



youth

renewing the countryside



youth renewing the
countryside



youth : renewing the countryside

A PROJECT OF:

Renewing the Countryside

PUBLISHED BY:

Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE)

WITH SUPPORT FROM THE CENTER FOR RURAL STRATEGIES AND THE W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION

SARE's mission is to advance—to the whole of American agriculture—innovations that improve profitability, stewardship and quality of life by investing in groundbreaking research and education.

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Renewing the Countryside builds awareness, support, and resources for farmers, artists, activists, entrepreneurs, educators, and others whose work is helping create healthy, diverse, and sustainable rural communities.

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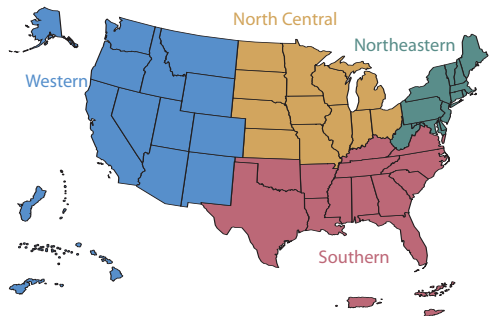
SARE, Youth, and Sustainable Agriculture



A farm is to a beginning farmer what a blank canvas is to an aspiring artist. It is no wonder then that America's youth are some of agriculture's greatest innovators and experimenters. The evidence is right here between the covers of this book—youth driving rural renewal by testing new ideas on farms, ranches, and research stations across the country. SARE supports these pioneers. In this book, read about the Bauman family farm in Kansas, the Full Belly Farm in California or the Living Forestry Coop in Wisconsin, all examples of farms or projects that have received a SARE grant to test and develop new ideas—and which, in turn, have enlisted young people in their efforts. See www.sare.org/projects.

SARE is a grassroots grant making and outreach program advancing sustainable agriculture across America. SARE supports farmers, ranchers, and educators—young and old—as they explore new models for everything from clean energy farming to direct marketing to practices that protect the land and revitalize communities. SARE is grassroots: Four regional councils of top researchers, educators, and farmers set SARE policies and make grants in every corner of the nation. SARE Outreach produces and distributes practical, how-to information based on the program's more than twenty years of research results. See www.sare.org/publications.

SARE is funded by the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) at USDA and since its beginning in 1988 has invested a total of \$161 million in more than 4000 initiatives. More than 7 percent of these grants are dedicated to fostering the next generation of farmers by helping them secure land and financing and farm more sustainably. See www.sare.org/grants.



SARE's four regional offices and outreach office work to advance sustainable innovations to the whole of American agriculture.

Renewing the Countryside



Renewing the Countryside works to strengthen rural areas by sharing information on sustainable development, providing practical assistance and networking opportunities, and fostering connections between urban and rural citizens.

This is the ninth in a series of books Renewing the Countryside has created in partnership with others. Each book shares stories of rural renewal and all are part of an education campaign aimed at building awareness and support for the people, practices, and policies that help create healthy, sustainable, and equitable rural communities.

Other national Renewing the Countryside initiatives include:



Green Routes— a sustainable travel program that helps diversify rural economies. The program directs people to places where they can eat, play, sleep, shop, move, and learn in ways that support a sustainable countryside. See www.greenroutes.org.



Journeys with First Nations—like Green Routes, but on and near Indian country, in partnership with Native peoples.

In the Upper Midwest, Renewing the Countryside's work includes:



Local Food Hero—A radio show that discusses the growing, cooking, eating, and politics of food.



Healthy Local Foods at the EcoExperience—Educating the public about local food systems and sustainable agriculture through an innovative, interactive exhibit at the Minnesota State Fair.



Got Local?—Networking workshops that bring together farmers and buyers of local foods.



Creating Value-Added Communities—Facilitating communities through a process that helps them develop strategies for creating wealth and reducing poverty, while planning for sustainable economic development.

To read more stories of people revitalizing their rural communities or to learn about and support this work, visit www.renewingthecountryside.org.



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introduction

Our countryside defines America as universally as baseball, hot dogs, and apple pie and as deeply as the Statue of Liberty and the Lincoln Memorial. Whether we live in the middle of Manhattan or the suburbs of Peoria, we depend on a healthy countryside: It supplies the food we eat. It is vital to providing clean water and clean air. It is a haven for wildlife and wildflowers—a reservoir of biodiversity. It supplies the products with which we build our homes and the fibers from which our clothing is made. We flock to the countryside for recreation and rest—whether it’s the slopes of the Rockies, a quiet getaway in the Northwoods, or a visit to relatives in the middle of the Heartland. Our rural areas are rich with culture, history, and hometown values that resonate with many of us.

Yet the value of the countryside has not shielded it from hard times. Rural areas and small towns have suffered from the decline in natural resource-based industries like forestry, fishing, and agriculture. The patchwork of small farms that once dominated our countryside has been replaced by large tracks of single crop farmland or paved over to make way for housing developments and shopping complexes. Communities that relied on manufacturing have seen enormous declines as jobs have moved abroad and factories have closed.

