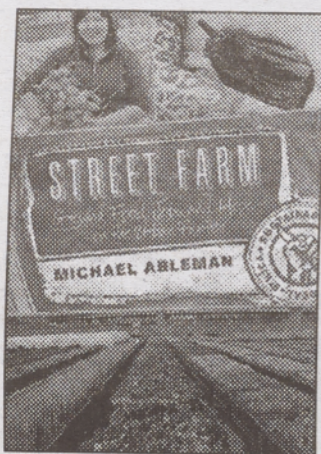


Dig deep! This farmer and activist has some radical ideas

Sole Food Farms co-founder is working to grow farmers in the city



Street Farm: Growing Food, Jobs, and Hope on the Urban Frontier by Michael Ableman

BY SUSAN STORER CLARK
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

You might flip through this attractive volume in a bookstore. It has lots of colorful, glossy photos of beaming people of varying ethnicities tending lettuce and holding huge bunches of brilliant beets. You'd probably notice tomatoes and peppers glowing in their market boxes.

But other pictures show weedy lots strewn with trash bags and litter, people passed out on the sidewalk, discarded needles. By now, you'd be aware of several sides of the multi-faceted reality presented by farmer and longtime activist Michael Ableman. There's much more to it than is in the pictures.

Ableman is the cofounder of Sole Food Street Farms, a network of four farms using five acres of reclaimed land in downtown Vancouver, British Columbia. He's been working for more than 40 years as a farmer and almost that long as an activist aiming to bring farming to cities. His book tells the story of Sole Food Street Farms, begun in 2009, but it is also an analysis of the ills of our current food system, a wide-ranging manifesto on why we need urban farming and a revelation of how much you need to

know to be any kind of farmer.

We are not talking urban gardens here. Many people in cities have containers or small plots where they grow a few tomatoes. Ableman writes about production farming, growing food for sale. He writes that they produce more than 25 tons of fresh produce per year, supplying

more than 30 area restaurants, selling at farmers markets and operating a community-supported agriculture program. About two years ago, Vancouver Magazine voted Sole Food the top food producer in the area.

The idea was not simply to grow food but also to offer disenfranchised people a chance to learn new skills, participate in meaningful work and heal themselves, as well as helping to feed the city. That part is the ongoing story of this book: the story of the poor, homeless, drug-addicted or

