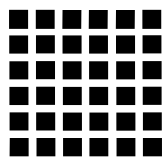
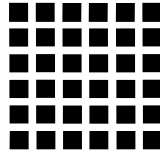




CHAR MARIE FLOOD

# Table For **Six Billion,** Please





# Judy Wicks On Her Plan To Change The World, One Restaurant At A Time

DAVID KUPFER

**In** 1983 Judy Wicks was living in a Philadelphia brownstone that she'd fought to save from mall developers in the 1970s — even committing civil disobedience at one point by lying down in front of a bulldozer. For ten years she'd been the manager and co-proprietor of Restaurant La Terrasse, but she wanted to own her own business, so she opened a neighborhood coffee-and-muffin shop on her brownstone's first floor, which allowed her the added benefit of being closer to her young children. Employees washed dishes in a sink in the corner of the dining room, and customers used a restroom upstairs in her home. The business took off, and Wicks turned it into a full-fledged restaurant, adding a kitchen in the basement and expanding into the brownstone next door. She called it the White Dog Cafe.

Since then, the White Dog Cafe has developed a national reputation for its award-winning fare and leadership in the local-food movement. Wicks buys all the restaurant's produce in season from local organic family farms, all its meat and poultry from humane sources, and all its seafood from sustainable fisheries. When purchasing products that must be imported, such as coffee, she follows the principles of fair trade. The White Dog's employees all earn a living wage (entry-level positions pay nine dollars an hour) and receive benefits such as health insurance, a matched retirement account, and paid holidays and vacations, a rare policy in the restaurant industry. A few years ago *Inc.* magazine named Wicks one of its favorite businesswomen, because she put into place "more

progressive business practices per square foot than any other entrepreneur."

Not satisfied with just running the restaurant according to her principles, Wicks has become a dedicated activist working to advance a greener, more sustainable economic system, with the ultimate goal of replacing corporate globalization with a worldwide network of local economies. She openly shares the secrets of the White Dog's success with other restaurants that want to serve local cuisine, and the cafe doubles as a center for community activism, hosting speakers, storytelling sessions, and film series. Through her international "sister-restaurant" project — in which the cafe nurtures relationships with restaurants around the globe — Wicks has brought her customers to Nicaragua, Cuba, Vietnam, Israel, and Palestine, where they learn about other cultures and the effects of U.S. foreign policy. She also runs another sister-restaurant program that promotes minority-owned restaurants in Philadelphia. Wicks is the mother of two, and her daughter directs the cafe's community programs.

A thirteenth-generation North American (her ancestors arrived here in 1635), Wicks grew up in the politically conservative town of Ingomar, Pennsylvania, about fifteen miles north of Pittsburgh, and attended a small women's college in the Midwest. In 1970, after a pivotal experience living in an Alaskan Eskimo village and working as a VISTA volunteer, she moved to Philadelphia at the age of twenty-three and cofounded her first

business, a clothing-and-housewares store for the under-thirty crowd, called the Free People's Store.

In addition to her for-profit endeavors, Wicks has founded two nonprofits — White Dog Community Enterprises, and the Sustainable Business Network of Greater Philadelphia — as well as cofounded the national Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE). Wicks defines a “living economy” as one that promotes healthy natural life and vibrant community life, while supporting long-term economic vitality. Community wealth and self-reliance are built, she says, by producing necessities — such as food, energy, and clothing — as locally as possible. Her integrity, articulateness, and vision have made her a leader, and she travels extensively to spread the gospel of localism to groups around the nation and world. She is currently working on a book about the living-economy movement, *Good Morning, Beautiful Business*, to be published by Chelsea Green in 2009. She is also coauthor of *The White Dog Cafe Cookbook* (Running Press).

In person, Wicks's enthusiasm and energy are impressive. Whether she's being candidly self-reflective or speaking passionately about localism, her pioneering character shines through.

**Kupfer:** What challenges have you faced as a woman in business?

**Wicks:** For the most part I think being a woman has helped me. The only time it was a barrier was when I was first managing a restaurant, back in 1974. I was only twenty-seven, and a lot of vendors wouldn't take me seriously. “Let me talk to the real boss,” they'd say, and I had to keep repeating, “I'm the boss.” Even now, once in a while, someone will ask me where my husband is. They just assume that because I'm a woman, I don't run the business by myself.

