



Chaney Kwak wanted to play a small part in saving the humble honeybee. What he found instead was a new source of serenity.

a sweeter purpose

Photographs by
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Clockwise from top left: Gigi Trabant holds a smoker, which calms bees; a honeybee on a flower; 12-year-old Andrzej Davis Krukowski holds a comb; honey ready to eat.





From left: Beekeeping tools, including protective clothing and a smoker; Cheryl Chang in her beekeeping suit.

There may be no way to compute an accurate number, says Dewey M. Caron, PhD, an entomologist and affiliate professor at Oregon State University, but nonprofessional beekeepers are thought to own up to 10 percent of colonies. “That may not sound significant,” he says. “But they serve a crucial part in maintaining bee populations.”

There was no eureka moment when I decided to become a beekeeper. Over the years I read about the crucial pollinator role played by the 20,000-some different species of bees (including the popular honeybee). I day-dreamed about lending them a spot to live—my idea of low-commitment community service, perhaps. I read a few blogs, fell into a YouTube rabbit hole, and took a weekend class. Once I was reasonably confident, I answered a call to adopt a hive.

My bees were rescued in Silicon Valley. Having stealthily nested in an abandoned house in Palo Alto, this colony was about to become homeless when developers fixed up the building. (If ever there was a place for a joke about the Bay

Area’s housing shortage, this would be it.) Just in the nick of time, three volunteers got in to move the sheets of waxy comb—full of honey, bees, and soon-to-hatch babies—into a Langstroth hive, a box used for keeping bees.

My friend Cheryl Chang was one of the rescuers. Though master beekeepers spend a lifetime honing their skills, picking up the basics is less intimidating than most people might think. Cheryl went from a complete novice to someone capable of capturing wayward swarms by beekeeping a few hours a week over two years.

In Mountain View, better known for tech giants than bucolic pursuits, Cheryl, who works at a charitable foundation by day, keeps a tidy garden of avocado trees and pineapple guava bushes. Tucked into the corner, her two hives whirl with activity almost year-round, producing gallons of honey more fragrant than anything from a store. In fact, some studies find that bees—which forage for miles a day—are healthier in cities and suburbs, where they have access to more diverse diets, than on monocultural farmland with only, say, almond blossoms. A varied diet can lead to higher honey yields, some say.

But Cheryl’s not in it for the nectar. “My beehives are like pets,” she says. “They’re part of my family.”

Quite a statement for creatures you can’t exactly teach to fetch. And forget snuggling up with them on the couch. But now that I’m taking my colony home, I start to understand her comment.

As soon as we remove the netting that keeps the hive sealed for the car ride, dozens of bees spill out and hover around the hive’s entrance. A few bees form a lineup on the landing strip of the entrance and start what could only be described as twerking.

“They’re fanning out the hive’s scent,” Cheryl tells me, “so the other bees from the colony can find their way back.”

Right away I’m smitten. Everything clicks in my head. I’m less a landlord or an amused dilettante than a guardian. The responsibility for these lives suddenly weighs down on me. To stave off an imminent anxiety attack, I concentrate on what I’ve learned about bees.

A FEW MONTHS BACK, I sat with about 30 people, most under 35, in a warehouse doubling as the classroom for San Francisco Honey & Pollen Co. We were at an introductory beekeeping class, and for most of us, the translucent comb being passed around was the first we’d touched of the geometric structure bees build with their wax secretions.

By trade, John McDonald is a structural engineer, retrofitting homes for earthquakes, but he’s also an enthusiast who derives some income from keeping bees. He started with a few hives at his lumber warehouse as a hobby with his daughter Christina, and by 2006 he was selling honey and sharing



Gigi Trabant pulls out a frame of bees from her hives.

a **S THE MILD SAN FRANCISCO** morning sun fills the back of my car, I wrestle with two stacked boxes buzzing with a low hum. I can’t afford to slip or drop them: Inside is a colony of honeybees.

Until recently I was a helpless city slicker, prone to startling and swatting at anything that buzzed. Yet here I am, veiled and covered up, hugging two supers—wooden boxes making up a hive—full of bees, wax, and honey. I’m now one of many amateur beekeepers fostering the creatures in cities and suburbs around the country.

Numbers of us vary, with some studies citing upwards of 120,000 Americans looking after honeybees on rooftops and in backyards.



Andrzej Davis Krukowski and his father, Anton, tend their hives.

know-how. Now he teaches more than 1,200 students a year.

Honeybees today have it harder than ever. Coming into public consciousness in 2006, the massive disappearance of bees, known as colony collapse disorder, kills up to half of all hives in some areas, with some beekeepers reporting 90 percent of their stock perishing. In some places, bee losses have decreased or been attributed to mites, but in others,

the collapse remains unexplained. Despite the urgency—and the subsequent popularity of amateur beekeeping classes—only a select few actually pursue the hobby.

