There's an undeniable poetry to how Thomas Jefferson laid out the justification for our democratic republic. The phrase "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" has a natural rhythm and lilt to it. And it contains the word *happiness*; in a government document, that in and of itself seems a great victory, a cause for celebration. The political philosophy that guided our founding managed to transcend the prosaic.

When you think about it, the pursuit of happiness could stand in for the other two rights the Declaration of Independence deemed unalienable: If you are allowed to pursue happiness, you are by implication alive and free. Free, most of all, to determine for yourself just what it is that happiness means for you.

After all, what could be more subjective, more uniquely open to individual interpretation than happiness? What is happiness? It is the condition of being happy. What makes you happy? That which brings you happiness. It is a completely circular proposition, depending entirely on your point of view. A morning spent knee-deep in a trout stream makes me happy; for others it might elicit nothing but chilly boredom.

This subjective quality gives the words much of their appeal, not to
mention their strength. The pursuit of happiness invests us with independent thought and action, and says that no one—certainly no government—can take them from us. Recognizing that we are free to live our life as we see fit is not only essential to the American dream; one could say that it is the dream itself.

Students of history point out that Jefferson’s language owes a great deal to that used by the political philosopher John Locke, who proclaimed the right to “life, liberty and property.” On the surface, Locke’s “property” seems a pale and uninspired right, a rather too-materialistic vision of human existence. And in terms of language alone, there’s no question that Jefferson’s phrase is more evocative: Locke grants us stuff, Jefferson the stuff of dreams. Still, by “property,” he is understood to have intended more than simple real estate, or wealth, or the human beings for whom the Declaration and the Constitution meant continued slavery. Property signified what we could accumulate on this earth, but it also encompassed our ideas, our emotions, our desires... all that is ours because it belongs to no one else.

It has been said that Jefferson settled on “happiness” because classical thought held that it is the only good we pursue for its own sake—the end goal, in fact, of all human pursuit. For some, like the folks we met in the first chapter, the immediate pursuit is of fortune. But none of them would say that money buys happiness outright. Delores Kesler became happy when she saw what money could do. Michael Cruz derives happiness from the intellectual challenge of moving around millions of other people’s money. And Chris Gardner, the most outspoken champion of the dollar in this book, believes happiness comes through the options that money can give you.

These people’s lives reflect the truth to which Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave voice in his first inaugural address, that “Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort.” We know all too well, though, that not every creative effort and not all achievement brings monetary rewards. With no disrespect intended toward those dreams that bear financial fruit, I wanted to devote a chapter in this book to those for whom the American dream is distinctly about pleasures that can’t be measured in dollars. Folks for whom happiness is not the final result of a life’s pursuit, but its central aim.

This is admittedly a somewhat arbitrary proposition: more, perhaps, than with the other chapters in this book, the pursuit of happiness invites all American dreamers. Nevertheless, the people here seem to me to have a special hold on a personal vision of success. They have pursued happiness as an end in itself.

For Deborah Cline, an urban farmer in my home state of Texas, the pleasure found in a bite of a tomato grown with her own hands, care, and sweat has come to match the satisfaction she gained from getting off food stamps. The small patch of earth that feeds her family and then some has proved fertile ground for her version of happiness. Jesús Serrata’s climb from the poverty he knew as a child in Mexico left him with a deeper appreciation than most for the American dream of home ownership. For him, happiness was found in the long journey from the makeshift hovel of his youth to the spacious home he designed, built, and now lives in with his family. This is the meat and marrow of his dream; the opportunity his work gives him to design homes that thousands of Americans call their own is so much gravy.

For Corporal Ryan Clark, happiness has always come in serving the United States of America. It’s an ethos of elegant simplicity, but hardly an easy one to live up to. Corporal Clark has done so with distinction, in feats of heroism with the Los Angeles Police Department and in his renewed commitment to the U.S. Army. For those who follow such patriotic dreams, the demands are many and the financial rewards few. But folks like Corporal Clark understand that material comfort means little alongside doing what you love for the country you adore.

And then there are those, like Stacy and Mark Green, who follow the path of Henry David Thoreau, America’s prophet of simplicity. Their move to small-town Washington may not carry quite the drama of Thoreau’s removal to Walden Pond, but it was clearly undertaken in the same spirit. They found that a choice between remaining in their high-stress, high-income lives and cultivating their relationships with each other and with their children was really no choice at all. Ever since then, they found the courage to bring their lives in line with their true priorities, they have not looked back.

