

Learning all about the food we eat

By **CHRISTINE BATES**

Staff Reporter

MILLBROOK—"Inc." is the most important part of the 2008 Oscar-nominated movie, "Food, Inc.," that was shown at the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies on Friday night, Feb. 25.

The "Inc." aspect is more frightening than the blood, beef carcasses and assembly lines of dead pigs. The film is a smorgasbord of vast fields of corn, dark chicken houses, feed lots, slaughter and fast food—a snappy history and explanation of how our factory food chain was created over the last 50 years.

Most people in the Cary audience knew about the dangers that industrialized cheap food poses to animals, to the environment and to human health, from contaminated hamburger meat to high fructose corn syrup, but the film linked these issues to the influence of corporate agri-giants.

The importance of "Food, Inc." is political. It exposes the practices of giant global agribusiness corporations like Tyson Foods and Purdue that dominate our food production. For example, the top four processors control more than 80 percent of United States meat production.

Human tragedy is marbled through the dead meat, like the story of Kevin Kowalczyk, a 2-year-old Colorado boy who died from E. coli contamination of a hamburger in 2001.

Today, years after that event and the release of "Food, Inc.," the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) still does not have the power to close down an infected processing facility. Kevin's Law, which would give the USDA that power, still languishes in Congress. Why? The answer is the revolving door among politicians, agribusiness executives and regulators.

The film visits a principled chicken farmer in the South, where poultry production has replaced tobacco growing, who was put out of business by Perdue because she refused to raise her chickens in the dark.

The filmmaker interviews a poor family who can only afford fast food to the detriment of their health.

Illegal immigrants are shown working in dangerous meat processing plants and being arrested by immigration police while the companies that employ them, like Smithfield, with the largest meat processing plant in the world, are never prosecuted.

Experts of more responsible food production, Eric Schlosser, the author of "Fast Food Nation" and a co-producer of the film, and Michael Pollan, author of "The Omnivores Dilemma," are interviewed as the film moves from fast food in the 1950s to acres of genetically modified corn—200 bushels of corn are now harvested on land that used to yield only 20 bushels. More than 30 percent of United States agricultural land is planted in corn, and corn is in everything we eat. It feeds chickens, pigs, cattle and fish and keeps food prices low.

Special attention is paid to Monsanto, which, at the time the movie was made in 2008, sold 90 percent of the soybean seed in the United States, all of it genetically modified and patent protected. Monsanto's soybeans are engineered to resist Round Up so it can be sprayed on fields, killing weeds and increasing yields.

Farmers who don't buy seed from Monsanto are investigated by a staff of 75 and eventually taken to court by Monsanto's legal team. The film shows one farmer who refused and cleaned his crop for seed the next year. Monsanto sued for patent infringement and the small farmer had to pay up because he couldn't afford to fight them anymore in court.

While the concentration of capital, power and influence seems overwhelming, there are companies like Stonyfield Farms, which is now selling yogurt to Walmart, and organic farmer Joel Salatin, a farmer in Virginia who makes a living raising grass-fed cattle and very cute pigs, and engagingly speaks about organic food while butchering free-range chickens.

The message of the movie is for

consumers to reject factory foods, spend more and know what they are eating. It encourages people to plant a garden, eat with their family, buy in season, buy locally.

Following the movie, two local farmers, Don Lewis of Wild Hive in Clinton Corners and David Hamilton of Sisters Hill Farm in Stanfordville, fielded questions from the audience.

Hamilton told the audience that Sisters Hill's mission is not profit, but producing healthy food that nurtures the human body, spirit, communities and the earth.

Lewis, who has built a business developing and grinding Hudson Valley cereal grains, said he felt the movie was extreme because it would turn anyone into a vegetarian, but is

nonetheless important. He talked about the issue of food security—clean, quality food sold at a fair price by your neighbors.

Lewis plans to build his own seed-cleaning operations this year to give local dairy farmers the ability to produce extra income. He acknowledged he expects to be sued.

Hamilton, when asked about whether enough food could be produced by a more sustainable food system, reminded the audience that Sisters Hill harvests 90,000 pounds of vegetables on just 5 acres.

Both recommended buying food locally at farmers markets or signing up for a Community Supported Agriculture program, like Sisters Hill, to get the freshest produce all summer long.