I've been a businesswoman my whole adult life. I started my first business, a store, when I was twenty-three. The thing about business is that you have to make ends meet; you can't just do whatever you want to do. So there's a certain grounding to it that I like. I've dabbled in nonprofit work, but it doesn't have the same energy. There's something about being able to make money doing what you love. I never had any interest in money growing up, but after I started a business, I took an evening class in accounting at the Wharton business school. I enjoyed learning about the balance sheet and the income statement. Women of my generation weren't encouraged to take business classes; they weren't even offered at the women's college I attended. Luckily for me, I had an instinct for how to come up with a product that people like.

**Kupfer:** The goal of traditional investment strategy is to maximize profits. Why are you working to change that?

**Wicks:** One reason that many people want a high return on their investment is that they're afraid of not having enough



JUDY WICKS

money when they're old. In indigenous societies, security in old age comes from the wealth of the community, not from individual income. If we felt secure in our communities, we wouldn't be afraid of how we might end up. But our society often does not include elderly people in the community. We marginalize them. It's no wonder we're all afraid of being old and penniless. What could be worse in our society?

The alternative to the stock market is investing your money in your own community so that you receive a modest financial return and also a “living return,” which is the benefit of living in a more sustainable local economy and a healthier community. I made the decision to take all my money out of the stock market and put it into Philadelphia's Reinvestment

Fund. I get a straight financial return of between 4.5 and 5.5 percent, and the money I invest also benefits my community. For instance, it helped to finance the wind turbines that produce the electricity the White Dog Cafe buys. Money invested in the stock market, on the other hand, is just taken out of the community.

We're taught that we're suckers if we don't make the highest profit or pay the lowest price. If you invest where you don't make as much money, then you're a loser. There's no thought given to the effect our financial decisions have on the long-term well-being of our communities.

**Kupfer:** Has the notion of a living return caught on?

**Wicks:** Many people have been moving their money into socially responsible investment funds, which avoid investing in businesses that damage the environment and exploit workers. It was originally thought that you would get less return from these screened funds, but it hasn't turned out that way, which shows that sustainable companies can be profitable. I see this as a first step toward community reinvestment, because it shows a growing mindfulness about the effects of investing. Community reinvestment is growing — the Reinvestment Fund in Philadelphia is constantly getting new investors — but not every city or town has such a financial vehicle. We need more local banks, credit unions, and funds that keep our investments in our community.

**Kupfer:** So far community reinvestment does mean lower returns. How do you convince people that it's in their best interest to accept less financial gain in exchange for this living return?

**Wicks:** Investing in your community *is* in your self-interest. You're investing in businesses that don't pollute the air you breathe, and clean air is as much a benefit as monetary payback. I believe I get a more reliable return on my investments this way, because sometimes the stock market loses money. I feel confident that I'll come out better in the long run than my friends who have invested in the stock market, and at the same time, I'll be benefiting my community. So it's not necessarily a sacrifice to invest locally and responsibly.

## Helping every region achieve food security, energy security, and water security builds the foundation for world peace. Self-reliant societies are less likely to start wars than those dependent on long-distance shipments of oil, water, or food.

Also we should invest in enterprises we want to see grow. Do we want businesses that are beneficial to life, or ones that are harmful?

If your community does not have a reinvestment fund, you can put your money into a credit union or local bank, or invest in funds that benefit other communities around the world; they often let you earmark your investment for a particular region.

**Kupfer:** Is the movement for local economies connected to the antiwar movement?

**Wicks:** In a way. Wars are often fought over access to basic needs like energy, food, and water. Helping every region achieve food security, energy security, and water security builds the foundation for world peace. Self-reliant societies are less likely to start wars than those dependent on long-distance shipments of oil, water, or food.

I once had a dream of going into a restaurant and instead of asking for a table for two, I said, "Table for 5 billion, please." Now it's 6 billion and growing. That dream was a vision of a world where everyone has a place at the table, politically and economically, and enough to eat. We can accomplish this not through economic and military domination, but by communication and understanding. My dream was the inspiration for our sister-restaurant program, which I started in the 1980s with a trip to Nicaragua. The United States was fueling the civil war there by arming the Contra rebels against the left-wing Sandinista government. I wasn't sure how I felt about what was going on. President Reagan was calling the Contras "freedom fighters" and the Sandinistas "communists." I was very anticommunist. I come from a small-town Republican family and grew up thinking that we are the good guys and the communists are the bad guys. The Vietnam War had caused me to question that, but I had faith that Vietnam was just an aberration.

