

Meet the people making a difference, as chosen by

**DEEPAK CHOPRA** • **DESMOND TUTU** • **AMY DOMINI** • **ANDREW WEIL**  
**ROBERT REDFORD** • **ALICE WATERS** • **PAULO COELHO** • **AND MANY MORE**

# Ode

FOR INTELLIGENT OPTIMISTS

# 25

# INTELLIGENT OPTIMISTS

## WHO ARE CREATING A BETTER TOMORROW TODAY

Rock star and activist  
**JACK JOHNSON** (center)  
with Bob and Kelly King  
of Pacific Biodiesel

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TONY RECASNER AND ALICE WATERS TEACH CHILDREN ABOUT NUTRITION, AGRICULTURE AND ECOLOGY BY SHOWING THEM HOW TO GROW FOOD AND COOK MEALS.

"I first met Tony when he came with a mutual friend to Chez Panisse to talk about the idea of an Edible Schoolyard in New Orleans. By the end of that lunch, we knew we understood each other when it came to the way we want to feed and educate children in our public schools. Tony is respectful of both students and teachers; he lives and works with honesty and integrity; he is completely open-minded. Although he's soft-spoken and gracious, when he sets his mind to something, he makes it happen. Most important, he is an enlightened educator, unbound by rules that don't have value. He supports programs and ideas that are true, authentic and vital to our children's health and happiness."

—ALICE WATERS, chef, *Chez Panisse*, a Berkeley, California, restaurant known for local and organic food

EDUCATION

## Tony Recasner

Principal, Samuel J. Green Charter School

New Orleans, Louisiana

**WHEN HURRICANE KATRINA HIT NEW ORLEANS IN 2005,** Tony Recasner's brand new Samuel J. Green Charter School flooded. Amid the wreckage, Recasner, 48, decided to restructure his school around an innovative model for urban education: the Edible Schoolyard. Created in Berkeley, California, by chef and activist Alice Waters, the program teaches kids about nutrition, agriculture and ecology by having them grow and cook their own food. A former educational psychologist, Recasner believed this kind of experiential learning would make a difference. "It was pretty dark and dim after Katrina, and here we were building a beautiful and bright garden. Creating the Edible Schoolyard provided a really powerful therapeutic intervention for all of us."

During those months, students at Green Charter School started working in the garden and helping design the program, which eventually included a one-third-acre (one-tenth-hectare) vegetable garden, a wetland, an orange grove, an outdoor classroom and teaching kitchens. Today, 400 kids learn gardening and cooking, while getting hands-on instruction in applied math and science. Most important of all, says Recasner, gardening teaches self-esteem. "It is an environment that creates another venue for kids to be successful and feel good about themselves, both academically and personally."

Recasner has been running urban charter schools—public institutions operated independently of the local school board—since 1998 when he started New Orleans' first one. Early on, he saw how gardening could change lives. One student, 15-year-old Charles Smoot, was failing 7th grade. Angry and frustrated, Smoot couldn't imagine staying in school. But after he started working in the garden, Smoot became more engaged in classes—and ultimately went on to high school. "Gardening helped to produce a total personal transformation in this boy," Recasner recalls.

A New Orleans native, Recasner grew up in a low-income neighborhood and attended public schools. He went on to earn a Ph.D. in psychology, but always wanted to help young African-Americans broaden their horizons. So he's worked hard to bring in talented professionals. Since starting the program, Recasner has raised more than \$1 million. He's attracted donors such as TV chef Emeril Lagasse, who not only funded a new outdoor classroom, and another teaching kitchen, but enabled Recasner to bring in landscape designers, chefs and other role models. "The effect is to create a wide enough lens for kids to see they could pursue different types of occupations," says Recasner. "It's about creating an aspirational culture that really communicates to kids that all these different options are options for you."—CARMEL WROTH