

The Authentic Life

Planting a seed in a Costa Rican village leads to a flourishing garden of economic opportunity

By **Kristin Vukovic**

A decade ago, fashion and bridal designer Melissa Sweet was living a high-powered life in New York City, replete with a Carrie Bradshaw closet. She was at the pinnacle of her career. Driving over the mountains in Costa Rica, Sweet decided to follow the man she loved and let it all go. “I felt like I’d had a really full career,” she says. “That’s when I finally realized that there’s no summit ... it’s always just more.”

Sweet moved to Costa Rica in 2008 to focus on building a family with her husband, Kevin O’Neill, and to reconnect with a healthier way of living. “I literally gave away 98 percent of what I owned,” she says. “Costa Rica is like the Garden of Eden—you can’t keep anything there for very long, because Mother Nature takes it back. Things are just eaten by the environment.”

After a few years of living a rural life in a small village, Sweet saw the negative impact packaged foods and agrochemicals had on the community and was inspired to help by imparting organic farming and health education. “There’s something so essential in being able to feed yourself and not be dependent on restaurants, groceries and packages and, in that way, being able to control your health,” she says. “I’m very passionate about organic food, and treating the earth in a way that would imply we care.”

In 2012, Sweet and her husband cofounded Vida Auténtica, a

nonprofit dedicated to creating a model of sustainable organic agriculture. She found a teacher, wrote a curriculum, made some fliers, and started to share her vision by going door-to-door. “They looked at me like I had three heads,” she laughs.

She realized that locals needed a reason to make a change. Sweet suggested they form a farmers’ market, which would create economic opportunity. At the Tuesday FERIA Orgánica Tinamastes, 45 vendors now sell organic foods and local crafts. The market supports graduates of the Pueblo Roots initiative, a yearlong intensive training program that offers graduates the opportunity to build their own greenhouses. In just three years, 135 greenhouses have been constructed, and almost 200 people have completed the course, with 94 percent women. “My passion is personal empowerment,” Sweet says. “I wanted [women] to have every opportunity for success.”

In addition to FERIA Orgánica Tinamastes, Vida Auténtica has helped develop relationships with restaurants and hotels to provide new markets for local, organic producers. Sweet’s next project is a Vida Learning Center, which focuses on organic food and seed production. Their goal is to help people live a conscious, authentic life, to “make green, live green, be green, be whole.” vidaautentica.org