When I went down to Nicaragua with a group of my customers and saw what the Contras were up to, I was heartbroken. I met a woman whose nine-year-old son had been killed when his school had been hit with a U.S.-made rocket, and another

whose daughter had been kidnapped by the Contras to work as a slave. On the way home, I was switching planes in Miami, Florida, and I saw headlines about people wanting Ollie North to run for president. This was during the Iran-Contra scandal, and North, a marine lieutenant colonel and Reagan-administration official, was accused of selling arms illegally to Iranians and using the proceeds to help fund the Contras. I just couldn't believe it. I sat down and started crying. I wasn't crying for the Nicaraguans. I was crying for the United States. I was crying for the loss of the country I'd loved. I realized then that the U.S. government was in Central America for the same reason we'd

been in Southeast Asia: to protect corporate access to cheap labor and natural resources. We say we're spreading democracy and freedom, but it's just the opposite.

At that point I committed myself to helping other Americans understand the motives behind our country's foreign policy. We have brought the White Dog's customers to Vietnam, Cuba, the Soviet Union, El Salvador, and Mexico. Our nickname for the program is "Eating with the Enemy." We've dined with the Viet Cong and the Sandinistas and the Zapatistas and the Palestinians. When you sit down at the table together and recognize the other's humanity, it makes you wonder why you ever saw them as an enemy.

**Kupfer:** What exactly is a "local living economy"?

**Wicks:** It's an economy in which basic needs are produced close to home in ways that are sustainable and don't harm the environment. This requires a cooperative mentality, because there's no such thing as a stand-alone sustainable business — it must be part of a sustainable system. Individuals, or individual businesses, can't provide for all our basic needs by themselves. We need a local food system, a local energy system, local clothing manufacturing, and green building methods. In the face of climate change and peak oil, our survival depends on community self-reliance.

In local living economies, goods we can't produce at home, such as coffee or sugar or bananas, are traded for fairly, so that the exchange benefits both our community and the community where those products originate. We can still have a global economy, but it will be a network of thousands of sustainable local economies that trade in products that improve our quality of life. If we create products that are unique to our region — whether it's a style of clothing, a type of cheese or wine, or a unique invention — they'll be sought after in the global marketplace. So this movement is not anti-trade or antiglobalization; it's about creating security at home and not depending on foreign trade for our basic needs.

**Kupfer:** Your work seems centered around community development.

**Wicks:** It's certainly what the White Dog Cafe is all about. Ultimately, everything I do — whether it's international or local — is aimed at building community. Business relationships were once the basis of our communities. I grew up in a small town where you knew all your local merchants and everybody hung out down at the drugstore. After my dad retired, he used to go down there every morning. On Saturdays, the men in our town would sit on the front steps of the local hardware store, before it was torn down. And at the local butcher shop, the butcher would ask my grandmother and mother, "How was your turkey on Thanksgiving?" or, "How was that steak last Saturday night?" My parents had direct relationships with local businesspeople. But that became lost over time. I can remember when the mall was built between Pittsburgh and my small town. It was one of the first malls in the country. When I was a teenager it was a big deal to walk around the mall, and we thought the chain stores were cool.

**Kupfer:** Back then, mall development seemed like progress.

**Wicks:** Yes, but that's not the case now. In fact, I think there's a longing for those community business relationships. Through our Sustainable Business Network in Philadelphia, we're re-creating that feeling of community and trust that I felt growing up in my hometown.

**Kupfer:** What did you learn from living with Eskimo villagers as a VISTA volunteer back in 1969?

**Wicks:** The most important lesson was the indigenous philosophy of interconnectedness: how the survival of the individual depends on the survival of the whole group. This promotes cooperation and sharing.

I was also impressed with the natives' resourcefulness and ingenuity, how every little scrap was saved and used in some way. When I went fishing with some Eskimo women, they made hooks out of safety pins and used fish eyeballs as bait. I saw an Eskimo man take apart a motor and put all the parts on the snow. Once he'd found the part that was broken, he fashioned a replacement out of bone, because he didn't have access to a new part.

