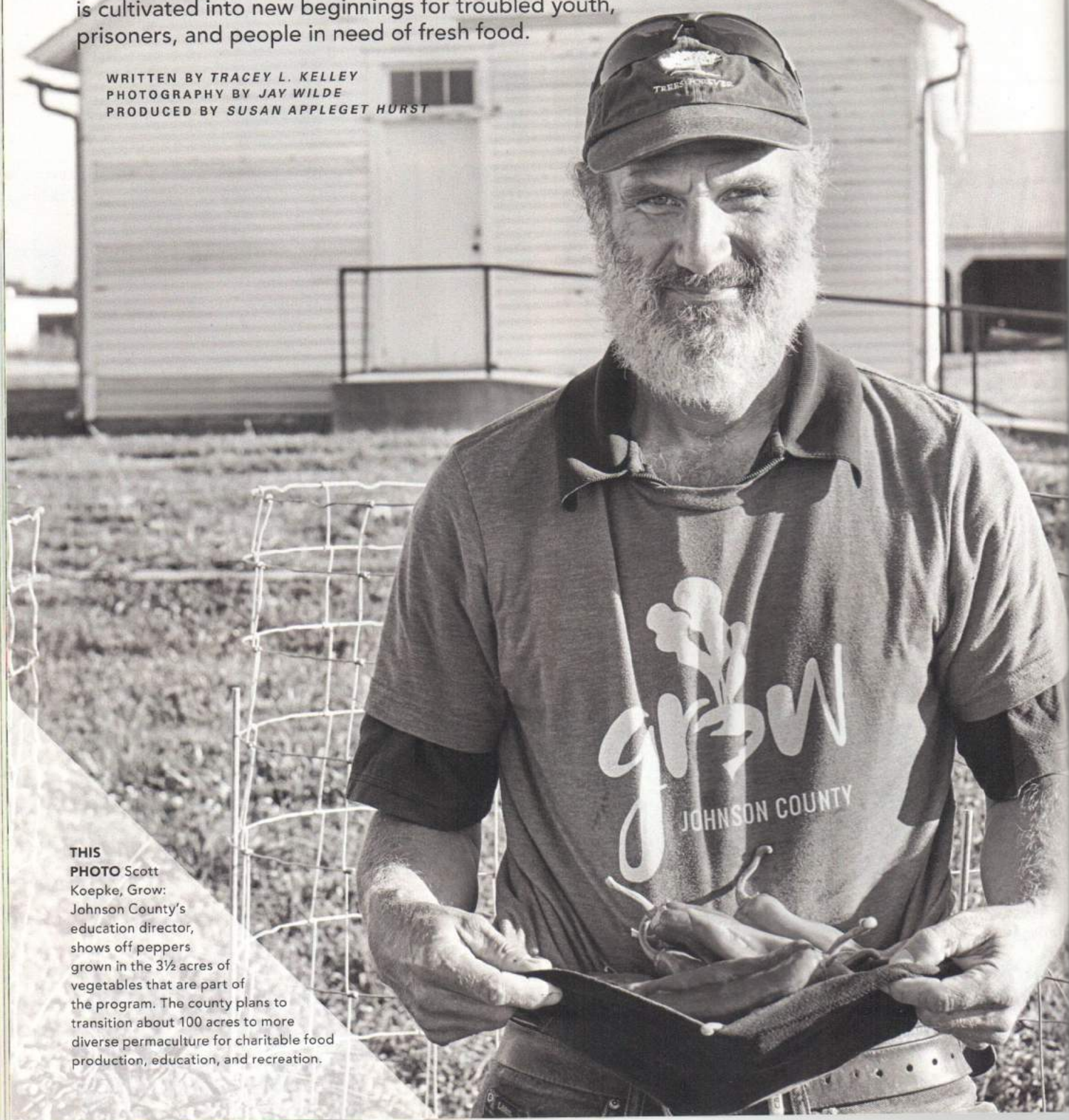


# Rich in Purpose

Historic ground once used for a county poor farm is cultivated into new beginnings for troubled youth, prisoners, and people in need of fresh food.

