



## *Living Sustainably in Stelle*

FALL 2005

### INSIDE

Experiments with Okra .....	6
Fighting Plant Disease Without Chemicals .....	8
Corn That Creates Its Own Shade, Suppresses Weeds .....	10
Changes for ASAP .....	13
Calendar.....	15

by Debra Levey Larson

Nestled in the midst of Illinois farmland is a little 44-home subdivision known as Stelle (rhymes with *well*). It has been called a cult, a commune and a doomsday community, but according to those who live there today, it's none of the above. You might call Stelle an intentional, or alternative, community, and although about a third of the current residents share some general beliefs about the environment and what it means to be a neighbor, the philosophy isn't mandatory. Today, anyone who wants to buy a house in Stelle can. But it wasn't always that way.

#### **Stelle's Roots**

In the late 1960s a kind and soft-spoken man from Chicago named Richard Kieninger had an idea of building a community, a sort of utopia—although that word was never actually used. He founded the Stelle Group—a philosophical organization which grew to almost 1,000 people. One of their common beliefs was to tithe—give a tenth of your earnings. Over time, that grew to enough money to purchase a 240-acre farm in the early 1970s. From 1971 to 1973, volunteers from the Stelle Group drove down from Chicago on the weekends and built the town. Their goal was to bring the best and leave the worst, care about your neighbor and foster a love for lifelong learning. These original qualities are still present in Stelle today.

It was in 1982 that Kieninger decided what he'd created in Stelle wasn't working. He hand-picked about a third of the residents to start a new community in Texas, which never fully materialized before most participants left.

But the Stelle that Kieninger left behind survived. It opened itself to anyone who wanted to live there; only two of the original Stelle-ites still do. Currently there are 44 homes and 100 residents, which include 25 children. Fifteen more house lots are available before the community becomes land-bound. But the surrounding property is an organic farm, so that's in keeping with Stelle's unwritten philosophy of the earth.

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## ***Stelle, continued***

Bill Wilson, a long-time resident and occasional spokesperson for the community, tells the story of those early years of change: "In 1982, when a lot of people left Stelle, the rest of us sat down and asked, 'What are our goals now? What's our vision?' And the reality was that we just couldn't agree on a single vision. So over the years, Stelle became just a very nice place to live. About a third of the current residents are the most active—form committees, create community, serve on the Stelle Community Association Board, develop programs and are generally involved. About another third love living here but are pretty busy with their own lives. And then there's another third who appear to have little or no interest in community at all—we rarely see them."

Half of the adult citizens of Stelle are self-employed or work at a nearby picture-framing factory. The majority of the others work within a 35-mile radius, and a couple of residents even commute to Chicago.

### **Not a commune, but a community**

The Stelle community center looks like just another house on the street. Inside is a small living room with a bookshelf. Its shelves are filled with reading material on a broad range of topics, from caring for aging parents to how to protect your PC. In another part of the center are a kitchen and a large room filled with long banquet tables. Wilson says that one of the ways they have worked at building a sense of community is to have meals together. The Monday Night Dinner Cooperative was created by 12 Stelle families. Once every 12 weeks, one family cooks a meal for everyone else, and they share it together in the community center. The other 11 Mondays, they just come and enjoy dinner cooked for them.

The community center also hosts a mail room and a community bulletin board. "Sometimes people post a gripe or a thank you or a notice about a pesky raccoon getting into their shed," says Wilson. "For four or five days there was a \$5 bill tacked up there that someone had found."

"This is also the place where ideas are shared. One time someone put up a note asking if others might be interested in creating a community vegetable garden. About half the town showed up. Today the Stelle Community Garden Cooperative is still operating by its original guidelines: If you work a lot, take a lot; if you work a little, take a little. Eight years later, the system is working just fine, and there's no paperwork.

About 20 families belong to a tool cooperative. They each pay \$10 a year as a maintenance fee and can use the community log splitter, steam carpet cleaner, lawn mower, table saw and other tools. "I love the tool coop," says Wilson. "It's much more economical than all 20 families each owning all their own equipment."



*A sign greets visitors at the entrance to Stelle, a community of 44 homes southwest of Kankakee, Illinois.*



*Willow trees provide a canopy of shade over a foot path on the edge of town.*

About the various cooperative efforts in Stelle, Wilson says that nine times out of ten, a lot of structure is just not needed. “Many of us have learned that to encourage community the best things to do are to work together, eat together and play together.” The children find themselves in a safe and supportive environment, so they tend to run around in packs. “We lovingly refer to them ‘Stelle’s Angels,’ ” says Wilson. “Probably the best way to describe what it feels like to me to live in Stelle is to compare it to Andy Griffith’s Mayberry.”

### **Using state-of-the-art sustainability**

Like Mayberry, Stelle depicts a quiet, paved neighborhood lined with sidewalks and storm sewers, front yards dotted with lawn ornaments and bicycles left in a hurry. But the rooftops of many Stelle houses sprout something Andy never saw: solar panels. In fact, about a third of the homes in Stelle have active or passive solar systems, far more than in other midwestern subdivisions.