It’s an equation with which all the people here are familiar. They have heard the call to follow their dreams and their dreams alone, and they have heeded it. They live their lives in response to conscious choices they have made, with evident relish. Here are everyday Americans who
find compensation not in power, or wealth, or the arbitrary prestige of
title but in the comforts of home, the strength of family ties, and the satis-
faction that comes from working for something that is bigger than oneself. In choosing to pursue only happiness, it seems that happiness has captured them.

Deborah Cline

The small farm has long stood as an almost mythic symbol of the simple, productive, self-sufficient—even idyllic—American life. In actuality, it was a back-breaking difficult way to make a living. And if you ask today’s small farmers, those who’ve managed to hold on to their farms, they’ll tell you that it still is. It’s work hard enough to be called labor—two syllables.

Nevertheless, there’s an understandable urge to romanticize the process of working a piece of land and actually getting to sink your teeth into the fruit of your labors. For some, this way of life truly counts as an American dream. It’s a way of life steadily being supplanted by “factory farming,” but small farms are still around. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, in fact, classifies 94 percent of all farms as “small.” But these farms take in only 41 percent of all farm receipts, and the pie is getting smaller—total farm revenue for the year 2000 was expected to drop 12 percent from the 1990-1999 average. A large corporation can ride out such downturns, but a family-owned farm has almost no chance.

Against this dark backdrop, however, there is a glimmer of hope. Some small farmers are discovering that while they can’t compete head-to-head against big-time agribusiness, they can do some things better than the factory farms, like grow crops for niche markets. Exotic produce, gourmet vegetables, and organically grown foods are in demand and don’t fit into the business plans of the corporate giants. Even further down the scale, there’s a small movement afoot toward organic micro-farming. That’s where you’ll find Deborah Cline, whose life was changed by a community gardening project in Lubbock, Texas. Before that, Deborah says, her only gardening experience had been “watching houseplants die.”

Growing up with a father in the air force meant that Deborah moved around a lot as a child. In the early 1960s, when she was nine or ten, her father was transferred to Thailand. Later the family followed him to a post in the Philippines. As Deborah’s father neared retirement, however, her mother moved the family back to El Paso, the city of Deborah’s birth. Waiting her husband’s return, Deborah’s mother instead received a letter from her husband informing her that he would not be coming back.

Overseas, the family had lived a sheltered life, with maid service and the support of a close-knit military community. Now, as Deborah started high school, her mother started working for the first time in her life, waiting tables at Denny’s. Deborah says that they received no support from her father overseas.

Her family was already teetering on the edge of complete fiscal collapse when Deborah’s mother was in a car accident that put her out of work. She was still legally married, so she couldn’t go on welfare. Her husband was still abroad, so she couldn’t force him to support his children. “We were just kind of caught in a loop,” Deborah summarizes. At fifteen, she was the oldest child. So she dropped out of school to fill her mother’s shoes.

She waited the same tables at the same restaurant for the same mea-
ger wage. She did her job and her duty, but it wasn’t always easy to smile for the customers: “It was a very angry point in my life,” she remembers. “I was extremely mad at the government, extremely mad at my father, and very rebellious.” She admits to feeling “a sense of accomplishment” in providing for her younger brothers and sisters but still could not shake what she calls the “anger” at having been put in that position.

By the time her mother was back on her feet, they were so far behind in paying their bills that Deborah could take no breaks. She and her mother now worked different shifts at the same Denny’s, and when Deborah wasn’t working, she was taking care of her three siblings.

When asked where she saw her life going at that time, Deborah has a ready answer: “No place. In a rut. With not much chance of escape. You know, you barely make enough to pay the bills, and every time you’d think you were getting a little bit ahead, something would come up. . . . There was no way to get out of it.” Adding to Deborah’s sense of helplessness, was the sense that “you can’t escape it when you’re too young to survive on your own. . . . And then you don’t really want to get out, because what are you going to do if you leave? And then there’s less for
the ones left behind. It’s a very depressing state. Children shouldn’t be under that type of pressure, and yet so many are.”

It didn’t take long for Deborah to start running with “the wrong crowd,” as she puts it. Sometimes added responsibility can have a salutary effect on a young person, but Deborah’s experience was one of too much responsibility and not enough hope. “You also start thinking you’re older than you really are,” Deborah adds. “You grow up fast, but you’re really not grown up inside. Yet you think you are because you’re doing all this.” Deborah’s mother might have been busy, but she wasn’t unaware of what was going on. As soon as she got an opportunity, she moved the family out of El Paso to the tiny New Mexico town of Carrizo to, as Deborah says, “get us away from the drug and hoodlum environment.”

