriculum. We learned what is involved in establishing a new community and what is necessary to nourish it into a long-term entity. Again, life in the Bustan, and on the Kibbutz, provided for first-hand experience. We could observe how our small community within the Bustan was functioning, as well as examine the already established community of Kibbutz Lotan. We visited neighboring kibbutzim and communities in order to compare how they function. These communities served as inspiration for the communities we eventually designed for ourselves.

First we formed groups based on shared visions that would be the backbones of each community. Then each group followed its vision to design the ecological, social, spiritual, and economic factors that we wanted to shape and sustain our community. This process encouraged us to think about what qualities we look for in a community, a home, and a support system. It highlighted the “people care” ethic of permaculture, which points out that caring for the earth and interacting harmoniously with nature include learning to interact harmoniously with each other. In my opinion it would be incomplete to teach permaculture design without also teaching community design.

During the course it was obvious how our apprenticeship group was forming a community and making connections that would last a lifetime. Since the course has ended, I have come to realize that we are part of an even greater community of green apprenticeship alumni. This

community extends around the world and connects hundreds of people who are now doing amazing things in their respective homes. Currently, an international alumni network is being established through which we will be able to look up where people are and get involved in each other’s projects when we travel. In my apprenticeship group alone, there were six countries represented.

I could have studied permaculture anywhere in the world in a variety of “convenient” ways. All of the courses teach the same theory and principles required to obtain a Permaculture Design Certificate. Living in the Bustan and being able to participate in what I was learning for six weeks was what made the green apprenticeship unique. Moving to Lotan, I did not know what to expect. I knew I would have fun, learn a lot, and play with mud. What I did not know was that the six weeks I spent doing the apprenticeship would turn out to be one of the most significant periods of my life. ■



Students at Courtney Rosser’s course apply a second coat of mud plaster to a bench they built using tires and trash as the structure.