Combine lack of ready-made jobs in rural areas with young people’s zest to explore the world, and it is not surprising that many of our youth head off to urban centers for education, employment, adventure, and excitement. It is not their departure that is of concern, but that most do not return. This perpetuates further decline in already aging communities. And while rural communities lament the loss of their young, they often are partly responsible. They frequently foster a climate that deters young people from joining their community. Sometimes it’s a patronizing attitude towards those who return; other times it’s a closed mind to new ideas or new leaders.

Young people are vital to maintaining vibrant, rural areas. We need them for their ideas, their energy, and their ability to see things differently. We need them to steward our land and our history. We need them to grow food, harvest energy, and manage our forests. We need them to help create a new, more sustainable, more just economy.

The good news is that not all smart, hardworking young people land in Seattle, Atlanta, or other urban hubs. A growing number are embracing life in rural communities and small towns. As we set out to find them, we were inspired—not only by how many we found, but by their ambition and dedication. Some are building on their history and



culture. Others are creating uniquely, twenty-first century opportunities like renewable energy businesses or Internet-based companies. Some are fighting for environmental or social justice. Many have found a foothold in building a stronger, healthier food system.

We use the word “countryside” broadly. While many of these stories come from very small towns or vast tracks of land in the West, others are set in urban areas. A piece of the countryside can prevail amidst impinging urban development; it can exist in an urban school garden or at a farmers’ market.

The young people showcased here are representative of many more we didn’t have room to include. The stories we have included are told by another inspiring group— young writers and photographers who beautifully captured them for these pages.

We hope this book inspires you—whether you’re a teenager looking toward your future or a mom deciding what to buy for dinner. Whether you’re the president of the United States or the mayor of a small town. Despite the uncertain times in which we live, these stories assure us that we can have great hope. These young people are not just renewing the countryside, they are changing the world.

— Jan Joannides, Executive Director
Renewing the Countryside

one : farming for the future

From Connecticut to California and everywhere in between, a hearty crop is taking root. And what is this groundbreaking new species? Smart, young people who are returning to the roots of American agriculture—roots steeped in a tradition and culture of diversity, quality, and respect for the earth.

While their contemporaries go off to be lawyers and doctors, teachers and computer programmers, this crop of young people sees a promising future in a new farming paradigm. Using progressive farming practices as well as time-honored traditions, they are sowing the seeds of a new agriculture, where success is measured against a triple bottom line of economic, environmental, and social considerations.

In this chapter, we meet a few of these young trailblazers who are breaking the mold, through innovation, hard work, and a commitment to living in harmony with nature. They see a future where small and mid-sized farms are a larger part of American agriculture, and rural communities draw in new people to farm.

Change is in the air. People across the country are rediscovering a passion for food grown closer to home and with a focus on quality. They want to know where their food comes from. It is this crop of clever young farmers, and those who follow in their footsteps, who are our hope—for a better food system and a healthier planet.



Before Organic

south carolina : shaheed harris



“It’s like that song. You know it?” asks Shaheed Harris, who is wearing a black “Trix are for Kids” T-shirt and New Balance sneakers. “We were country before country was cool.”

His soft voice peals with laughter. He’s right. Shaheed’s family turned back to work the land at a time when doing so was nearly unheard of, and hardly recommended. Later, they became the one of the first farms in South Carolina to become certified organic. The decision to farm was made out of necessity more than any conscious choice. Shaheed’s father, Azeez Mustafa, had worked on an assembly line at DuPont and was laid off right before Shaheed was born.

“My job title was ‘Group II,’” Azeez recalls. “Back in the seventies, DuPont was

“Our tomatoes don’t grow perfectly round, but they taste ten thousand times better than supermarket tomatoes. As long as we can get our food in people’s mouths, the battle’s not really with the larger farmer.”



the highest-paying job around. Actually, it was the only job around. Either you got a job at DuPont, or you went north. Farming would no longer support a family.”

After Azeez was laid off, the family lost their house, their car, and practically everything else. He built a handsawn house, in which they lived for thirteen years. They lived by lamplight, with wood fires and a kerosene stove, and became strict vegetarians—often eating raw or dumpster-salvaged food.

“Stress of mind brings expansion of mind,” says Azeez, shrugging. “It was a training camp for organic farming. We grew our own vegetables and medicinal herbs, and we foraged. You know, organic, non-irrigation farming is just a poor man’s way of growing food. That’s how everyone used to do it, up ‘til the 1960s.”

According to Shaheed, South Carolina is the perfect place for growing food. Even today, Azeez’s wife, Fathiyyah, claims they don’t need to buy anything other than soy milk, and they use honey from a local seller instead of sugar. “There’s nothing you can’t grow here,” he explains. “We’re close to the coast and get the spin-off from hurricanes. When you see trees growing fifty-feet tall without water, you figure there must be a way for the sweet potatoes.”