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**THIS PHOTO** Scott Koepke, Grow: Johnson County's education director, shows off peppers grown in the 3½ acres of vegetables that are part of the program. The county plans to transition about 100 acres to more diverse permaculture for charitable food production, education, and recreation.



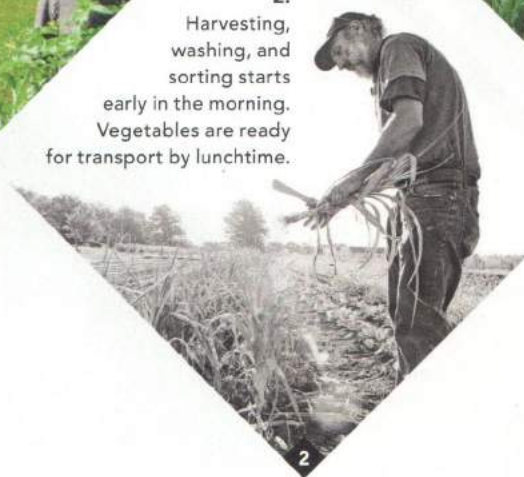
1. Scott Koepke strives for an interactive, demonstrative, and theatrical approach to connect with students and juvenile detainees. "When eye contact goes from nothing to full engagement," he says, "it's because I bring a lot of color and passion to what I do."



1



2. Harvesting, washing, and sorting starts early in the morning. Vegetables are ready for transport by lunchtime.



2

Scott Koepke understands that some of the teenagers who visit the Grow: Johnson County farm in Iowa City, Iowa, suffer from "nature deficit disorder." So with his long gray hair stuffed into a baseball cap, he's on hands and knees, working dark topsoil, modeling what he's trying to teach. The kids kneel down the rows and follow one of his observation lessons: Be silent and listen to the world. After some time, he asks, "What do you hear?"

They note the rustle of leaves, a fluttering of wings, the wind. For many, it's a rare opportunity to simply listen and breathe.

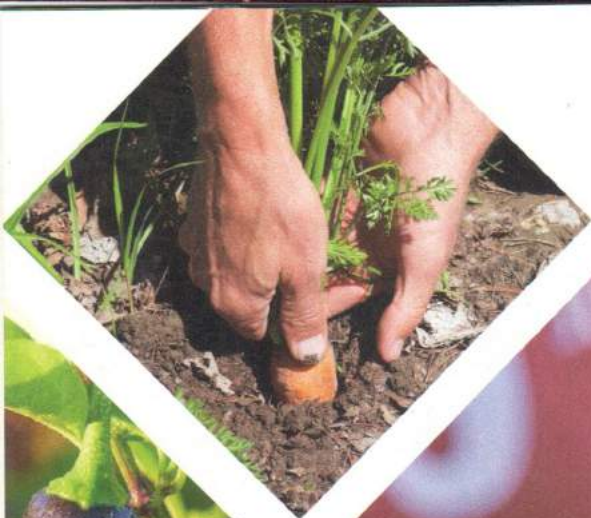
"I've dealt with 14-year-olds locked up for attempted murder. Now, I'm not claiming taking them to the garden and teaching them about nurturance makes them rethink their conflict choices," Koepke says. "I don't think instead of picking up a gun, they're saying, 'Oh, but remember that garden class and that old dude?' But there are a lot of seeds we plant that lie dormant, seeds of important subconscious messages that pop up and serve you in the right moment."

The Grow: Johnson County (GJC) program is a hunger-relief initiative designed to provide fresh, healthful food for people in need and foster a new generation of growers. The 3½-acre farm is an extension of a historic site: one of Iowa's poor farms created in the mid-1800s for an indigent population and people with mental illnesses. An environment once riddled with strife and despair has new purpose.

As education director of GJC, Koepke aspires to teach life skills through growing 15 organic fruits and vegetables. Proud of his "Mr. Soil" nickname, he uses science to incorporate lessons of respect, balance, trust, resilience, healthy choices, patience, humility, nurturance, and gratitude.

