



RAISING THE STAKES

AGRIscapes Teaches Schoolchildren the Importance of Agriculture and Cultivates Future Leaders

By Dan Lee

A school bus rolls to a stop in the AGRIScapes parking lot at Cal Poly Pomona. The doors hiss open, and a horde of schoolchildren eagerly scramble off the bus and scamper to a barn where sheep and goats greet them.

It's the first stop on a field trip that will take them to a children's garden to learn about where fruits and vegetables come from, and then to a display of farm equipment that ranges from antique tractors to the latest drones.

This is the vision for AGRIScapes Center: A place where children and their parents discover agriculture and its connection to food and nutrition.

"There's a huge demand in the Los Angeles urban area for learning about and experiencing country life and agriculture," says AGRIScapes Director Craig Walters (78, plant and soil science). "We want to reach out and tap that interest, creating the next generation of College of Agriculture students and the leaders of the agricultural industry."

It's also a vision that Jim and Neta Hicks heartily support. Last spring, the couple generously donated \$800,000 to expand educational outreach programs at AGRIScapes, as well as to establish an endowment to support plant science and agribusiness students. At the time, it was the largest single outright gift to the College of Agriculture.

"We're pleased to be able to help the College of Agriculture. We depend on agriculture to provide our food, and we must not take that for granted," says Jim Hicks, a businessman and longtime supporter of the university and agricultural education. "We must continue

to educate the public on the importance of agriculture so that future generations will continue to have stable and sufficient food supplies."

The university created the 40-acre AGRIScapes in 2001 as a center to promote agricultural and environmental awareness through demonstrations of alternative methods to grow food, conserve water, reduce energy needs, and recycle agricultural and urban waste. It includes the Farm Store, greenhouses, hydroponic facilities, a children's garden, a petting farm and a 3,000-square-foot visitor center that is available for events.

"Research shows that if children get involved in a backyard garden, they're more likely to eat more fruits and vegetables," Walters says. "It's a critical habit to begin at a young age."

But AGRIScapes has reached the limits of its capacity, and the petting farm area can only accommodate 40 children at a time. Last year, more than 4,000 schoolchildren visited in October before and after the annual Pumpkin Festival. In all, about 6,000 children visit the center on field trips annually and learn about farming and food through hands-on demonstrations.

Walters and the College of Agriculture are reviewing the plans for AGRIScapes with an eye for using the Hicks' gift to expand the center's capacity and celebrate Southern California agriculture.

Among the ideas are building a barn for petting

farm animals, displays of antique and modern farm equipment, space for other exhibits and demonstrations, and upgrades to lighting, utilities and parking.

"With these additions, we can not only accommodate more people, but greatly enhance their experience," Walters says.

The vision includes promoting AGRIScapes as a facility that can accommodate not just school field trips, but also as a venue to host workshops and conferences for the public.

Part of the Hicks' gift also will create a student assistance endowment to provide financial support to plant science and agricultural business students for tuition, books housing and travel to internships.

"We're grateful for the Hicks' passion for agricultural education and their generosity for supporting our programs," says Mary Holz-Clause, dean of the College of Agriculture. "Their donation will go a long way toward raising up the next generations of leaders in agriculture."

Jim Hicks is the retired president and CEO of Jim Hicks & Co. in Brea, a wholesale distributor of commercial fertilizers for the Western United States and Mexico. He has served on the board of the California Ag in the Classroom program and was honored with the organization's Legacy Award.

Since 2009, Jim Hicks has donated to scholarships in the College of Agriculture and helped fund other improvements at AGRIScapes. Last year, he created the Jim Hicks International

Scholarship program, which has provided College of Agriculture students with internships in Asia and Africa.

"The Hicks' passion for bringing agriculture education to children is inspirational," Holz-Clause says. "This gift will significantly enhance AGRIScapes' ability to be a leader for outreach in Southern California."

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A group from the Cal Poly Pomona Children's Center touches worms in a composting box during a visit to AGRIScapes.