Irrigation, they figure, makes for plants that might grow bigger—but lack the nutrients and flavor the plants get by stretching their roots deeper into the soil to find their own water and minerals.

“Whenever we buy seeds—usually from California—the first crop is always the worst,” Shaheed notes. “We save the seeds that grew successfully, and every time we replant, they adapt and become stronger. You’re actually training your plant to deal with the environment. The seed is built to help itself, you know. And every generation improves.”

The family uses okra seeds that originated from plants Shaheed’s grandfather grew, and seeds collected from watermelons his father nurtured as a child—giving a personal meaning to the concept of “heirloom varieties.”

According to Azeez, only 5 percent of the food in South Carolina is produced in the state. Emile DeFelice, a recent candidate for the position of South Carolina Commissioner of Agriculture, ran using the slogan: “Put your state on your plate!” He lost.

“And people wonder why our state is poor,” Azeez veritably thunders. “If you don’t support the local people, what do you think is gonna happen!”

Thankfully, local support is growing. When the family—all three generations, including Shaheed’s daughter Asya—goes to the farmers’ markets, they sell out every time.

“Our tomatoes don’t grow perfectly round, but they taste ten thousand times better than supermarket tomatoes,” says Shaheed proudly. “As long as we can get our food in people’s mouths, the battle’s not really with the larger farmer. But we spend a lot of time educating the consumer.”

Becoming organically certified was a relatively simple matter. According to family records, the land had been free of chemicals for decades longer than the requisite three years. South Carolina State University established an outreach program

for minority farmers, and Clemson University helped certify the farm in 2003. A nonprofit called Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, which has been fostering sustainable agriculture since 1979, recognized the Mustafa family from the start and named them Farmers of the Year in 2006 to reward their hard work.

Today, Azeez and Fathiyyah travel and teach classes about non-irrigation farming and how to work with the weather, and other natural cycles.

After becoming certified organic, the Mustafas teamed up with eight like-minded farmers in the area to set up Sumter Cooperative Farms. To date, it is the largest organic farm cooperative in the state. The co-op continues to expand, having identified another eight farms that are on their way to being certified. They stagger the products of each grower to help them meet the demands of the market: watermelon, mizuna, and arugula are particularly sought after. Treated like living plants, the freshly picked greens stand in a pan of water, like cut flowers, until their customers pick them up.

The Mustafas specialize in salads, greens, and medicinal herbs.

“We couldn’t afford to go to the doctor when Shaheed was growing up,” says Azeez. “So we learned as much as possible about taking care of ourselves. We spent thirteen years without a television, remember? So we had time. Now we can afford it—but Aysa is eight and has never had to go to the doctor. You work with creation instead of against it.”

What kinds of herbs keep a whole family healthy for thirty years?

“Alfalfa is the mother of all herbs—a blood cleaner,” Azeez begins, counting off on his fingers: “I suggest that you use dandelion root and milk thistle to clean the liver. Cinnamon cleans the pancreas. Ginger and cayenne pepper are catalysts to clear out phlegm. Raw cranberries and thyme tea will help with kidney stones. What else? Yellow dock, burdock, echinacea, chaparral, red clover blossom. We use them all. Just use good food and herbs, and there, you’ve tuned the body up!”

“Be a good shepherd. . . . Start tearing up these beautiful yards and plant some beautiful vegetables instead!”

Fathiyyah adds, “The elders still knew certain things. And the more natural you become, the more remembrances come back to you. I read Rodale, and gave it all some thought, and tested a lot of ideas. Sure, pests are a problem, but spraying gets rid of too many things. We put down grits to fight the ants; we spray with cayenne pepper, or dish detergent, or vegetable oil. The deer loved our peas and beets, but I learned that if you put human hair in your garden, they stay away.” The local barbershop is happy to save up hair for Fathiyyah’s natural pest management.

Minimalism and self-sufficiency are unquestioned pillars. The Mustafas have a small tractor for running rows, but family members still do most of the work by hand with a stirrup hoe.

The Mustafas farm in a way that is far more sustainable, attentive, and holistic than the industrial greenhouses in California that share the “certified organic” sticker. As

organic standards loosen up increasingly, how are consumers to know the difference, when the labels look the same?

“Shop at farmers’ markets,” Shaheed stresses. “Buy local.”

This family didn’t choose organic farming for its economic or social advantages, per se. In fact, they react with what seems to be pleasant, unconcerned surprise at seeing their unusual lifestyle being adopted because, suddenly, it’s hip. Whole Foods takes legions of employees on tours of the Mustafa farm, where scarecrows stand erect in the fields, glaring at animals with the effrontery to approach.

You get the feeling that, were all excitement to disappear tomorrow, the family would just shrug and carry on. But though they seem oblivious to outside forces that would shake up their world, there’s nonetheless something of the prophet about both preacher-voiced Azeez and gentle Shaheed.

“Be a good shepherd,” says Shaheed. “Start tearing up these beautiful yards and plant some beautiful vegetables instead! Call us if you lose the way!”



