

COMMUNITY VOICES

An Interview of Mary MacLean



Mary MacLean is a community developer and Project Manager of Fas Fallain (Gaelic for “Grow Healthy”). She works with great passion to bring better health to the Scottish island and region where she was born and raised. In part she’s doing this by helping islanders relearn farming skills and traditions that have been lost in past decades. I interviewed her at the 2004 annual meeting that The Network: TUFH held in cooperation with Community Campus Partnership for Health in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. This article is an edited, abridged version of that interview.

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You are Project Manager of Fas Fallain. What is this organization?

It’s a 3-year initiative aimed at encouraging healthy eating and the provision of fresh locally produced foodstuffs throughout the Western Isles of Scotland. We assist individuals and communities in growing their own food and generating income by selling their surpluses to local shops and a network of local produce outdoor markets. Among other things, we work with groups on how to have healthy eating on a low income.

Years ago the Western Islands of Scotland were self-sustaining, but then people moved away from their crofting (small farming) traditions. When I was a little girl we lived on my paternal grandmother’s croft while my Dad built our house on his croft. Like other families we planted potatoes, root vegetables, cabbage, carrots, corn, and foodstuff for our animals. We had cattle, sheep, chickens, ducks, dogs, and cats. The cattle provided milk and butter. The meat from the animals was salted because we didn’t have fridges (refrigerators). There was an abundance of fish, like herring. There were many beautiful fishing boats. Everyone could get enough to eat. We even harvested our own fuel. Once a year we would get together to cut the peat. It was like a celebration.

Men supplemented the family income by working with the merchant navy and doing other work. My father had a mobile butcher's van, and he worked the croft.

Then the island changed, and traditional skills weren't passed on. Supermarkets and fridges came on the island. You could go to town and buy pre-packed vegetables off the shelf. Not much thought was given to where the vegetables came from, how they were transported, and how many vitamins were lost in the process. People felt it was a luxury to eat this food and not have to work in the fields like their parents had done in the past. People stopped growing, and growing became associated with poverty.

What about the fishing?

In the late 1960s, fishing changed. Huge trawlers from Spain and elsewhere moved into the area. People became greedy. Fish stocks became really low. Now low-income people can't afford to buy fish. Local fishermen get more money selling shellfish, prawns and scallops to Spain than selling them locally.

During my teen years, particularly in the early 1970s, men began working on oil rigs. My own son-in-law works on an oil rig in the North Sea. The majority of the men hate the work, but money is the attraction.

What did you do as a young woman?

I left the island to work. I came back with two daughters. I had various jobs and then got my degree at a late stage. I desperately wanted work but jobs were hard to find. I trained as a volunteer counselor with Family Mediation Western Isles. I worked with them and have continued to support them. My experiences with Family Mediation have proved invaluable in all my work to-date and certainly help with my present community development role.

How did you become a community developer?

I always had a strong belief that if things were going to change, the change had to come from us – the community. I found out that the Health Promotion Department of the Western Isles (National Health Service Board) had carried out a community-run assessment. Respondents said they wanted a worker based in the middle of the community, but so far they didn't have one.

I gave my CV to the department. I met with them and offered to work voluntarily. A health promotions student and I did a health needs update. Among other things the community said they wanted employment, childcare, and healthy fresh produce.

We were given a small building next to the Cearns Housing Scheme, which is the largest social housing area in the Western Isles. The building was filled with boxes. In four weeks we converted it into a resource center with an office and meeting room. We got the community interested and set up the Cearns Community Development Project. The community runs the project. Voting rights belong to them. We invited representatives from various agencies to

serve in an advisory capacity. We were a bit manipulative because we wanted to be able to tap into the agencies' sources of funding.

We took on the parent-baby group, which was already in existence, and called it The Little Ducklings. We found that many of the moms were intimidated when some weeks after the birth of their child, a health worker came to their house. The moms also felt threatened by going to a clinic. So we encouraged health visitors to come to the meetings of the Little Ducklings. The visitors built trust with parents. Parents became more confident and started asking questions of health visitors.