Wilson says that some in the solar industry have nicknamed Stelle the Solar Capital of the Midwest. “We’re at the end of the grid, so the power can be unreliable at times,” says Wilson. “The goal for many residents who use solar panels is to even out the power supply and to take less off the grid—maybe even give energy back.”

Spreading the solar story is one of Wilson’s missions as director of the Center for Sustainable Community, a nonprofit organization that was formed in 2002 when a handful of Stelle residents wanted to share some of what they had learned over the years about sustainable and community living. After operating the center on a shoestring for 18 months, in 2003 the group decided that they needed someone to energize their efforts full-time, and Wilson was hired for that role. The center hosts workshops on a variety of sustainability topics and gives tours of Stelle.

One tour stop is the town’s solar-powered telephone company, which also provides Stelle high-speed wireless Internet service. Another stop is a new home on the edge of town owned by Mark and Rhonda Wilkerson. Mark is the Midwest manager of SunWize Technologies, a solar distributor. With help from University of Illinois architect Brian Deal, the Wilkersons built their dream home, which is a

*continued on page 5*

*Solar panels on the roof of the building that houses Stelle’s solar-powered telephone company are raised about six inches to allow air to circulate under the panels.*





*Looking for frogs in the pond is a favorite activity of guests at the B & B.*

# *Listening to the Landscape*

Just down the road from Stelle is a beautifully kept two-story house surrounded by trees and a lush garden of vegetables and flowers. The Greenhouse Bed and Breakfast, owned and operated by Mark and Guia Hoffman, is affiliated with the Center for Sustainable Community—not for its guest rooms, but for the methods in permaculture being practiced on its grounds.

“Permaculture is one approach to sustainable agriculture,” says Deborah Cavanaugh-Grant, research specialist with the Agroecology/Sustainable Agriculture Program at the University of Illinois. “It



*A ring of garlic grows around the base of a fruit tree.*

aims to create a system that is economically viable, ecologically sound and socially responsible, but its underlying ethic is one of harmony with nature, abandoning the idea that humans have superiority over the natural world.”

As Mark Hoffman moves from one tree or shrub to another, he describes some of the ongoing experiments he and his wife Guia conduct on their property and the choices they’ve made through incorporating permaculture methods. It has resulted in some rather unusual landscaping. For example, around the base of each fruit tree, one or more vegetables are planted, and garlic grows in a ring around the pear tree to keep the borer population down. Mark says that although permaculture isn’t a method of organic gardening, similar principles come into play. If he and Guia

run into pest problems, they find natural ways like the garlic to deal with them rather than using chemicals.

Around a large cherry tree are planted three concentric circles—broccoli closest to the trunk, then cabbage, then asparagus. It’s another experiment. Mark has planted the ring of asparagus right at the “drip line” of the tree branches so that the asparagus sprouts will get more water than if they had been planted closer to the trunk, under the canopy. Mark likes these circular vegetable gardens because space is used more efficiently. What would otherwise stretch out to be a 50-foot garden strip fits compactly under the cherry tree.

Another tree sits in the center of a ring of oregano and eggplant. Mark liked the Italian theme of sorts. He finds enjoyment in the creativity and the experimentation of permaculture. One area smack in the middle of the front yard became a problem location, with nothing wanting to grow there. So the Hoffmans decided to “listen to the landscape” and created a water feature for that spot. With a small pathway leading past the new pond to an arbor with a bench, the frog-filled addition has become a favorite lingering spot for guests at the B&B.

Mark is deeply involved with the Center for Sustainable Community, which annually hosts permaculture workshops taught by the Hoffmans and other professionals. For more information on the Greenhouse Bed and Breakfast, visit <http://www.greenhousebed.com/>. 



*Bill Wilson introduces Mark Hoffman before touring the gardens that surround the Greenhouse B & B.*



*Mark Wilkerson points to solar panels on the rooftop of his newly constructed home in Stelle. His home was one stop on a tour hosted by the U of I Agroecology/Sustainable Agriculture Program.*

model of solar power and sustainability. The 30 batteries in the basement continually store enough power from the solar panels on the roof that the family could get through a winter on stored power.

### **Sustaining beliefs from a superstitious past**

Although founder Richard Kieninger held some fundamental humanitarian ideologies that are still respected in Stelle, he also was certain that the world as we know it would end on May 5, 2000. It was that belief that drove the original settlers to their new location and gave them the passion to build the community, but that same belief gave Stelle a reputation for being a “doomsday commune.” Though the end-time ideas left with Kieninger in 1982, the false reputation persists in the minds of a few. And it’s that earlier association that causes the road signs to Stelle to disappear. “Young people just like to steal them as a novelty, I guess,” says Wilson. “Almost every spring some high school kids will drive through town honking their horns and yelling, and they steal the road signs on their way to or from Stelle. These signs are probably decorating a college dorm room somewhere.”

So there are no road signs to guide the curious from the highway to Stelle. You just have to know which county road to turn onto. A running joke in the early days was that if you could find Stelle, you were meant to be there, Wilson says. And although Kieninger’s doomsday has come and gone, the citizens of Stelle continue to thrive, exploring new ways to live more sustainably every day. 🌱

For more information about Stelle and its efforts in sustainability, visit <http://www.centerforsustainablecommunity.org/>.