Who were these curious onlookers spending their day off in beekeeping suits? A couple next to me revealed that they were on a second date. Another woman confided that she was just there for the tasting. Many came, from the sight of it, to snap selfies in white coveralls. Then a dyed-in-the-wool Berkeley baby boomer declared, “We all should help bees save the world.” Though some sci-

entists counter that the role honeybees play in human survival is a little exaggerated, there’s no question that these prolific pollinators, along with native bumblebees and thousands of other kinds, aid the survival of crops—which keep feeding us.

For the next few hours, we got a crash course. A colony, we learned, is led by a queen who takes to the sky only for a few days to mate and spends the rest of her life laying eggs. A small number of eggs develop into drones, or male bees whose sole purpose is to mate with a queen from a different hive and, oh cruel nature, immediately die. But most become female worker bees who devote their lives to labor. Their tasks evolve as they mature, not unlike humans who get promoted. They help develop the infrastructure of the hive and learn to guard it from intruders before eventually leaving to forage for nectar, pollen, and water. They work themselves to death in as little as six weeks, replaced by the generations they raised.

It’s tempting to anthropomorphize bees. Some hives are genial, while others appear downright mean—as broad as the spectrum of human personalities. McDonald, in only shorts and a veil, opened a hive to reveal some bees that were so docile, he left his hands ungloved. The queen’s genetics and pheromones determine her colony’s personality, and it’s not unheard of for a beekeeper to dethrone her and set up a new royal if the subjects are deemed too violent.

LUCKILY FOR ME, my hive turns out to be very mellow. I fret about everything—whether to keep feeding them sugar syrup to ease their transition, whether they’re hovering around the hive too much—prompting my friends to say I sound like the nervous first-time moms they used to be. “Stop worrying you might kill them,” they advise me, “and just enjoy.”

Weeks after their arrival, they learn to soar high above the house and head toward Golden Gate Park, a buffet of prime forage. I worry less and less that these gentle newcomers will attack neighbors—a relief because, although cities from New York to Los Angeles have been changing laws to allow beekeeping, many urban dwellers, not to mention those allergic to bee stings, understandably fear living next door to multiple beehives. By law, San Francisco allows its residents to keep bees without permits, while other places require beekeepers to inform their neighbors. Many beekeepers try to keep things under wraps.

“In an effort to be discreet, I painted the hives green, tucked them between greenery in the corner, and never told the neighbors,” says Gigi Trabant, another hobbyist. She began taking beekeeping classes the month after she retired from nursing in 2011. But her attempts at stealth ended when half of a colony decided to pack up and leave (a phenomenon called swarming). One spring day, thousands of Gigi’s bees whipped themselves into a frenzy and moved en masse across her yard in San Francisco’s Outer Richmond neighborhood.

Gigi says her neighbors actually enjoyed witnessing the swarm, and today they count as some of her bees’ biggest champions. But she still takes care to open her boxes to check the colony’s health only on weekdays when her neighbors’ children are at school. She passes around jars of honey at holidays.

Of course, for every happy ending like Gigi’s, you’ll hear a nightmare story of miffed neighbors threatening to sue. So to avoid potential conflicts, father and son Anton and Andrzej Davis Krukowski, who also live in San Francisco, set up their hives on a family friend’s property better suited for beekeeping than theirs.

Andrzej, then 9, wanted to overcome his fear of getting stung by making beekeeping his independent learning project at school. “I was reluctant,” says Anton. “I thought it was overambitious for a fourth grader.”

But Andrzej, now 12, has the maturity befitting a son of two teachers and approached the project with seriousness. “You get a lot more experience with bees than just fun,” he says. “It’s almost like looking at art.”

Tending to their hives has become a bonding experience for the duo over the past three years. Lately, though, Andrzej has been feeling a bit unmotivated: “I still enjoy it once we go there, but now it feels more like a responsibility. Video games are much easier.”

If his son’s enthusiasm has fluctuated, Anton has grown more interested. “There’s something very hypnotic about opening up a hive and seeing them,” he says. “It becomes a meditative activity.”

To my surprise, I discovered that few things calm me like having hundreds of bees buzz about.

I know exactly what he means. Sure, it hasn’t been smooth sailing: I’ve gotten stung, including once on my forehead, which swelled like a tumor. Battling ants is a constant struggle, and during one routine check I dropped a frame full of honey, destroying months’ worth of bees’ labor in one smash.

But to my surprise, I discovered that few things calm me like having hundreds of bees buzz about. As a reluctant California transplant, I’m not one to use words like “mindfulness,” but beekeeping gives me a taste of the serenity that meditation enthusiasts extol. The bees’ murmur drowns out the competing thoughts in my head—about the home renovation that’s going all wrong, loved ones’ recent health diagnoses, work deadlines. Even at the end of the worst day, I calm down when I sit by the hive and watch the bees at work, gracefully soaring along paths decipherable only to them. When I need comic relief, I look for the ones returning home, heavy with nectar. They collide with others or miss the landing, comically traipsing down before floating again.

In a few short months, the bees have provided more solace than any self-help book. They let me feel at one with nature and time as I watch them sustain the world. I breathe without thinking, and soon I realize I can simply be. It’s a cliché, I know, but by adopting these creatures, I was saved.