All of her brothers and sisters attended and eventually graduated from high school in Carrizo to, but Deborah says she “just didn’t go back” to school. Instead, she left home and moved in with a man she’d met there, thinking she’d live out her life in this town of “five hundred people, dogs, and cats,” working as a cook or waitress and raising her newborn daughter.

After she split up with her daughter’s father, she got into a job program and worked for the local sheriff’s department. At the same time, her mother remarried, to a man who became “a wonderful father” to the children still living at home. For a while, all seemed to be getting back on their collective feet. Deborah got a job in Lubbock training to become a bookkeeper, but she left for an union apprenticeship in construction. After four years of relative stability, she married in 1980. Her husband joined the navy, and for the next three years, it was traveling again for Deborah. When he was discharged, the couple returned to Lubbock and had two children.

Life outside the military wasn’t so easy. Deborah’s husband lost his job, and intense financial pressure put a strain on their marriage that led to their separation in 1987. That’s when Deborah was forced to file for food stamps, a time she calls “the down point of my whole life . . . it was just like being back in El Paso. You can never make enough to get off it. So you’re basically in that same loop, without any place to escape to.”

If anything, the fact that the government was involved made her situation worse. Most people who are on public assistance are ashamed of the fact, but that doesn’t stop the agencies behind the checks from rub-bing it in, Deborah says. “You have to go in every month, and they make you feel like you’re doing nothing. You’re categorized as being a lazy bum, unwilling to work. Just being in their offices, the questions they ask, the way they check up on you . . .” Deborah pauses, revisiting it all in her mind before she completes her thought, “It makes you feel like a criminal.”

In the middle of all this, Deborah’s eldest daughter took extra courses and graduated high school early. She moved back to Carrizo to with her grandparents. “She needed a break and I couldn’t think of anything better than for her to get out of it,” Deborah explains. But Deborah was still stretched to make ends meet for her children. Even once she and her husband reconciled, she was out of work and still taking food stamps.

Deborah found out about the South Plains Food Bank after she and her husband moved to the neighborhood: “The little old lady next door told me that they had a program where you could get help with groceries if you were in a lower income bracket. It was right down the street.” The process was simple and accepting, especially when compared with the public assistance bureaucracy that Deborah had been through. You filled out a form, and if you needed groceries, they gave them to you. But what surprised Deborah more was the fact that the food bank was run mostly by volunteers. “Well, I didn’t have a job,” she continues, “so I started just going over there and helping out as a volunteer. Eventually, they gave me a part-time job when a position came open—a paid position.” Deborah was now putting in eight-hour days—half volunteer, half paid. And she was still getting some donated food.

Deborah was finally able to get off food stamps altogether when the food bank helped her get her commercial truck driving license and hired her full-time. They also trained her as a supervisor for the new dehydration plant they had built, which for Deborah was a big step. Her pay went up, and she got a real “sense of pride about what I was doing.” When the plant closed, Deborah went part-time at the food bank and part-time at a local smoke shop. But her passion, she learned, wasn’t driving trucks or sorting cans. It was in the garden.

When Deborah first started volunteering, the South Plains Food Bank primarily worked with donated canned food and fresh vegetables. But things really picked up when they started a community garden program on some vacant lots that had been donated, to which the city agreed to
supply free water. The food bank would help needy individuals set up garden plots and grow their own food. Deborah got a plot herself. After a couple of years she was among the many food bank gardeners who found that she was able to grow more than her family needed. Some of her surplus went back to the food bank, some to a market the food bank had set up so families could supplement their income while cutting back on their grocery bills.

Deborah sold shares of her plot to five people: one is the executive director of the food bank, another is her grant writer. Both are too busy with the office to get out into the fields, but they love fresh produce. The other three shares belong to people who heard of Deborah through word of mouth. Deborah uses their money to pay for plants and supplies, and pays them back in food. Each week, she personally delivers a harvest. During a good season, even a sixth of her crop is too much for the families to eat themselves, and Deborah's shareholders can make a little money selling the excess at work.

Now there's always plenty of good food at the Cline residence. Deborah says she's learned how to stagger her crops so she can bring home fresh-picked produce year-round. She talks about tips she's picked up at the food bank and over the Internet on how to keep her garden pest- and pesticide-free. She meets with other gardeners to exchange healthy recipes. Having raised her children on what food she could afford on a small paycheck and a government supplement, she can definitely see and feel the difference: "I hated saying, 'Well, I'm sorry, you're having beans and potatoes again because that's all I've got.' That was the most heartbreaking thing in my life. To not be able to feed them like I felt they should be fed."

