

DAN AND WILMA WIENS



Dan and Wilma Wiens are SET entrepreneurs from Canada who have helped to change the way people around the world think about, grow, and consume food. Dan and Wilma were high school sweethearts who grew up in the city, and always had a strong interest in improving the world's relationship with food. While Wilma studied in Human Ecology, Dan earned a degree in agriculture. In the 1980s, shortly after they were married, they moved to Swaziland, where Dan helped local schools to improve the way they taught agriculture. Dan and Wilma soon realized that, in order to solve problems related to

the international food system, they would need to educate people to live more responsibly back home in Canada. It is ironic that people in so-called developed countries know so little about food systems; most cannot identify ten local

Soon Dan and Wilma had started a small-scale organic vegetable farm (about 3 acres/1 hectare), and sold their produce in a nearby farmers' market under a handwritten banner: "Organic Vegetables." At that time (the early 1990s), customers would come by and ask why their vegetables weren't cheaper than the neighboring vegetable stands (these customers failed to realize that cost savings from not using chemicals would be counter-balanced by increased labor costs for weeding).

Dan believed that there must be a better way to sell his veggies, so he assembled a group of friends and acquaintances to brainstorm ideas. They came up with a variation of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). CSA works like this: consumers (called "sharers") purchase, in advance, shares of a farm's harvest. The harvest is then distributed to the sharers as it ripens during the growing season, which is about 13 weeks long in the case of Dan and Wilma's farm.

A local newspaper ran a short story about Dan and Wilma's CSA, and within 24 hours the local telephone operators had received requests from over 200 people asking for their phone number. Soon their farm was fully subscribed and also had a waiting list of people wanting to become sharers. People were eager to support an idea that seemed right for the time.

Because sharers have gotten to know Dan and Wilma, and many volunteered to actually work on the farm, they have become trusted friends. After the first year of operation, Dan assembled some sharers, showed them the farm's financial statements, and asked them to set the share price for the next season. The sharers raised the price by 40%. Over the years the farm's harvest has been compromised due to the driest and the wettest summers on record. However, rather than complain about the lack of vegetables, some sharers anonymously gave their farmers some cash.

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Because Dan and Wilma use organic agronomic practices to grow their food, sharers know that the vegetables from their farm have not been sprayed with harmful chemicals. At the same time the quality of soil on the farm has been enriched, and each year as much as one-third of a tonne of carbon/hectare has been sequestered from the atmosphere and put into the soil. But their farm is not officially certified organic because, on a per hectare basis, it is much costlier for a small-scale farmer to pay the certification costs than it is for large-scale organic farmers.

The Wiens's model has spread. Some of Dan and Wilma's sharers have started their own CSAs. Dan has run educational workshops and mentored people around the country who want to start a CSA. Dan and Wilma made arrangements so that a nearby plot of land could be farmed by people from the inner-city, and encouraged the start-up of another farm operated by recent immigrants specializing in vegetables that are important in their heritage. One of the Wiens's children has taken over the farm operations. A daughter has started her own SET business: a bakery that features organic sourdough bread with local ingredients.

In the meanwhile, Dan has returned to international development work, where he has helped to raise millions of dollars to promote among thousands of the world's poorest 500 million small-scale farmers the kinds of Conservation Agriculture (CA) practices that he uses on his farm. CA helps farmers to double their agricultural productivity while enhancing the quality of their soil without external inputs (e.g., without fertilizers). Innovations like CA can be life-changing: about 70% of the world's 800 million chronically-malnourished people are from rural areas, and the negative externalities associated with global malnutrition have been estimated to be US\$3.5 trillion per year.