WildRoots ISEN Grant Report

On Tuesday January 28th, John Edel the founder of the Plant (check it out at www.plantchicago.com) came to Northwestern to be our annual WildRoots winter speaker. Thanks to ISEN's funding, we were able to bring him to campus and hear about his work at the Plant and their mission as an organization.

Along with ISEN, the event was co-sponsored by nuCuisine (who provided food before the event), SEED, and Engineers for a Sustainable World (who helped with the advertising effort). Over 50 students and faculty members came to the event in spite of the cold weather that evening, and the talk lasted over an hour. It was followed by Q and A, where students asked interesting questions about the day to day operations of the plant, John’s philosophy on farming and sustainable business, and the Plant’s multi-million dollar methane digester that will provide more than enough energy to power the building using the waste that is generated on-site.

WildRoots looks to the Plant as an organization that uses creativity and ingenuity to revolutionize how food is grown in urban areas. We believe that bringing him to campus was a suitable way to represent our organization’s effort in the off-season to encourage students to think about our food system. We believe having a speaker like John promotes our sustainable efforts and encourages us to promote sustainability on campus.

As an organization we are interested in expanding into hydroponics so we can grow throughout the cold season, so hearing from John was an excellent opportunity to learn from an expert in the field. It was also interesting to hear about
their business model. The Plant has a for-profit side and a non-profit side working together to reinforce their cohesive operation. They are profitable in their aquaponics operations, and they work to extensively benefit their community and Chicago as a whole. At WildRoots, we work to benefit the city of Evanston in our volunteer efforts and outreach programs. We look to the Plant as a model urban farm working not only to provide fresh produce with a low carbon footprint, but also as a community hub that promotes social welfare.

Bringing John to campus was an exciting way to learn and benefit from an expert’s voice on reducing energy, community building, growing food, and overcoming challenges in the field of sustainable agriculture. The event provided an important opportunity also for Northwestern students and faculty to learn from the Plant’s model, especially in a place with limited access to agricultural operations. It was fantastic to learn about their energy usage. The Plant’s mission is to close as many waste and energy loops as possible in their operations. They have microbreweries whose leftover grains provide fuel for their bakery. The waste from their aquaponics operation and local businesses goes into a methane digester that captures methane to power a turbine that generates on site electricity to keep the Plant completely off the grid. This innovative model of operation and growth is totally unique to the plant, there are no other similar vertical farm operations around the world, so it truly was a special opportunity to bring John to campus.

We at WildRoots hope to continue the tradition of bringing winter speakers to campus in the field of sustainable agriculture. This event was a phenomenal success and we could not have put it on without the support from ISEN. Thank you.