Koepke is also a garden educator at the Iowa Medical and Classification Center, a medium-security prison in Coralville, Iowa—an outreach he calls "Handcuffs to Handplows" because he believes in second chances. He sees a direct correlation between food insecurity and incarceration. "When I hear stories from kids, inmates, and people who are hungry, I think, *That could have been me.* The kids talk about their struggles for basic needs at home, especially food, that led to theft and other crimes. I'm not asking people to excuse this behavior, but to understand it so they can help."

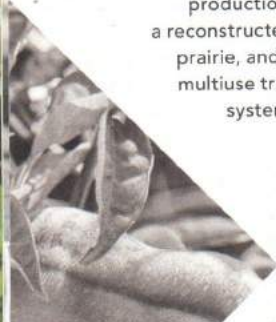
A September 2016 report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture indicates 42 million Americans—including 13 million children—are "food insecure." This means one in six children don't have regular access to sufficient food. In the United States,



1



1. Dozens of varieties of vegetables and annual fruits are grown in the GJC plots at the former poor farm, but the vision for GJC's future includes orchards, small grains and legumes production, a reconstructed prairie, and a multiuse trail system.



2



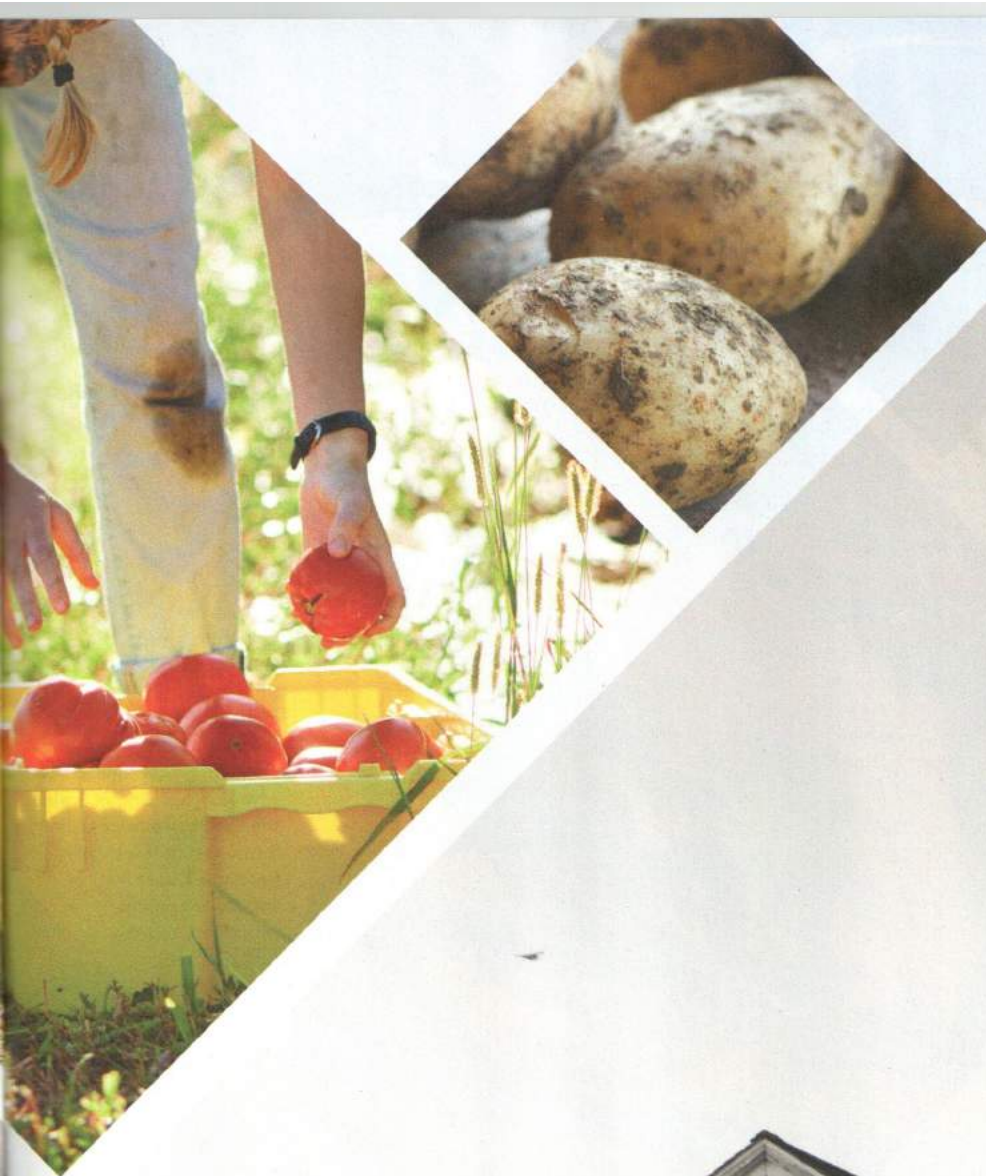
2. One of the teens housed at a nearby juvenile detention center tastes a freshly picked cherry tomato for the first time. Many of the kids lack familiarity with the flavors of fresh vegetables, let alone the experience of harvesting them.