The Cearns Apples and Pears Women's Healthy Eating Group was formed. It's a diverse group that includes lone parents, full-time career ladies as well as unemployed ladies and older residents. They're all interested in food and health and have addressed issues, such as weight awareness, diet, and budgeting. The group developed a business plan that was successful in its bid for the franchise of a healthy eating café situated in a large new sports complex in Stornoway on our Isle of Lewis. The group's vision is a healthy eating establishment that will focus on health rather than profit. It will also provide employment and training for members of the group who would otherwise be unable to work. The Apples and Pears also want to set up a childcare facility in the sports complex. This will respond to the community's need for good childcare, and it will provide more training and employment.

Another group is the Spring Chickens – a group of elderly people who meet every fortnight and plan activities and fundraising events. They are a dynamic group who support each other and also share their wealth of knowledge with younger members of the community. This group does not view age as a barrier to leading a full, exciting life.

Our resource center was (and still is) right next to the community shop. After people shopped, they popped into our office. They made more and more requests of us. They'd say, "We'd like this or that. Is there any way it can be arranged?" This is how events were arranged.

In response to their request for more information on healthy eating, we invited dieticians and local chefs to participate in healthy eating events that have included health eating information workshops run in conjunction with the Western Isles National Health Service Board Dietetics Department. Local chefs have also coordinated themed cookery events on topics, such as cooking with local shellfish, vegetarian cooking, Asian cooking and healthy eating on a budget. These events, which were held in a variety of indoor and outdoor locations, were free to the general public.

The community realized that if we wanted healthy food, we should grow our own food again. They said they wanted to grow soft fruits, like strawberries, and other fruits and vegetables that cost a lot. They also said they wanted to sell this produce at the local shop at prices that people with low incomes could afford. I contacted the Scottish Community Diet Project in Glasgow because I

heard they gave out funds for growing projects. We were successful. We used matching funds from local agencies to erect polytunnels – plastic greenhouses.

Who developed and tended the gardens?

Initially all the workers in the “Grow Our Own” project were volunteers and included men with drug and alcohol problems. In the future, we’ll have people from the acute psychiatric unit. Now we have one full-time horticultural worker – a man in his late 40s, who had been out of work for a long time. When I first met him, his confidence was very low. However, now he’s doing a wonderful job. Many people visit the polytunnels to learn from him and the others. This gives all the workers a sense of pride. Politicians have made site visits and have been impressed with the level of commitment.

We use local horticultural experts to train people who work in the polytunnels and to train other individuals and groups. We’ve also turned to the Scottish Agricultural College for their help. We try to arrange for whatever training people require and request. Some people want basic digging courses. We also have more complicated courses, such as a berry growing course for people who want to supplement their income. This course includes training in husbandry of soft fruits, growing techniques, shelter, soil and nutrition.

We had a workshop on a plot of land at the local primary school. Some residents got training. The school benefited. So did the teachers and students. We provided the seeds for a garden on the school grounds. The community has been taking care of the garden. When it comes time to lift (harvest) the crops, we want to use the produce in the school canteens (dining rooms) so that children can see the progress of food from the ground to the table. I feel strongly that the younger we target the children the better. They are the future of the island.

What kind of involvement have health professions students had in the various projects?

The University of Highlands and Islands and Sterling University train nurses. Nurses spend 50% of their time in Stornaway on our island. They use me as health promotion trainer. I tutor community development. For part of my sessions, I always take the nursing students into the community. The students love being in the community, so I’m hoping that in the future all of my sessions can be in the community. Nursing students always come back and ask questions as part of their assessment.

If any student who comes to the island doesn’t have a passion for the people and their issues, then forget it. It wouldn’t be fair to the student or to the community. You have to believe in what you’re doing. Otherwise you can’t be successful.