A Piece of Rural Perfection

california :joaquina jacobo

Full Belly Farm forms a sunny patchwork of animals, plants, insects, and laborers working in collaboration to produce a bounty of crops for Sacramento and Bay Area residents. The 200-acre certified organic farm was founded in 1985 in Guinda, California, a small town about sixty miles northwest of Sacramento. The farm combines diverse agriculture with educational outreach and a firm commitment to environmental stewardship. On a typical day, Full Belly Farm hums busily as the farm’s fifty or so workers tend to chicken, sheep, and cows; harvest vegetables, herbs, flowers, and nuts; and prepare boxes for CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) subscriptions beneath a hot Central Valley sun.

Joaquina Jacobo is a vital fixture on Full Belly Farm. It can be difficult to locate her with the many roles she plays, such as picking vegetables, preparing flowers for farmers markets, packing Full Belly’s CSA boxes and working the farm’s market stand.

“She’s in the kitchen,” says one worker, while another suggests she’s at the washing machine. Just then, Joaquina strides from behind the shop with a wide, friendly smile and a greeting of, “Un momentito,” as she rushes to drop off a wheelbarrow before moving to the cool shade to talk about her journey to Full Belly Farm.

In 1994, as a young woman, Joaquina left her parents and siblings behind in Sinaloa, Mexico, to come to the United States with her then three-year-old son, Edgar. Her husband, Bonaficio, and a job picking vegetables were waiting for her at Full Belly Farm. As a young girl, Joaquina had learned the essentials of farm work and life in the countryside while growing up on her family’s small vegetable farm and cattle ranch in the mountains of Sinaloa. School was a three to four hour walk from her family home. With no car available, Joaquina was only able to attend through fourth grade. Despite her short career as a student, Joaquina sees the power of education and believes that education is the most important thing for youth to succeed.

Joaquina feels her own children, Edgar, sixteen, Briceda, thirteen, and Jose, nine, are receiving excellent educations at their school in Guinda. She’d like to see them go on to college. Fortunately, Joaquina’s work on Full Belly provides an adequate living for her family and allows her children to make choices she was never afforded.

While her formal education ended early, her work on the farm and with the public has taught her valuable lessons. As a new worker, Joaquina was a shy young woman. Today,



The serenity of Joaquina’s open face reflects neither the stress of hard labor nor that of parenting three children. “La vida rural es más tranquilo,” she explains after considering why she chooses a rural life.

she is an “excellent communicator and facilitator,” says Judith Redmond, one of the four Full Belly Farm founders. Judith describes Joaquina as focused on self-improvement—proven by her enrollment in classes to improve English skills and attain citizenship.

When she arrived at Full Belly Farm, Joaquina’s primary role was picking vegetables. Today, Joaquina wears many hats, but primarily works in quality control in the farm’s shop, a role she relishes. During her thirteen years with Full Belly Farm, Joaquina’s abilities have evolved symbiotically with the farm’s needs, capitalizing and building on her already positive and helpful nature.

“Los patrones son buenos amigos,” says Joaquina as she describes her close relationship with Fully Belly Farm’s owners and the family feel among the farm staff. While the work is hard, Joaquina believes she has a good job. Weekly yoga on the farm helps balance the stress involved with her work. The entire farm staff, Joaquina’s sixteen-year-old son included, comes together to stretch tired muscles every Friday morning. When asked if he enjoys the yoga, Edgar says, “Yeah, it’s pretty cool,” a ringing endorsement from a teenager.

In contrast to Joaquina’s long-term employment with Full Belly Farm, many of California’s 600,000 farm workers are employed by labor contractors, and work on a temporary basis. Most are men, age twenty-five to thirty-five, who work seasonal jobs ranging from three to ten weeks. According to a National Agricultural Worker’s Survey from 2003-2004, 43 percent of all individual farm workers and 30 percent of farm worker families earned less than ten thousand dollars per year.

The serenity of Joaquina’s open face reflects neither the stress of hard labor nor that of parenting three children. “La vida rural es más tranquilo,” she explains after considering why she chooses a rural life. Joaquina likes that she can leave keys in her car. She appreciates pure air and sees more opportunities for independence in open spaces. While she enjoys the independence of rural life, Joaquina also remains closely connected to her fellow farm workers. She makes sure that new immigrant laborers on Full Belly Farm understand the differences in United States’ labor practices, such as using disinfectant liquids or working hourly instead of on contract. Joaquina’s communication skills, concern for others, and deep knowledge of Fully Belly’s operations make her role a natural fit.

Leaving the shady sanctuary of the garden, Joaquina walks through the farm’s shop where her nearly grown son is busy sorting vegetables. She points from buckets overflowing with bright flower blossoms to the farm’s fruit trees. Drying fruit lines the path while bees buzz through the grass, hard at work doing their part for the farm’s production.

