

VASUDHA

Spring 2014 Newsletter

While [Fall 2013](#) was full of trips and tours, Spring 2014 was an especially busy semester for Vasudha with the inaugural Speaker in Residence Series. This intimate forum brought writers, thinkers, and political leaders from the Northeast to discuss recent matters concerning 'Earth, Energy, and the Environment.' Students also took a retreat to Rensselaer's Darrin Fresh Water Institute on Lake George, participated in Earth Week, and attended the Sustainability Film Series.

The highlight of this semester was a student led fund raising initiative to purchase and donate goats to families in the Global South. This important initiative was the idea of first year Vasudha student Natalie Yap, and Vasudha provided the resources she needed to complete the project. Natalie and other students designed t-shirts and then sold them during campus wide Earth Week events in order to fund raise. This



initiative gave Vasudha students the opportunity to artfully mesh their concerns about real world problems with their passion for change. As of this writing, students have collected over four hundred dollars, enough money for more than

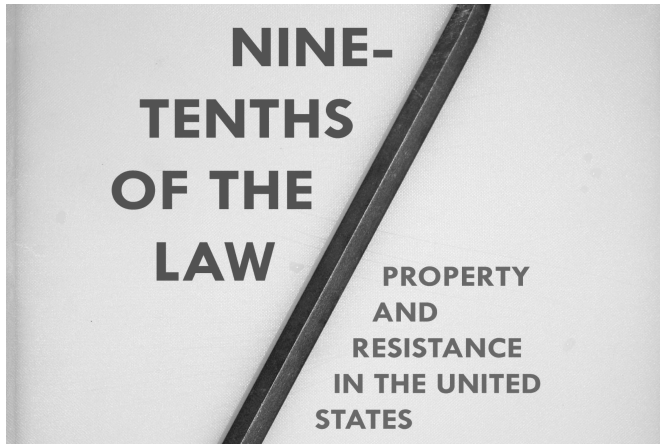
three goats! When asked what motivated her to take on this initiative Natalie said:

The goal of the project was not only to raise Vasudha's presence on campus to the student body, but to also grasp the idea of what it means to give sustainably. Sustainability to me means that we can continue to live with the least amount of negative impact we have on each other and the environment. I hope that goats we fundraised for will allow those individuals to continue living sustainably and allow for people here to start considering how they can give more sustainably to each other.

The Vasudha [Speaker in Residence Series](#) brought together students, faculty, and local individuals with regional sustainability practitioners and activists. Instead of a formal lecture, the Speaker in Residence facilitated a guided conversation with participants over dinner. Each speaker brought a unique perspective and approach to challenging social and environmental problems. Participants left

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conversations with a deeper understanding and informed perspective on the challenges and opportunities for sustainability in the 21st century.



Vasudha hosted a new speaker every month for a total of four speakers over the course of the semester. The first, Hannah Dobbz is an author, documentarian, and founding board member of Land Action, a non-profit that assists environmental and social justice organizers doing housing and land rights work. Her first book *Nine-Tenths of the Law: Property and Resistance in the United States* (2012, AK Press) was described as “a brilliant history of squatting in the USA.” Dobbz talked with students about alternative sustainable housing, activism surrounding homelessness, and the history of real estate ownership in North America. She was also invited to host a screening of her documentary *Shelter* in downtown Troy.

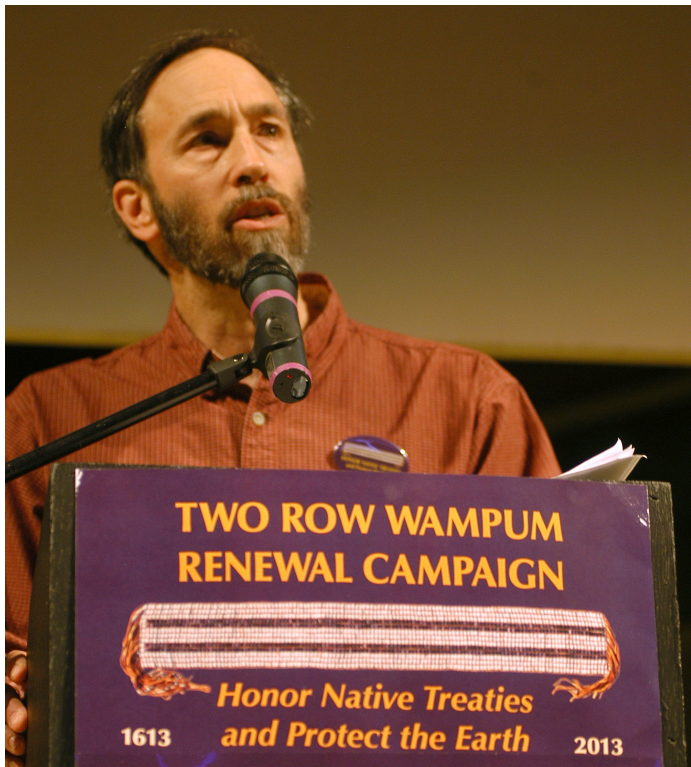
Our second speaker, Taleigh Smith is a climate justice organizer based in the Bronx. She helped found Concrete Green, a worker-owned cooperative that promotes urban sustainability and resilience to climate change. Smith also

launched the first Bronx Youth Green Jobs Academy teaching environmental literacy and urban planning at Hostos and Bronx Community College. Sharing some of the lessons she has learned from her own projects, Smith facilitated a discussion with participants about carbon markets, ecological consciousness, and structural challenges to local sustainability efforts.