The other thing that struck me was the impact of our culture on the indigenous people who had never been out of the area. Watching Hollywood movies had caused many to feel ashamed of their own way of life. Once, my grandmother mailed me a package, and some teenage Eskimo girls came home with me to see what was in the box. I opened it and lifted out a pair of shiny pink satin slippers. The girls all oohed and aahed, but I said, "I can't wear these here," and I put them aside. The girls looked disappointed. I think they thought I meant that they didn't have a nice-enough place for me to wear the shoes — that their village wasn't good enough for the pretty slippers. I felt just the opposite: I admired their way of life and was embarrassed by my own culture. But it's hard to convince people who haven't had luxuries that they're better off without them.

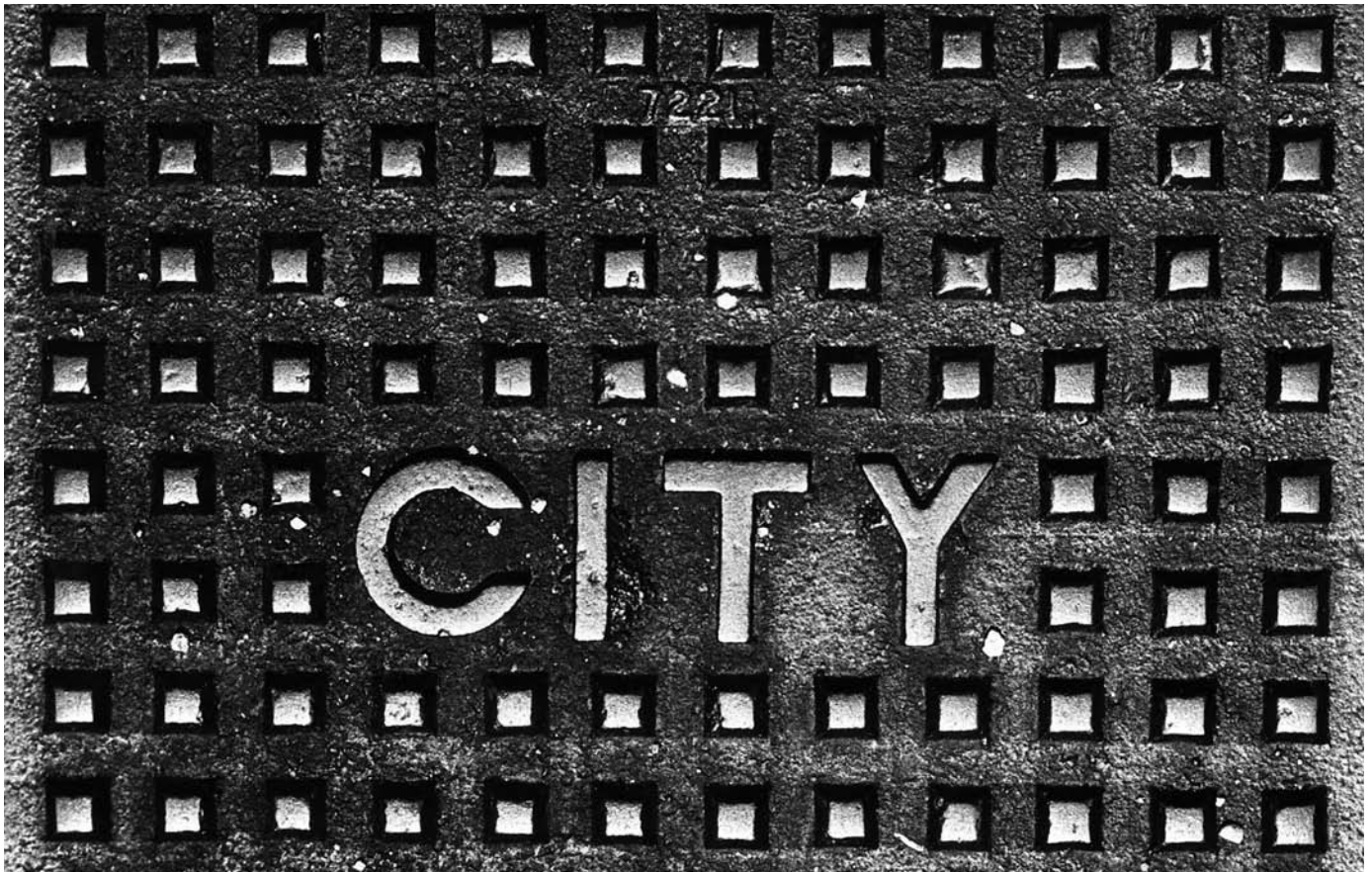
**I'm still conditioned to consume; it's a struggle for me to act mindfully and not compulsively in areas like eating, drinking, and shopping. For all my social organizing and trying to bring about change in the business world, it's easy to forget that real change begins with changing oneself.**