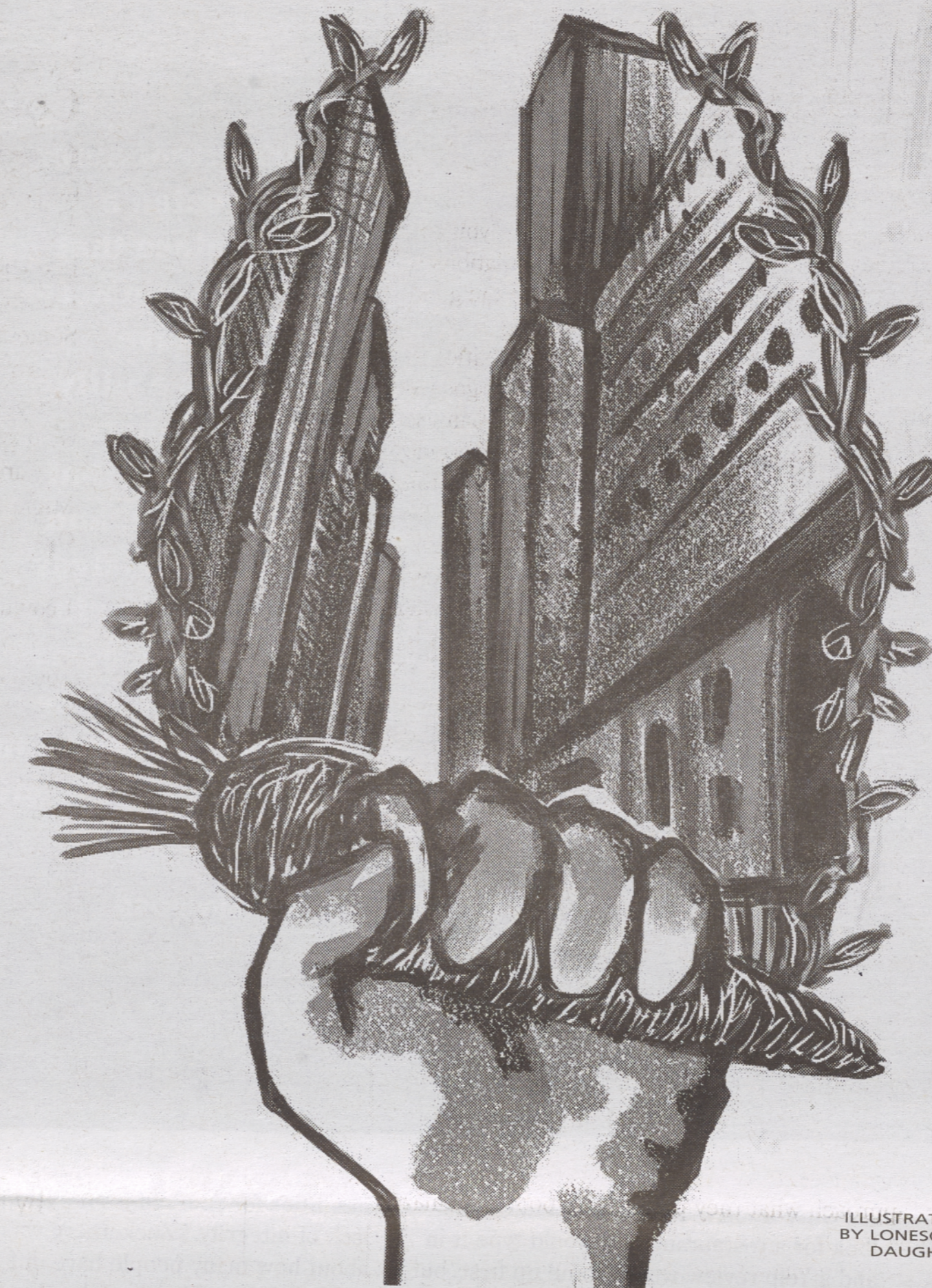


ILLUSTRATION
BY LONESOME
DAUGHTER

mentally ill people they hired to do the work. Some have bloomed and grown, some have faltered. Some have grown, and then faltered, as human beings often do. Ableman weaves their stories through his narrative.

He also weaves in pieces of wisdom and practical advice. A few paragraphs on Water Wisdom note: "Water is a finite resource and should be treated as such." A thought-provoking half page on The Parking Space notes that a typical parking space is 9 feet by 18 feet, 162 square feet. He says that space could produce 450-500 pounds of food in a six-month growing season, with an average retail value of about \$1,500. (He does point out that's assuming ideal conditions and a high skill level.)

Is this a "how to do this in your home town" kind of book? No. It quickly becomes apparent how complex such an operation is, and how much knowledge and skill it takes to do it.

First, think about what it takes to be a successful farmer. "Doing agriculture well requires a very sophisticated and complex set of skills," Ableman writes. "These skills take years to develop, and they require a deep understanding of soils, insects, biology, botany, mechanics, physics, marketing, labor management, and on and on."

Even with that knowledge, it took Ableman a couple of growing seasons to realize they were going to have to use plastic containers, rather than planting directly into the soil or raised beds. There are a couple of reasons for that: The soil beneath the city is often contaminated, even biologically dead, plus the land is often leased, or its use just granted temporarily,

so the whole farm needs to be portable.

He only hints at the complexity of the political and permitting processes, but it's clear these take up a lot of his time, as does coordinating with the owners of the land. Still, the most difficult relationships can be with the people who work the farms. The main hope is to offer work that is life-giving, and he says it is "a relief to witness such fecundity and productivity and blatant health in the midst of the struggles" of the neighborhoods. Still, he acknowledges that, if you do this work, you have to recognize that you cannot save people, and that is sometimes bitterly hard to accept.

Ableman has a larger agenda. He wants to upend the food system we have, the disassociation most modern people have from the sources of their food and the abuse to which we subject our land. Yes, small-scale food production is more expensive to the consumer, but, "cheap food is the result of massive subsidies, soil loss and degradation, groundwater depletion and pollution, and farmworkers who are not always well cared for."

Toward the end of the book he presents his Urban Food Manifesto, beginning with this proposal: "Every municipality should establish publicly supported agricultural training centers in central and accessible locations." He's talking about working urban farms. Some of his ideas, he says, are radical, but some are obvious.

He's worth paying attention to. He seems to have made at least one radical idea work really well.

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