Troy City Council President Rodney Wiltshire was the third Speaker in Residence. Council President Wiltshire grew up in Troy and owns Empire Solar Store, a company that installs residential, commercial, and industrial-scale solar panels. As an elected official, Wiltshire has taken the lead on many innovative, city-wide projects including a municipal solar farm, electric car charging stations, and the Climate Smart Communities and Sustainability Task Force. He spoke with participants about his various roles as a local politician and small business owner, and the challenges involved in making incremental changes in both the private and public sectors.



Vasudha concluded the speaker series with Onondaga Clanmother Wendy Gonyea and

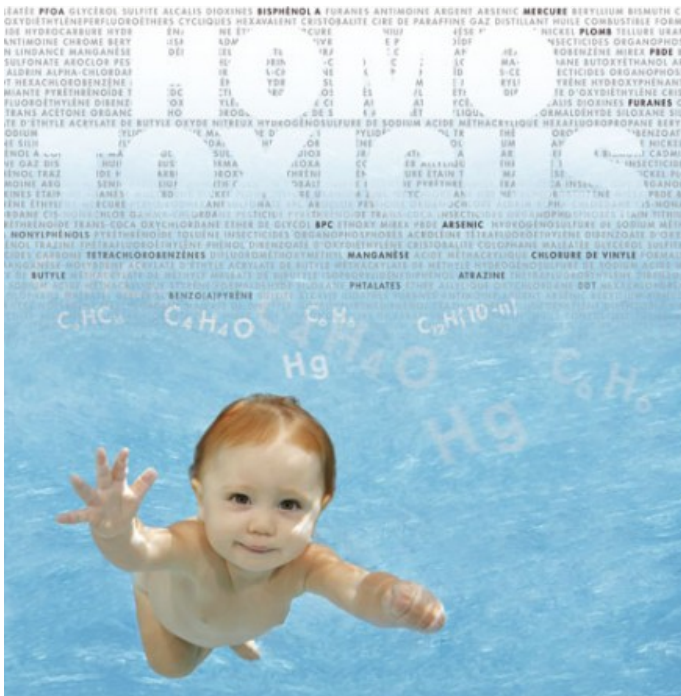


Andy Mager from Syracuse Peace Council. Together, they talked with participants about the history of the Two Row Wampum –a treaty between the original Dutch settlers and the native people of present-day New York– and its implications for the well being of the Haudenosaunee and other Native peoples. The conversation ranged from environmental issues like hydraulic fracturing (fracking) for natural gas, to political concerns over land rights and governmental autonomy. Along with dinner and discussion, the speakers screened Guswenta: Renewing the Two Row Wampum, a short film by Gwendolen Cates that won the award for best short film at the Socially Relevant Film Fest in New York City.

Earth Week, a campus-wide celebration hosted by the Rensselaer Sustainability Research Network, gave Vasudha students a chance to

hear and meet a wide variety of speakers on topics ranging from animal rights activism to intergenerational ethics. There were also workshops on how to make simple and cheap water quality sensors, and films on a wide array of sustainability-related topics.

The Sustainability Film series began the spring semester with a screening of several short films by RPI's new chapter of Engineers Without Borders. Each film documented the



installation of new water containment facilities in different communities in the Global South and contained reflections on the part of community members and engineers about the importance of working collaboratively on such projects. The second film, *Homo Toxicus* by Canadian filmmaker Carole Pollquin, studied the slow but steady accumulation of toxins in people's bodies. It covered the wide range of symptoms and syndromes that may be caused by exposure to

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under-tested chemicals used in everything from agriculture to transportation.

At the conclusion of the semester, thirteen first and second year Vasudha students celebrated the end of another successful school year by taking an overnight trip to Rensselaer's [Darrin Fresh Water Institute](#). This field trip offered students an opportunity to unwind and reflect their experiences at Rensselaer over the course of the year. Students took the occasion to canoe and kayak on Lake George, and hiked several miles through the Tongue Peninsula Mountain Range. On their way up to DFWI, students were treated to local, organic fare at the Harvest & Hearth Restaurant in Saratoga Springs where the owner talked about the importance of local and organic farming not only for healthy eating and nutrition, but also for the local economy in Upstate New York.



We wish the very best to Vasudha alumni as they continue their education at Rensselaer. We are equally looking forward to the in-coming class. For more information about our activities and the program, more broadly, please visit our website: Vasudha.rpi.edu. Namaste.



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For further information you can also contact: Dr. Michael Mascarenhas, Director, mascam@rpi.edu.