While I was there, I saw a materialistic way of life coming to the village, and there was nothing I could do to stop it, because it was so seductive. I saw the same thing years later when I traveled to the Soviet Union for the first time. The Soviets would display the wrappers from store-bought goods in their china cupboards; they had so little that they even adored the packaging. Many of the changes that occurred in the Soviet Union came from their desire to have not our freedoms but our stuff.

The question is: Can we warn people in developing countries, or do they have the right to spend and accumulate and waste as we have until they have an awakening about how consumerism hurts the earth? (Not that we have had such an awakening yet in our own culture.) The Chinese and the Indians want cars. But if they get them — and big houses, and fashions, and so on — it will have a catastrophic effect on the environment.

**Kupfer:** How has that experience in Alaska affected your work today as an activist and businesswoman?

**Wicks:** It helped me see that a sustainable economy, which the Eskimos have had for thousands of years, is based on sharing and cooperation. The business world needs to move away from a mentality of accumulation and competition. I'm working through BALLE to build a new economy that's mindful of



the consequences our business decisions have on other people and the environment.

It also made me realize how seductive consumerism is. The lifestyle of the young people in the Eskimo village — particularly the girls — was changing before my eyes from a sustainable one to a wasteful, consumer-based one. Living in their village made me realize how much women in our society — including me — are affected by advertisements and TV; how we're made to feel we're not good enough, not feminine enough. We all buy things to make us feel more beautiful, if we're women, or more handsome and powerful, if we're men.

I'm trying to change my own consumer behavior. Just today I was at a conference, and there was a woman selling beautiful silk tops. I thought, *I bet I'd look really good in this*. Then I found out they were made in China. In my mind the old argument played out: *I would look great in this versus This is made in China. I don't even need it. My closet is full*. I realized that I'm still conditioned to consume; it's a struggle for me to act mindfully and not compulsively in areas like eating, drinking, and shopping. For all my social organizing and trying to bring about change in the business world, it's easy to forget that real change begins with changing oneself.

**Kupfer:** Your restaurant has become quite an educational force. What inspires this?

**Wicks:** When I see an interesting project in our community, I want my customers to know about it. For instance, I was driving around the city and saw these incredible outdoor murals, so I found out who was responsible for them, and I organized a tour to show my customers how these murals were beautifying the community. If I see someone who's showing leadership in the arts or civil rights or public education, I bring them to the White Dog and feature them in a program. People who come to the events then become supporters of the organization we are featuring.

We also travel to other parts of the country, or the world. There was a shy legal assistant who came with me to Vietnam, and the experience changed her life. She's gone back there ten times and works with a Vietnamese orphanage. Somebody I brought to Cuba now works to help Cubans develop their economy. After Hurricane Katrina, we took a group of customers down to New Orleans to help rebuild, and some of them have stayed in touch with families there.

It's hard for people to break out of their own neighborhoods, where they feel safe. We have a program in which we establish sister relationships with minority-owned restaurants in low-income areas of Philadelphia. We take our customers, who are mostly suburbanites and center-city people, to those neighborhoods for a meal and a cultural event. The first time

## Corporations today are controlling our lives the same way the British controlled life in India, and I'm basically using Gandhi's methods to fight them. His vision was that a self-reliant population could throw off British rule nonviolently. So he advised people to grow their own food and make their own clothes.

we did it, we planned to go to an art opening at a Puerto Rican art center and then to dinner at a Puerto Rican-owned restaurant, followed by dancing at a Latino nightclub. Right before we went, the newspaper published a city map with black dots on high-crime neighborhoods, and there was a dot right on the corner where our sister restaurant was. The paper called the area the "Badlands" and said it had the worst drug trafficking in the whole city. Worried that no one would come to the "Badlands" for dinner, we held a program at the White Dog called "The Good People of the Badlands," and we invited community leaders from that neighborhood to come and talk about all the positive things that were happening there. Our dinner in the Badlands was sold out, and we went back every year for three years. Once my customers found out that they could go there and not get shot, they were more likely to go back for dinner on their own. It's about breaking down barriers and stereotypes.