At the end of the orchard row are flower fields where kneeling workers are busy weeding. Finally, around the backside of the shop, Joaquina arrives at a large pile of dried garlic heads where two men sort. After a few words with them about the work they have been doing, she digs through the pile and finds what she is looking for, an enormous, brilliantly white head of garlic that is nearly the size of her small hand. Joaquina smiles, proud of the abundance she sees in a short walk around the farm. In her hand she holds a product of the farm’s intensely collaborative effort, and a small piece of rural perfection.

An Independent Path

minnesota : jason & laura penner

Driving to Jason and Laura Penner’s farm outside of Butterfield, Minnesota, one is struck by the massive scale of agriculture carpeting the landscape. Giant wind turbines, multi-barn conventional hog operations, and endless fields of corn and soy swallow up acres upon acres. This is the modern face of Midwestern agriculture, but it is one in which human faces are strangely absent. People aren’t a common feature of this landscape, unless you stop to fill up at the local gas station, or maybe visit the local school in session.

The daily reality of life on rural Minnesota’s southwestern prairie is that everything seems larger than life, except for the population—especially youth. This is why the Penner family and their small-scale hog operation break the mold.

For Jason, farming wasn’t always in the cards. He left his family’s hog and crop farm in Minnesota to attend college in Indiana. Postcollege, he stayed in Indiana and worked as a software consultant. He also met and married Laura, a nurse from Fort Wayne. She grew up in the city, and though her grandparents had farmed, she was not accustomed to life in a rural community.

After a few years, Jason grew unhappy in his office job and decided to return to Minnesota to farm. Laura notes, “Jason told me from the beginning that he wanted to move back to the farm. I didn’t know what that all entailed, but I followed.”

“I really wanted to work for myself,” Jason explains. “If I farmed, I would have my own business to run and could be my own manager. And I just always liked farm life.”

Even with his family’s support, getting into farming was a major challenge. The hurdles facing most young farmers—accessing land, getting start-up capital, finding reliable markets—can be overwhelming. So before making the leap, Jason did some very careful planning.

He researched a company he had heard about called Niman Ranch, that supplies naturally-raised pork to Chipotle Mexican restaurants, among other vendors. Niman Ranch pays farmers a premium for hogs that are raised on pasture and in deep bedding without the use of antibiotics or growth hormones. Raising hogs for Niman Ranch appealed to Jason because of the steady market and the premium paid to Niman-certified hog farmers.



“I can remember most of my kindergarten class. I think 60 or 70 percent of them all grew up on farms, and now not a single one of them is farming, except me.”

As a beginning farmer, Jason was also interested in the type of hog farming that Niman Ranch promoted. The financial risks and upfront investment for raising hogs on pasture are significantly lower than raising hogs on contract in confinement barns. This made the enterprise more feasible for the Penners.

To help realize their farming dream, the Penners enrolled in the Land Stewardship Project’s Farm Beginnings program, a farmer-led educational training and support program that helps people evaluate and plan their farm enterprise. Jason and Laura made the four-hour round-trip drive to attend classes every other week. The program helped them set goals, understand financial planning and marketing, and provided on-farm education from seasoned farmers. At the end of the program, they had a solid business plan and by the spring of 2004, the farm was up and running.

Today, the Penners are a bustling young family with two small sons, Ian and Aiden. Laura works part-time as a nurse in a neighboring town when she’s not home with the kids. Jason has plenty of work to keep him busy on the farm, with thirty sows that he farrows twice a year and 210 acres of rented cropland planted in corn and soybeans. He also telecommutes as a software consultant for the same company he worked for in Indiana. This job provides most of his family’s living, though he splits his time about half and half between the farm and his software work.

In order to achieve his long-term goal of farming full-time, Jason plans to further expand the operation. He ultimately would like to have 120 sows, which will require additional infrastructure on the farm, and, potentially, more land. Acquiring enough farmland may be one of the biggest hurdles the Penners will face, due to high prices and limited availability. Right now, Jason rents six acres

from his dad that house the hoop barns and pastures, but the rest of his cropland is all rented from neighbors.

Laura explains, “The bigger farmers are just getting bigger because they have the money to buy land.” This makes it difficult for beginning farmers to compete on the same playing field.

Jason is fortunate to have one landlord who charges a reasonable rent as a show of support for the young farmer and his family. But finding a support network of

young farmers has been hard for the Penners for two reasons. First, their small-scale hog enterprise stands in stark contrast to the conventional hog operations that dot their neighborhood. Second, very few young people are encouraged to enter farming. As the landscape grows more barren, with fewer neighbors, Jason can see a marked difference in the area from when he grew up.

“I can remember most of my kindergarten class. I think 60 or 70 percent of them all grew up on farms,” he says, “and now not a single one of them is farming, except me.”

The dearth of farmers affects not only the composition of the southwest Minnesota countryside, but also that of the rural towns that speckle the former prairie. Jason remembers going with his father to the local hog buying station, and the sense of community that was integral to the experience.

“There were just always trucks,” he says. “People coming in with little livestock trailers, twenty to thirty head. There were always people talking. Now you go there, and you’re basically alone.”

