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Two Glades centenarians bring the long view to problem-solving

By Jack Payne

Victor Guzman showed up at the Everglades Research and Education Center in Belle Glade in 1952 with what he remembers as simple instructions from his boss in Gainesville: “Go down to the Glades and solve the problems of the farmers.” He’s still at it.

Several times a week the 100-year-old climbs the stairs to his second-floor warren of offices. There are no elevators at the center, and he flat-out refused first-floor working space. He still drives himself to work 27 years after his retirement from the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

Stubborn? Perhaps. But there’s a tremendous upside to that -- persistence. It’s that part of him that anchored his conviction that he could help farmers grow lettuce on muck soils. Local grower David Basore said that without Guzman’s groundbreaking breeding work, there simply would be no \$32 million-a-year lettuce industry in Palm Beach County. Guzman is probably the man most responsible for making it possible for you to eat a salad grown near Lake Okeechobee.

UF/IFAS threw two 100th birthday parties last month. One was for Guzman. He consented to a ground-floor celebration. The other, in Gainesville, marked the centennial of the Cooperative Extension Service.

During the Depression Extension agents taught farm groups about marketing and farm women about home economics to help families survive. They provided seeds, fertilizer and tools to support the Victory Garden movement of World War II. They brought new technologies to farmers that have increased our harvests even as the number of farms declined. So Extension knows a thing or two about persistence as well.

These days, the Everglades Extension agents can help you monitor pest populations, identify the bugs in your garden or on your crops, diagnose plant diseases and grow better tomatoes. In short, they continue to solve problems. Guzman’s portfolio of research responsibilities remains as wide open as they were in 1952. He says he’s free to investigate whatever he wants. I can confirm that no one in Gainesville tells Victor Guzman what to do.

Nor does Guzman tell farmers what to do. The key, he says, is to show, not tell. In the 1950s he found celery farmers using crews to weed the land by hand. Guzman didn’t try to coax them to use his herbicide to kill weeds without killing celery. He just asked for a demonstration plot and showed them it worked.

Today Guzman's offices have bookshelves filled with yellowing binders, a couple of typewriters (though he uses a computer nowadays), packets of seeds, and metal file drawers that recall old library card catalogs. He also stores in his offices several bags of the product of his latest breeding project. They might hold the genesis of a new Florida crop, a bush-grown bean. They might also represent years of work for naught.

Guzman doesn't profess to know. He simply says, "You never can tell." He says his "system" is not to worry.

In an age when gene jockeys look for biotech shortcuts to identify the most pest-resistant, drought-tolerant, nutrient-packed, sweetest-tasting produce, there's still a role for an old man who can walk a lettuce field with eyes that can see what centrifuges and bioinformatics data bases can't. Eyes that take the long view.

Guzman's recent birthday party and the centennial celebration of Extension remind us and our quick-fix culture that solving problems takes time.

They also remind us that most solutions are temporary. New challenges follow close on their heels. The Glades farmers' problems haven't all been solved.

People and institutions that get to have 100th birthday parties don't get discouraged by this. It's just an opportunity to build a century-long legacy of problem-solving.

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