Her two youngest kids, both college bound, don't take many trips to the doctor these days, and look visibly healthier, Deborah says. There's a lot of pride in her statement, but she adds that pride isn't the only feeling she gets from her garden: "It's a lot of work, but there's a peacefulness. There's a sense of accomplishment at the end of the day when I kick back and my garden looks gorgeous." And since her garden is chemical-free, she continues, "When I pick a tomato off the vine, I can just stand right there and eat it." The same thing will go for the grapes that she planted for the first time in the season before she was interviewed: "This year we put up our first trellises and our first grape arbor, and, I mean, it gives you a sense of amazement to see the vines climbing over them. Now it looks like someplace you'd actually like to go sit out and relax in."

For most, bringing home work means bringing home stress. When Deborah brings work home, it carries that same sense of calm. "My husband is seeing that I'm getting a little carried away," she says, laughing. "I have three gardens in my yard, growing along my fence. One little plot out front, two little plots in the back." She's been trying new things, like asparagus and strawberries, that are expensive in stores. With another laugh, she says, "I just haven't gotten to the mushrooms yet."

Mushrooms are one of the few things Deborah picks up in the store. Lettuce doesn't last long, so she might buy an occasional head. She used to buy a few canned goods, but now that she knows how to preserve her crops in jars or by running them through a dehydrator, all she really buys is meat. One of the plots she helps out on is full of fruit trees, and then there's fresh honey from the beehives. Her Waldorf salad ingredients, pecans and all, are the result of her own joyful toil. And since everything has been carefully cultivated, she says, she knows the difference and could never go back to store-bought produce.

"You have more blemishes than what you would have in the store. They're not genetically engineered to be perfectly round or have the perfect skin. But when you bite into a tomato—the flavor," she sighs, "is incredible. I used to not know that tomatoes had any taste. I have lemon cucumbers that have a sweet, lemony flavor. You know, the cucumbers in the store kind of just have the same flavor and it's not a strong flavor. When I pick up a banana melon, that cantaloupe smell is just... it's such a sweet, clean, fresh smell."

As she eloquent description of the simple pleasures of growing your own food makes clear, Deborah almost bubbles over with enthusiasm about the effect the South Plains Food Bank has had on Lubbock. Everyone who has a piece of the thirty-three lots developed by the program shares food—someone may have had a bad year, but others will make up the difference. They lend one another a hand on projects big and small, exchange tips, and provide encouragement. When Deborah was on public assistance, she felt alone. That feeling is gone: "You know you're not the only one struggling. You've got all these other people who are struggling too, but you're all gaining from the experience. You're steadily moving up."
Help for the program comes from all quarters. Churches, schools, sororities and other groups from Texas A&M, the Rotary Club, nonviolent offenders completing community service requirements, the city of Lubbock, and corporate donors like John Deere, Case, Water Master, and Bioflora have all pitched in. "The whole community in Lubbock has really jumped behind these programs," Deborah says, "the businesses, churches, everybody. You meet people and get to know them, instead of being just strangers passing by."

Deborah sees a moving effect on the children who come to work there. Some of them are as young as six, out on a field trip. They come by the busload. Some are at-risk teens. They come via social service organizations. "They know their work is important," Deborah says, "because they deliver the vegetables too. They take it and they see the families that they are helping. And they're able to take vegetables home to their own families. They're seeing the results of what they've done... They start out a little hesitant, because it's hot out in that sun, and swinging a hoe is hard. But when they look back and see how that squash can grow... they know they've done great."

Deborah earns about eight dollars an hour in her part-time job at the smoke shop, plus whatever she can make selling extra vegetables. But there's no question she's rich: she's in control of her life and also part of something larger than her. What's the biggest difference between her life ten years ago, before the food bank, and her life since? Deborah answers without hesitation: "I don't feel like I have anybody controlling me or watching over me or dictating what I do. I don't belong to the state anymore. And they're no longer keeping me stuck on that level of not being able to better myself. I have bettered myself, and I feel proud of what I've accomplished."

And what about that strain of the American dream bent on building fortunes? "I really don't think that Americans all want to be filthy rich," Deborah says. "I think everybody would just like to be in a position where they can pay their bills, make sure their kids have shoes. And not have pressure. Not have the high pressure." Deborah has managed to banish the "high pressures" from her life. Her work is actually relaxing and spiritually fulfilling, and she has few wants she can't meet. She speaks of how, just the other day, her kids wanted to go see a movie—so she picked an extra twenty tomatoes. It's an anecdote that succinctly cap-