Jason and Laura have been able to develop friendships with other young people in the surrounding communities—teachers, people in their church—but relationships with other farmers, outside of Jason’s dad, have been much harder to come by. That was one aspect of the Farm Beginnings classes that Laura appreciated as they set out to farm.

“When you’re surrounded with other farmers that are excited and like doing what they do, it’s kind of contagious,” Laura says.

The Penner family is an anomaly in this age of corporate agriculture. They have taken big risks in the pursuit of their dream, but Jason knows it is worth it in the long run. “I just really chose a route that I felt could be profitable, and that would let me be independent,” he says. “I don’t really want to manage a ton of people. I don’t want to farm by sitting in an office.”

The Penner’s business is well thought out. Jason comments, “Our farm is sustainable from a standpoint of sustaining the lifestyle I want, sustaining the profitability I want, and sustaining a different way of doing things.”

Like any other young parent and farmer, though, Jason struggles to keep the work-life balance in check. “If the pigs are out, the pigs are out. There’s no waiting ‘til tomorrow. But if you can manage things right and keep your priorities straight,” he adds, “it can be a really good place to have a family, and incorporate work and life together.”



“Our farm is sustainable from a standpoint of sustaining the lifestyle I want, sustaining the profitability I want, and sustaining a different way of doing things.”



Survival Takes Roots

new hampshire : chris, mike, & pat connolly

When asked how it is to work a dairy farm with his two brothers, soft-spoken Pat Connolly laughs sheepishly and answers, “A pain in the butt!”

Yet from 7 a.m. until well into the night, Chris, Mike, and Pat Connolly work as a team, constantly prioritizing and moving to the next task on the never-ending list of things to do. Jen, Chris’s wife, jokes that you never see them all in the same place in a day unless there’s food involved. This morning is no exception: one’s baling hay, one’s finishing the milking, and one’s skimming cream and bottling. But at 10 a.m., they coordinate their coffee break.

It happens every morning, no matter how busy they are. Each descends from a different corner of the land to the house that they grew up in—where their parents still live, quietly keeping watch over the comings and goings down the dairy farm’s dirt road. Sometimes neighbors, friends, wives, and parents join them, knowing that they’ll find a few moments of warmth, caffeine, and plenty of ribbing and joking.

The Connolly brothers were twelve, ten, and seven years old when their parents ventured into farming at their home in Temple, New Hampshire, population 400 at the time. The land is shrouded in mountains, punctuated by valleys, and back then was dotted with hundreds of dairy farms throughout the county. A decade or so after they arrived, Marty and Lynda Connolly decided to launch their own dairy farm.

They had no experience, and the three boys learned alongside their parents as neighbors and friends shared insight and lent a hand. Both older brothers, Chris and Mike, left the farm to go to the University of New Hampshire but returned when it became apparent that the farm was going to need all of them in order to survive.

At one point there were five dairy farms in the town of Temple alone. Today, there are five in the entire county. Many young people can no longer afford to live on the land where they grew up, as property taxes are rising. For those who want to return to farm, the costs run high—so high that Chris remarks, “If we raise our prices any more, we won’t be able to afford our own milk.”

There are fewer and fewer farmers around to help new ones get started. The properties around the Connolly’s that were once farmland are now estates—hilltops

crowned with mansions, second homes for wealthy families. Retirees are drawn to the novelty and slower pace of New Hampshire life in comparison with the high stress of New York or Boston.

Not only that, but to be a dairy farmer, “You’ve got to be tough as nails,” Marty states. There’s mud, manure, heavy machines, and milking at all hours. The Connolly’s all acknowledge that it’s hard to understand what it’s like until you’re doing it all day, every day. But in order to hold on, this farm is no longer “just” a dairy farm. As the nearby farms go under at an incomprehensible pace, the Connolly’s have converted every passion, interest, talent, logical next step, and possible idea into a business venture. They diversify to keep the farm going, and support four families in four houses.

There’s the milking, of course: the 7 a.m. wake up call of uncomfortable cows. They sell their milk to HP Hood, a national distribution company that pasteurizes and distributes milk. They also sell raw milk off the farm to a loyal customer base coming from as far away as Rochester, New Hampshire, and Boston, Massachusetts. The farm store is also where they make ice cream several times a week. Lynda, Jill (Pat’s wife), and Cindi (Mike’s wife) come home in the evenings from working off the farm to help keep ice cream orders filled. Chris and Jen raise chickens that supply the eggs that are in high demand. Pat and Jill raise pigs and Hereford-cross cows. They sell the beef from their cattle in the store. There’s a tin in the refrigerator to leave the money—all on the honor system. These are things you’d expect from a dairy farm, but there’s more.

They hay the fields of their neighbors. They convert tons of manure to compost and distribute it to local gardens. On the other side of the land, Marty runs a hunting lodge and breeds pheasants, rabbits, and quail to stock the land. He and Mike have at least a dozen Bassett hounds and several rehabilitated falcons all in training. Jen runs her own carding mill, spinning yarn from the wool of neighbors’ sheep. Lynda, Jen, Cindi, and Jill make pheasant pies, ice cream sandwiches, ice cream pops, sundaes, plus wool mittens, sweaters, and hats, to sell at the store.

