



MAKING CONNECTIONS...

By Joan Dye Gussow

When I first began studying nutrition, I was convinced that the real issue in world hunger was whether we could produce enough food for a world population that was exploding. As I began trying to answer that question, I went stumbling across the fields—resource economics, ethics, agriculture, food science, advertising, bioenergetics, and the like—picking up pieces that turned out to be connected in often surprising ways to the deadly fact that over 30,000 children a day die of starvation in a world where there is ample food. The secret to understanding, I had come to realize, lay in making connections.

I give a one-page quiz on the first day of my class in nutritional ecology—a class that is all about making connections—and at the bottom of the page, I have for some time printed this conundrum which I call an extra point question even though the quiz is never scored. “In 1989, Bangladesh put a ban on the export of frog legs. When the first Gulf war caused Kuwait to deport its Bangladeshi workers, the frog leg export ban was lifted, resulting in an increase in pesticide use. Why was it lifted? Why did pesticide use increase?” In order to figure it out, you have to know only that both frogs and insecticides kill insects and that when you take frogs’ legs off, they die. And you also need to understand that in poor countries, a job catching frogs is probably better than no job at all. Most students have a hard time with the question because they’re not used to making connections.

One of the students who took that quiz many years ago (I don’t remember how she did on the frog’s leg question!) was Jane Levine, an older student, very bright and hard working. Because she had a sharing marriage, she talked to her business-executive husband Larry about what she was learning in class. And Larry, victim of a takeover of the very successful mattress ticking company where he ran the marketing department, walked out on his new bosses one day and decided to turn his substantial energies into doing something that mattered more.

Jane and Larry had already begun to involve themselves in the Earth Friends program at Teachers College which Larry credits with helping him learn the connections between food and the environment. Almost simultaneously, the two of them joined the board of World Hunger Year (WHY), and quickly decided that they needed to go further. And so, with few resources other than their own passion and commitment, Larry and Jane decided to begin a program that would teach kids about hunger and help them learn how to make a difference in an unjust world. And so was born Kids Can Make a Difference® (KIDS).

Almost by accident, the Levine’s were invited to a school in York, Maine (where they had a summer place) and found themselves facing 100 sixth graders. They survived, and Larry discovered that he loved to teach. Armed with just a few facts, about how many children died of hunger, about how much food there was in the world, about who got it and who didn’t and some of the reasons why, he and Jane began giving hunger awareness workshops that helped young people make connections about why hunger happens. By the end of their first year they had spoken to children in 20 public and private schools in New England and Metropolitan New York

City. KIDS became a program of WHY and remained so until 2009. In 2010, KIDS became a program of the International Education and Resource network (iEARN).

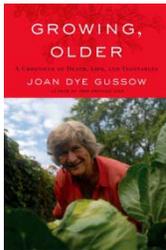
It's not easy to teach children about the existence of poverty and hunger. The facts are damn depressing, and it takes energy and wit to help kids understand how they might begin to intervene to assuage the suffering of others. Through Kids Can Make a Difference, Larry and Jane found a way to empower teachers and their students. Coax them into taking action rather than withdrawing into helpless indifference.

As they became increasingly aware of the lack of printed resources dealing with hunger in a way young people could relate to, Larry and Jane worked with Jane's schoolteacher cousin Stephanie Kempf to produce a sourcebook that would provide teachers with information and resources—and memorable lessons—about hunger and poverty. The result, two years later, was the widely acclaimed *Finding Solutions to Hunger*, a Sourcebook for Middle and Upper School Teachers. The KIDS Teacher Guide is now available in Spanish as well as English.

Kids is now 16 years old. It's been an amazing journey to look in on, from the time when Larry went into his first classroom and discovered he loved teaching—and could do it—to this sixteenth anniversary when Kids' materials and approaches are used in thousands of classrooms across the United States and numerous foreign countries. Some people don't just make connections, they get things done. Thanks.

Joan Dye Gussow is an author, serious food grower, and Professor Emeriti of Nutrition and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University She is a member of the KIDS Advisory Board. Her new book [Growing, Older](#), published by Chelsea Green will be out in November. .Joan Dye Gussow may be contacted at jeg30@columbia.edu.

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*Michael Pollan calls her one of his food heroes. Barbara Kingsolver credits her with shaping the history and politics of food in the United States. And countless others who have vied for a food revolution, pushed organics, and reawakened Americans to growing their own food and eating locally consider **Joan Gussow** both teacher and muse. Joan's new book, entitled **Growing, Older: A Chronicle of Death, Life and Vegetables**, is now available. Please visit http://www.chelseagreen.com/bookstore/item/growing_older:paperback and type in the special discount code "JOAN" at check-out to receive 25% off your purchase of this book. If you run into problems placing your order, please call 1-800-639-4099 and their customer service staff will gladly assist with orders. Simply mention the "JOAN" discount and receive the 25% off as indicated in the promotion.*

Be sure to view the interview with Joan.