



Ben Samuelson, AMI Fellow, 2013-14

My AMI Senior Fellowship was with the founding team to create the AMI Urban Farm at VSDB. That was the first educational farm I helped to build, now I'm working on the third.

I signed on as a "Location Manager" for a non-profit called The Amir Project. Amir builds gardens and farms at summer camps and runs programming during the camp season aimed at teaching ideas of social justice as well as the more obvious "where our food comes from" tag. It is a compelling idea and I saw it work. With just a little reminding and mindfulness I saw children take an understanding of our role of power in the garden.

My job at the Amir Project was to first help run our seminar to train 80 farmers to go tend and teach in gardens at camps across the country, then to manage a team of 5 to build (from scratch) and run programming in a productive one-quarter acre farm in just three months! That is an insane goal and we did it.

Now I am living and working in northern California at the Environment Celebration Institute's demonstration farm. This is the non-profit that Elaine Ingham works through. She is something of a celebrity in the biological farming movement, and for good reason. Her soil biology consulting work has been quietly transforming unstructured and lifeless farm soils back into resilient productive havens for microbes, like soils are meant to be. Her work has been widely embraced internationally, and the demand for consultants is outstripping supply. She relies on scrutinizing compost for the life it contains, using extreme discernment to select the right compost for the job, and applying it as an inoculant, not a fertilizer. Our workhorse is the light microscope; we make a lot of compost, and keep a lot of records. The purchase of the farm was final in the late spring of this year. There is still a great deal of work to be done on our soil, which has been chemically managed and is currently host to very few organisms other than bacteria. The purpose of the farm is to be a teaching center for the microscopy skills necessary to understand and inform all types of growing operations. Currently Elaine uses the farm as a kind of personal retreat for about one week each month where she can garden, catch up on email, and rest from her global work life. This is lucky for me as I get lots of coveted one-on-one microscope time with her, which seriously rocks. I am getting back to my roots in Biology (my undergrad major) and quickly gaining soil literacy. These skills are needed all over the world and I am honored and flattered to be considered to do this big work.

There's not much gain in counting nematode eggs and flagellate cysts before they hatch, but I'm excited for whatever is next. I usually have a hard time looking down the road, even a few months. In fact, AMI gave me the longest steadiest engagement I've had since college. Wherever I go I take the fruits of that immersive learning and meaningful work that I shared in Virginia with my cohort.