Just when you think you would drop from the exhaustion, Pat jumps in with tales of the ski hill on their property and their work as groomers on the local mountain during the winter. Chris drives an oil truck. Mike is the fire chief. Pat is a volunteer fireman. They sit on all sorts of planning boards, determined to keep a handle on development and to advocate for their neighbors.

The farm has even won several awards, most recently as a finalist for the Green Pastures Award, which recognizes New England farms for their innovative environmental measures.

Some things remain the same for the Connolly brothers.

“Survival takes roots,” Marty Connolly remarks as he surveys his sons with a mixture of awe and pride, amazed that they have chosen this life to keep the family farm surviving. The fact of the matter is that they couldn’t do it without each other. They each speak with deep gratitude for their wives; for what they have sacrificed and for the radical adjustments they have made to live and work together.

The properties around the Connolly’s that were once farmland are now estates—hilltops crowned with mansions, second homes for wealthy families.

To an outsider, one wonders where the hours in the day come from and how it is possible to spend so much time working as hard as they do. Yet somehow, when they’re all sitting around during coffee break, they’re joking with each other that none of them has a real job—and maybe they don’t. They have a lifestyle—one that rolls work, play, family, love, and land all in to one.



The Noisy Little Farmer

connecticut : dan & tracy hayhurst



The name Chubby Bunny Farm conjures up a hearty laugh, but it’s a serious business for master farming Connecticut couple Dan and Tracy Hayhurst. Dan, thirty-two, gets up each morning to practice something like Kung Fu, moving his arms and legs in graceful circular motions, weaving sticks or bricks into graceful patterns to get his blood flowing for the day. With this start he can attack farm work with the paradoxical combination of intense energy and patient gentleness with which all great farmers treat their land. Soft spoken and courteous, Dan smiles as he explains how Chubby Bunny got its name.

“It’s sort of a joke. I guess it’s a game where you put marshmallows in your mouth, and if you say chubby bunny with the most amount of marshmallows in your mouth, you win. I thought that was hilarious,” he says.

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The Hayhursts take a lighthearted approach to their heavy work.

Dan found it much less hilarious when he raised more than twenty rabbits for meat and they escaped into his vegetable fields. His vegetables became a veritable Mr. McGregor’s garden for the many Peter Rabbits ravaging his crops. Dan and his wife, Tracy, stopped raising them because of the trouble they caused. Dan also felt uncomfortable slaughtering such an abundance of cute, small rabbits—just after tending vegetables—and decided to raise a few larger, better-behaved animals.

Now the most mischievous character at Chubby Bunny Farm is no doubt Beatrice “Butters” Hayhurst, Tracy and Dan’s young daughter, whose passions include *The Noisy Little Farmer* book and ransacking their small and comfortable post and beam home. Their home abounds with fresh produce and jars of pickled or diced vegetables to last through a cold New England winter.

The Hayhursts dwell in a sheltered valley in Northwestern Connecticut, bordering on verdant wilderness preserves and removed from the hustle and bustle of the nearby metropolises. Big forested hills loom on all sides of the farm, sheltering it from the worst conditions and making for a spectacular blaze of colors each fall. Narrow country roads wind through the dense woods around the farm, occasionally opening up into the small farmsteads and homes of their few neighbors. Despite their rural location, Tracy and Dan know the big city well. About one half of their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) clients live in New York City.

In a CSA, customers pay for “shares” in the farm and in return receive a bounty of produce on a weekly basis. The Hayhursts began delivering boxes of vegetables to the Big



Apple from land they were leasing in Stuyvesant, New York, in 2002. As this part of their business grew, Dan and Tracy became tired of the three hour drive to and from the city every week. Now that they live in a hilly rural area near their respective families where they grew up, Dan and Tracy arrange for the New Yorkers to send a truck to the farm once a week. Customers distribute the CSA goods themselves. Dan and Tracy focus more on their local community, finding nearby CSA members among former teachers, principals, and old high school friends.

When Dan needed some help on the farm one May, his older brother, Chris, volunteered. Chris writes on environmental issues and covers various adventure sports as a freelance journalist and rock climber. By the end of the summer, Chris grew to love working with his hands in the soil and cracking jokes beside his little brother. He often biked twenty-two miles each way, in addition to laboring all day on the farm.

Chubby Bunny regularly hosts farm apprentices. The apprentices appreciate Dan’s eagerness not just to work hard, but also to impart his intimate knowledge of farming gleaned from internships, farm jobs, and countless hours in the fields.

The Hayhurst family grows more vegetables than they need for their CSA members, so they participate in a local farmers’ market in Sheffield to sell the excess produce. They also have a little farm store in the barn where locals and CSA members come to pick up their weekly produce.

