**UBC grad student’s gleaning project engages community**

Life is a juggling act for Casey Hamilton: Social entrepreneur. Anti-poverty advocate. Urban sustainability activist. Dietitian. Backyard fruit harvester.

Two years ago, she founded the Okanagan Tree Fruit Project, salvaging the excess production from backyard fruit trees.

From an initial pick of 5,000 pounds in 2012, the Okanagan Fruit Tree Project reaped 17,500 pounds last year, and this year’s tally surpassed 30,000 pounds of fruit and produce by mid-October. The volunteer base has swelled to nearly 400 pickers and a juicing operation was added last year for fundraising.

“I’m a passion-project person. I think it’s important to put your efforts where your heart is,” says Hamilton. “I needed to do something tangible. I think I have always been driven by helping people.”

Hamilton is pursuing a master of science degree in urban agricultural policy at the Okanagan campus. The hyphenate extraordinaire is also a dietitian with Campus Health and a research coordinator with the Campus Health VOICE and Wellbeing projects. She established the Central Okanagan Food Policy Council in 2010 to ease poverty in BC’s Interior by developing resource sharing among non-profits.

Hamilton consulted a former business analyst with Tetley Tea and Canada Safeway, tapped into expertise about food security issues, and got a project coordinator on board. The Okanagan Fruit Tree Project was soon in business as a structured non-profit enterprise with a board of directors and a mission to fill a horn of plenty for the poor.

Like a well-tended garden, the community gleaning initiative thrives. Its harvest adds valuable sources of food for the community, increasing the availability of healthy fruit for those in need, reducing food waste, and promoting local food security and volunteerism; 30 community non-profit groups benefit from juice sales and fruit donations.

“I want to help people understand they have opportunities in life. You show them by doing, instead of just talking about it,” she says. By blending social activism with scholarly inquiry, the Okanagan Fruit Tree Project has also become a policy plank in Hamilton’s master’s thesis.

A 2007 BSc graduate in food nutrition and health from our Dietetics program, Hamilton then worked for Interior Health in Kelowna as a dietitian.

She decided to tackle poverty by analysing cities and urban landscapes, identifying barriers and devising novel policy ideas to overcome them. Hamilton sees BC’s Central Interior as a food source to benefit those struggling with the most basic elements of survival – food security and a roof over their head.

“Instead of teaching people to eat healthy diets, I want to work at creating environmental supports to live a healthy life. I want to take part in changing the system,” she says.

Her sights are firmly set to build the Okanagan Fruit Tree Project into a self-sustaining organization, following graduation next June. Already this year, the Okanagan Fruit Tree Project has grown to include Penticton, and other communities are waiting to be added.

“I see nothing but growth for this. We haven’t even reached the tip of the iceberg with what we can do.”