



ANTHONY EDWARDS / STAFF PHOTO

Renewable energy lovers attend SolarFest 2016 at the Southern Vermont Arts Center in Manchester on Saturday.

SolarFest: A prayer to the sun

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MANCHESTER — Just a few years ago, Jesse McDougall said he didn't know anything about farming. "I never gave a thought to health or the soil," McDougall said. "But then I fell in love with a girl who had a farm and I became obsessed with carbon."

McDougall was one of over 50 presenters and workshop guides at the 2016 SolarFest in Manchester on Saturday who were educating audiences about everything from low-impact living in a yurt to medicines found in fields and

forests. McDougall chronicled the history of 265 acres of field and forest land in Shaftsbury, first purchased in 1936 by his wife Cally's grandparents. He told the tale of how it became a dairy farm, then a horse farm and how the fields grew barren and depleted from years of Round Up and other chemicals.

"Our son was born in 2013, a fifth generation on the farm, and it was no longer the story of our lives. It was a much larger story and the story of our land. We stopped spraying (chemicals) on everything on the farm."

The thing is, once the McDougalls put

a halt to the chemicals, nothing grew. "It got worse and worse and nothing came up," he said, adding that they called conventional farmers and organic farmers and no one knew what to do.

And it wasn't until he saw a TED talk by Allan Savory, an African farmer, that he understood what was happening.

"The soil was depleted," he said as he began educating a group of 20 or so, about how this happens and he knew he had to replenish it. And so they decided to buy 50 chickens and

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see what happened. "We fed them and they did the work, scratching the dirt and fertilizing it," he said. "It was the start of biological digestion."

By the next spring grass appeared; by 2015, it was a rich, lush green. Today the farm is thriving with sheep, chickens, turkeys and pigs, he said.

In addition to McDougall's tale at the 29th SolarFest celebration, held for the first time at the Southern Vermont Center for the Arts that ran Friday and Saturday, there was drumming and song circles, music, art, campers, education, life stories about how to live healthier lives and preserve natural resources. There was a painting wall and vendors and food such as pancakes and maple syrup, fresh-squeezed lemonade with mint, ginger or raspberry, fire-grilled corn with garlic lime aoli and chili salt, and sweet potato and black bean tacos.

As part of the celebration activists were asking for signatures on petitions and showing people the benefits and how to's of alternative energy sources.

Energy Independent Vermont — a coalition of environmental organizations, Vermont businesses, town energy committees, academic leaders and business associations — had a booth at the festival with information on how to save Vermonters money and cut carbon pollution.

"We should put a price on carbon pollution," said Walter Gustafson, of Burlington, who was sharing information at the Energy Independent booth. "We should invest in clean

energy and more renewable alternatives."

In one of several performance spaces, Alan Ket shared his graffiti story.

"I'm from Brooklyn, but I live in Shrewsbury; we moved here to start a family," he said. "I am a full-time artist, I started painting subways in 1986."

Ket talked about how he and other graffiti artists first thought it was vandalism because that was society's message. But, he said he realized in time that he had artistic ability and power.

He talked about how the city took the old trains away and brought in new silver trains, how street artists went inside and some painted murals. And even though he went inside, he still loved painting trains. "I became the bridge to the next generation of artists," he said. "I am an elder in the movement."

Recently, Ket started photographing tags spray-painted in subways; the tags are names like Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, Laquan McDonald, Delrawn Small, Tamir Rice, Anthony Hill, Freddie Gray — the names of young black and brown women and men shot by police in recent years.

For most everyone at the festival, the life stories are about blending art and passion, and a belief in the power of the earth. "Our mission is building the soil," said McDougall. "What we sell is a by-product which is healthy and respectful of nature."

On Saturday evening, folk musician Dar Williams performed, followed by Marcia Ball, a Louisiana-raised blues artist who closed the celebration.

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