**Kupfer:** You've been a part of the socially responsible business movement almost from the beginning. Did alarm bells go off for you after Ben & Jerry's ice cream was bought out by the Unilever Corporation?

**Wicks:** Yes, I had always looked to Ben & Jerry's as an example. It was from Ben & Jerry's that I first heard about a "living wage": the concept that an employer would voluntarily commit to paying the wage that workers actually needed to live in that community. And it was Ben & Jerry's that came up with the concept of "multiple bottom lines," which measures success not just by the amount of profit, but by the positive impact on society.

When Ben & Jerry's was bought by a multinational, it was a wake-up call for me. Of course, Jerry and Ben did not want to see their business compromised this way. It was a forced buyout. They were heartbroken to lose the company.

**Kupfer:** How was it forced?

**Wicks:** Because Ben & Jerry's is publicly traded, by law the company had to make decisions that were in the financial

interest of its stockholders. If a buyer is offering more than your stock is worth on the market and you don't sell, you'll be sued by your shareholders. Ben and Jerry tried to get around it. Vermont even passed a law saying that businesses incorporated in Vermont had the right to make decisions that favor other stakeholders, such as employees, customers, and suppliers. But that wouldn't hold up in federal court, where the old law still governs publicly traded companies.

The buyout showed the dangers of defining success as continual growth. Ben & Jerry's grew so big it became a target for corporate raiders. We have to change our definition of success and show that we don't have to grow in size to be successful.

We can grow deeper roots in our community. We can grow by expanding our knowledge and consciousness, developing our creativity, deepening relationships, and having more fun. Rather than starting a chain of White Dogs, I've tried to make our one restaurant a special place. Rather than spreading my brand, I've tried to teach my business model to others.

It used to be that when I saw a Ben & Jerry's or a Body Shop, I would think, *Oh, a little oasis of hope and goodness*. Now when I see a Ben & Jerry's, I feel almost the same way I do about any chain. I'd rather see a locally owned ice-cream store, especially if they are using local milk from grass-fed cows.

When we talk about local economies, it's important to recognize the co-optation of the word *local*. Wal-Mart is threatened enough by the buy-local movement that its ads now say, "Shop at your *local* Wal-Mart," and they refer to themselves as "*your town's* Wal-Mart."

**Kupfer:** After your restaurant became such a success by offering fresh, locally produced food, you decided to share the lessons you'd learned with your competition, to encourage them to buy local too. What was the reaction?

**Wicks:** There was a real sense of gratitude. Sharing our knowledge of how to buy directly from farmers has bred generosity and a more cooperative spirit among Philadelphia restaurateurs and promoted the idea that we are all part of the same local food system. Obviously people aren't going to eat out at the same place every night. They're going to go to different places. So it's more about raising the quality of the food in our whole city, putting Philadelphia on the map as a restaurant town. In the end that helps us all and is much more satisfying to me than running just a successful restaurant myself.

**Kupfer:** You've also financially sponsored community self-reliance projects in other communities.

**Wicks:** Yes, the first loan we gave was twenty thousand dollars to finance a coffee harvest in the Zapatista Autonomous Zone in Chiapas, Mexico. Another time I loaned thirty thousand dollars to a Pennsylvania farmer who needed a

refrigerated truck to deliver pastured pork and other products to restaurants in town. This raised the demand for pastured pork, so White Dog Community Enterprises got a fifty-thousand-dollar grant to assist four pig farmers who wanted either to expand their pastured herds or to transition from indoor production to pastured production.

By helping these pig farmers, and the coffee cooperative, and the farmer making deliveries, I was supporting the system of which I am a part. I'm also not funding something far off that I don't really understand. There's true transparency in a local system.

**Kupfer:** When Mahatma Gandhi fought British tyranny in India in the 1940s, he emphasized the need for Indians to produce food and other products locally.

**Wicks:** Exactly. Corporations today are controlling our lives the same way the British controlled life in India, and I'm basically using Gandhi's methods to fight them. His vision was that a self-reliant population could throw off British rule nonviolently. So he advised people to grow their own food and make their own clothes. That's why you see photos of him behind a spinning wheel, because he tried to teach the Indian people that, rather than send the raw materials to Britain to be made into clothing, they could make their own homespun clothes, which he always wore. The Indian people had gotten themselves into a situation of reliance on the British, who had turned all the family farms into plantations to grow cotton or flax or bananas for export.