I’m not sure if nurses have any diversity training. I hope we can offer a class very soon. Refugees are coming to our islands. We’re becoming a multicultural island with people from the Ukraine, Pakistan, and Asia. I feel passionately

about wanting to avoid the resentment that happened on mainland Scotland when refugees arrived. No one explained who these refugees were or why they had come. They were put in housing blocks (projects). Then trouble began.

Two years ago I began talking to minority families on the islands about their issues. Pakistani community members say that being in the hospital can be a problem because the staff do not understand their cultural needs. For example, they said that nurses aren't aware that Muslims need to pray five times a day. There are stories of Pakistani patients who were taken to the theater (operating room) at a time when they had to pray. No one understood why these patients got very anxious. The patients also needed a jug of water to wash before prayer.

We're using food as a strategy for getting in touch with minority communities. Food is friendly and not threatening. We asked members of the minority communities to use their cultural perspective in doing healthy eating demonstrations for the entire community. As part of this, Asians and others cook their own foods in front of an audience. This has been tremendously successful. During the demonstrations, helpful conversations take place between minority community members and the rest of the community. This builds bridges.

What a good idea. Other communities in the world are likely to also benefit from using food as a way of bringing people together.

In the midst of your busy schedule do you possibly find time for any other teaching?

I help teach a course in health issues in the community. We focus on capacity building, community development, and other issues. The course is accredited through Edinburgh University. It is open to student nurses, housing officers, and all community members. The health promotions department covers the cost of the course, so it is free to the participants.

Speaking of costs, you began your work with the Cearns project as a volunteer, but it sounds like your work rather quickly became full-time.

I hope that you were financially compensated.

After the voluntary period the post was partly subsidised through the "New Deal" scheme – a scheme through the Unemployment Centre, where they contributed £75 a week towards my wages, for a period of six months. After this the post was covered by various "pots" of money, mainly the Health Improvement Fund through Health Promotion Western Isles, who have always supported the community development ethos. I then began paid work with Fas Fallain, but continued to use the Cearns Resource Centre as a base, thus ensuring that the project remained active. We continued to seek funding and were successful with a three-year lottery bid, which will fund a total of three posts dedicated to the development of the area.

I have now moved my office to a more central location and feel very proud of what the Cearns people have achieved. They have funding to employ three paid

staff members who will be based in the Resource Centre and a paid horticultural worker based in their “Grow Our Own” project. We have been through so much together over the years. The area will always have a special place in my heart. It’s an example of what can be achieved. Although I wish I had the opportunity to develop that particular project now that it is financially stable, I think it is more important to roll out this model to other areas. Fas Fallain will allow us to do this, but we will soon have to focus on the future of this project as funding finishes in November 2005. We need to evolve accordingly.

When did you get involved with Fas Fallain?

Two years ago. When the polytunnels were erected, the health promotions department decided to work with the Scottish Local Enterprise Company and submitted a bid for a growing project – a healthy living center with a focus on food. The bid was successful. They advertised for a manager. I didn’t apply the first time around because I felt I wasn’t quite finished with the Cearn project. But the department didn’t find anyone, so I approached them. I asked them if they would consider basing Fas Fallain temporarily in our resource center to allow me to come out of the Cearn project gradually. They agreed.

The Fas Fallain project has helped to fund some of the projects I’ve mentioned. I feel passionately about community development and grassroots work. My job is to empower communities to make their own decisions. That’s what I was doing in the Cearn Project. Fas Fallain covers the whole of the Western Islands, so in my new position, I’m able to do this work in a larger way.

Currently, other projects are being rolled out. All of them will be different. One is in a rural village on our island with a high number of elderly people. They are building two polytunnels. The community is using the knowledge of the elderly and passing it on.

Soon I’ll be visiting the Isle of Barra. I hope they’ll tell me what they want. Then it will just be a case of supporting them and guiding them in the right direction. Once they are underway that’s my time to start backing out.

Thank you very much for sharing your story. I’m sure it will be an inspiration to the many communities on this globe that want to find ways to come together with universities and other partners and respond constructively to our changing world.