3. Koepke works with teens at the Linn County (Iowa) Juvenile Detention Center to plant, maintain, and harvest a small garden. "I've seen gentleness that's important for me to witness personally with kids who've been really violent," he says.

3





## GROW: JOHNSON COUNTY

(GJC) in Iowa City, Iowa, addresses the need for access to healthful foods in the community by managing a 3½-acre farm and providing educational opportunities for aspiring growers. In 2017, GJC delivered 30,000 pounds of vegetables and fruits to various hunger-relief programs, which collectively serve more than 15,000 people in the county. Also last year, the GJC education program reached 400 K–12 students as well as detainees from the Linn County Juvenile Detention Center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Although land is provided by Johnson County at no cost, GJC relies on various private and public donations. For more information, visit [growjohnsoncounty.org](http://growjohnsoncounty.org).



**THIS PHOTO** This building was the “insane” wing of the Johnson County farm, and it housed people from 1859 to 1886, when residents were moved to a nearby newly built asylum, though they continued to work on the farm.



1. Staff members from Table to Table, a food rescue organization, pick up a new harvest of GJC's produce for delivery to more than 25 food recipients in Johnson County, including elderly meal delivery programs, shelters, churches, and low-income housing sites.



2. "Kids respond to my message of being gentle with a plant, especially when we're doing transplanting exercises. They're respectful, and follow my directions," Koepke says.



3. Jason Grimm, GJC's production manager, steers the tractor while harvesting potatoes with Koepke. Grimm is also the food systems coordinator for nonprofit Iowa Valley Resource Conservation and Development, which initiated the GJC program.

"This helps kids understand we're all connected."

— Scott Koepke



63 percent of counties are rural, but rural counties account for 76 percent of all counties with food-insecure households.

"The majority of food-insecure people desire to eat healthfully but can't afford it," John Boller, GJC's project director, says. In Johnson County, it's estimated that nearly 20,000 people lack adequate sustenance. "I believe having access to healthy food is a human right," says Boller, who formerly operated a food bank.

As part of his garden bridge of healing, Koepke coined the phrase "nurturance transference." The premise is simple: When you care for something else, you're caring for yourself. "This helps kids understand we're all connected," he says. "Through this concept, some of the at-risk youth learn the act of caring when many of them have given up."

Koepke recalls one of his young volunteers. "She was the saddest ball of pain. She wouldn't make eye contact, and was a dark cloud of grim, bleak energy. I never force my way with these kids, but I look for

an opening," he says. "When I realized our time was ending and she was going back into the detention center, wordlessly I offered her a watering can. She took it, and walked over to a row of newly planted seedlings with me. Then I asked, 'Can you please water this soil?' And she did."

He cries a little sharing this memory. "Maybe it didn't mean anything to her, but it meant a lot to me. She had a moment of engagement. And maybe that night, she had a dream about watering a garden." **CG**

*For more information, see Resources on page 110.*

**BELOW** In the 19th century, county governments throughout the United States established poor farms to support the elderly, the sick, and the indigent. The farms were intended to be self-sustaining, using inhabitants' labor as reciprocation for their basic necessities and housing. This common societal practice existed in the United States until the mid-20th century. The buildings and land of the Johnson County (Iowa) farm, established in 1855, comprise one of the few county farm models that are still relatively intact.