The U.S. did the same thing to Cuba: turned the whole island into farms producing sugar and beef and tobacco for export, so that there were no community farms left. In India millions died of starvation, and Cuba almost experienced famine when the Soviet Union collapsed. To survive they beat their swords into plowshares, training soldiers to become farmers. In fact, everyone became a farmer — at least, part time — even doctors, and they turned every inch of available land into gardens. I went to Cuba five times during that period, and it was amazing to see the community gardens. One time I brought along an organic farmer from Pennsylvania, and he told me how amazed he was that the Cubans had such advanced organic-farming methods. They were organic by accident, because they couldn't afford petroleum-based fertilizers and chemicals, or even gasoline to run tractors. But now they're ahead of the curve when it comes to reducing dependency on oil and building a healthy, self-reliant food system.

**Kupfer:** Do you think your contemporaries from the countercultural movements of the sixties have reassessed their relationship to money?

**Wicks:** Yes, I know I have. The first business that I started, in 1970, was the Free People's Store. We thought that the Vietnam War was being fought to protect U.S. business interests, and we didn't want to be part of that. So we said that our store was "nonprofit." We didn't have legal nonprofit status, but we were committed to not taking a profit to enhance our bank accounts. We took only what we needed to live on. We even had a free bin in the store, filled with donated clothes and other items for people who didn't have any money.

As a generation, I think that we've certainly overcome — if you will — the idea that profit is evil, to the point where a lot of us have embraced what we opposed back then. I, myself, have come to understand that *profit* is not a dirty word. It's necessary to keep a business alive, and you can use profits in ways that are beneficial to the community.

I think what needs to happen for real social change to occur is to have two generations in a row that share a desire to change society. We didn't have that with our parents, who were relatively content at having survived the Depression and World War II. But the Vietnam War and the civil-rights movement gave our generation a longing for peace and justice, and many of us have passed that along to our children, who are now having children. I think the number of people who want peace is growing with each generation. Looking back, during the Vietnam War, there were few people of our parents' generation out there protesting. But these days you'll see three generations protesting the war in Iraq.

**Kupfer:** Have you noticed a rise in the number of people consciously trying to reduce their carbon footprint?

**Wicks:** It is growing, but not fast enough. You hear more lately about the concept of "food miles" — how far food travels to get to your plate. To most people fewer food miles just means that it's fresher, but others are starting to make the connection to carbon emissions, though I don't think that's the primary reason people buy local. I think the local-food movement is more concerned with nutrition and community connection: people want to meet the farmers who grow their food, and they know that local food tastes better and is healthier and more nutritious. Food that's shipped many miles is engineered to have a long shelf life and bred for conformity of shape and size and color; unfortunately taste and nutritional value are lost.

**Kupfer:** The *New Yorker* recently ran an article citing evidence that apples flown from New Zealand to England actually have a smaller carbon footprint than locally grown English apples, because the climate in New Zealand is better suited to farming apples. And beans imported from Kenya have a smaller carbon footprint than European beans, because farmers use fewer petroleum products in Kenya. How do we balance the many environmental costs when determining which apples or beans to buy?

**Wicks:** I believe it is always better to buy local. The cost of oil will continue to rise, and climate change is bringing different weather conditions everywhere, so the future is unsure. What if Africa has a severe drought and produces no beans, or the beans produced there are needed by Africans? It's critical for each region to develop local food security and be self-reliant rather than depend for survival on food transported long distances. Each region should be continually developing better agricultural methods appropriate to its own climate. And by buying local, consumers strengthen their local food system rather than send capital elsewhere.

**Kupfer:** Is there a danger of isolationism if too much emphasis is placed on self-supporting localities? Could self-sufficiency undermine feelings of interconnectedness?

**Wicks:** I don't think the corporate-controlled global



THOMAS HYDE

economy gives us a feeling of interconnectedness. I see it as largely based on exploitation, which is just the opposite. Some of the world's people — like us — take much more than their share of the world's resources, while others barely survive. We should be moving toward a more reciprocal system based on fair trade. I don't think we can trust the current system to make sure everyone has enough. Just look at the current global food crisis. In some parts of the world, people are going hungry because they can't afford to pay the rising prices in the global marketplace. These are often countries that once had plenty of locally grown rice to feed their own people. But that was before U.S. corporate rice farmers put them out of business. The U.S. and EU governments subsidize large corporations that grow commodity crops like corn, wheat, rice, soybeans, and cotton. This allows those companies to dump their products on the market at below the cost of production, putting local farmers out of business and making the world's people dependent on imports, with no control over price or quality.

There are many goods the people of the world can trade in besides crops that can be grown most anywhere. We can develop a feeling of interconnectedness through exchanging

art and music, ideas and culture, and by getting to know each other as human beings rather than as producers and consumers. We can trade in what is culturally unique to our region. These products bring a greater sense of interconnection than beans and potatoes.

**Kupfer:** Where are we today in the history of the local-economy movement?

**Wicks:** Near the beginning, but it's growing fast. I think it's logical that the movement start with food, because that's what we buy the most, and it's so easy to understand why we should buy local food. Energy is the next thing that has to become local, because we can't keep fighting wars over oil. I think clothing is going to take longer, because it's costly and complicated to make fabric, and it's not something we use up every day like food and energy. When the time comes, White Dog Enterprises would like to start Fair Fiber, a clothing counterpart to our Fair Food project. It's "farm to back" instead of "farm to table." We hope to experiment with a small-scale project that grows fiber crops, turns them into fabric, and then makes the clothes. I know nothing about making clothes, so it's all new for me. I find it absurd that the native fiber crop

an employee putting in one screw over and over again. In the slaughterhouse, the fast-food chains, and the industrial farms people are just cogs in the machine. One aspect of the local economy is that workers have more-enjoyable, more-meaningful employment.

**Kupfer:** Given that the U.S. economy could be upset even more at any moment, isn't local self-sufficiency paramount to our survival?

**Wicks:** Absolutely. A lot of people feel that the stock market is going to crash and that the U.S. infrastructure is falling apart, partly because we're spending all our money on war instead of things like bridges and a healthcare system for all. And I think when the crash comes, there's going to be a panic. What we're doing now in the local movement is building the infrastructure before the panic, whether it's caused by the collapse of our economy or by global warming.

Most crises push people to find security in community. There's a "we're all in this together" spirit during hard times,

and the instinct is to shore up the home base and seek control over basic needs. The recent food scares — such as tainted meat, tomatoes, and spinach — are causing people to want more transparency in food production, which is possible only when food is produced locally. Industrialization has led us far from community self-reliance, but I think we have enough sense left to embrace the concept in the face of adversity. When times get tough, some people will panic and compete and hoard resources, but hopefully the crisis will bring out the better angels in most, and we'll recognize that our

survival depends on cooperation.

**Kupfer:** Is there any way to build the movement without cynically hoping for a disaster that forces people to change their ways?

**Wicks:** People tend not to change if they feel comfortable and satisfied, but the truth is that we are not satisfied in a spiritual and emotional way. Studies show that Americans are less happy now than they were in the fifties. I think going local and sustainable is part of the pursuit of happiness. We have a craving for community. We want relationships with the butcher and the baker and the farmer who grows our food and the person who makes our clothes. As I said, there is no such thing as one sustainable household or business; it's about being part of a community. Sustainability requires working together toward a common goal, and there is joy in doing that. If more people realized this, I think they'd get on board. Nevertheless, it will take a disaster to change some people's behavior. I just hope that, as climate change makes life harder and harder and the price of transportation gets higher and higher, those of us who are working now to build sustainable local systems can provide an example that others will follow. ■

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of our region is outlawed. I would like to sue for our right to grow hemp, or nonpsychoactive cannabis. In colonial times all of the clothes were made from hemp. There's even a town in Pennsylvania called Hempville.

One of the hardest things to become self-reliant in is going to be transportation, because we're not in a position to manufacture cars locally.

**Kupfer:** But you've predicted that vehicles will someday be customized to each region.

**Wicks:** Right, because the type of car that would run best in Arizona, with the dust and the sand, might be very different from the ideal car in Vermont, with the hills and cold weather. I like the idea of having workshops where maybe a few artisans would put a whole car together, instead of working on assembly lines. It could be fun to make cars. And if we scaled down by using public transportation, bicycles, and shared cars, and lived in walkable communities, we wouldn't need that many of them. Jobs could be more meaningful if we moved away from the industrial cookie-cutter approach and broke it down into small companies, where there's more employee ownership and a more holistic vision of what you're building, instead of