When customers arrive in the dark cool barn—built ages earlier by competent Swedish hands—they can purchase a variety of local products: homemade yogurt, organic salad dressing, pasture-raised beef. The Hayhursts love to carry other local products, as do their neighbors—marketing each other’s goods at their respective farm stores. With everything from maple syrup and fresh yogurt to old-style German sauerkraut coming from nearby producers, Dan and Tracy hardly need to go grocery shopping.

Back in New York, Tracy ran the farm alongside Dan, but soon decided to follow her passion for baking. She began making cakes, pies, and cookies for the CSA members and for caterers. One year, Tracy offered dessert shares to the CSA members. Each week, members could choose between two sumptuous, hand-baked desserts. Mouthwatering as this endeavor was, it was an enormous amount of work, and the Hayhursts are back to the basics and expanding their local customer base. And now that Beatrice has a couple years under her belt, Tracy devotes less time to farming in order to pay full attention to this newest little farmer.

In diversity lies strength and stability. Dan and Tracy grow nearly sixty different types of vegetables throughout the year, ranging from staples like tomatoes and carrots to the more obscure celeriac and kohlrabi. Several dozen laying hens inhabit the same old



The Hayhursts also raise several sheep for meat, and two big, happy hogs dominate a large grass pasture. Beatrice squeals with excitement as one of the porkers squeezes himself into the muddy black water bin, grunting and snorting in this watery throne like royalty entertaining guests.

trailer that Tracy and Dan lived in for several summers on other farms. Now lined with straw, laying boxes, and proud, protective hens, the trailer is towed to a new spot every couple of days, allowing the chickens to forage on fresh grass. The Hayhursts also raise several sheep for meat, and two big, happy hogs dominate a large grass pasture. Beatrice squeals with excitement as one of the porkers squeezes himself into a muddy black water bin, grunting and snorting in this watery throne like royalty entertaining guests.

Chubby Bunny’s customers appreciate Dan and Tracy’s “Farmer’s Pledge.” They promise to adhere to strict organic standards without becoming certified organic. Dan swears off artificial pesticides, insecticides, and herbicides. Official certification demands that farmers document all of their farming decisions. For someone growing more than sixty different crops and engaging in an ingenious milieu of cover cropping, crop rotation, grazing, weeding, harvesting, and marketing, there is not a lot of time for paperwork. The Hayhursts know their customers, and their customers trust them. While organic certification can create better prices for farmers who sell crops wholesale, for now, Dan and Tracy create the same healthy organic produce for their share owners without the need for certification.

As fall approaches, the Hayhursts can look out over a good harvest and the imminent arrival of some delicious organic, free-range bacon and sausage. Dan will do odd jobs over the winter and Tracy—better with all things mathematical and official—will work on the farm’s website, their taxes, and CSA membership renewals. Beatrice will continue clamoring for airplane spoonfuls of homegrown butternut squash and more readings of *The Noisy Little Farmer*.

Hay Bales & Five Generations

oklahoma :travis schnaithman

As a Dodge truck bearing Oklahoma red dirt and an “Eat Beef” license plate creeps between square hay bales, its passengers bustle with silent energy.

Behind the wheel, a youngster takes the form of a veteran farmer. His older brother scrambles across the hay towed directly behind the truck. He grins, wiping the sweat off his brow as the stack of hay on which he rides grows steadily bigger. In his eyes glows an intense pride. In his heart grows the hope of his grandfather. In his being is the making of his family’s next great generation.

For this young man, twenty-year-old Travis Schnaithman, there is little question about spending the rest of his life on the farm. The Oklahoma State University agribusiness major has lived his entire life on his family’s centennial farm, six miles from the rural town of Garber, Oklahoma.

The farm, Travis says, was homesteaded in 1893 by his great-great grandfather, John Jacob Schnaithman. John participated in an Oklahoma land run after immigrating to the U.S. at sixteen years of age. Five generations have been raised here since.

Abruptly turning his attention back to the hay bales, Travis lets out a laugh as younger brother, Tyler, jolts the truck to a stop announcing that it’s break time.

Travis, Tyler, and three friends from Garber—persuaded by the Schnaithman brothers into helping haul hay—mosey into a tin barn and perch on hay bales. Tyler grabs a small ice chest and unveils Dr. Pepper and Gatorade. One of the friends—who graduated from Garber High School with Travis in 2005—says it’s good to be back home.

“There’s no place like rural Oklahoma,” he says.

Another, sweating, laughs and mentions he can’t remember when he last did so much physical labor. Travis takes a swig of Dr. Pepper, slaps one friend on the back, and says he loves the work.

Travis returns from college to his family’s farm every chance he gets. He does pretty much everything on the farm, from driving the tractor and cleaning out wheat bins, to hauling hay and feeding cattle, to building fences. When he started at Oklahoma State in the fall of 2005, he had other ideas in mind about



“I was so unsure about what I wanted to do, but when I came home on the weekends, there was always this excitement because I got to do what I loved and be in a place that I loved.”



how he was going to spend his life. Politics and public speaking were high on the list, but they didn’t stick.

“I was so unsure about what I wanted to do, but when I came home on the weekends, there was always this excitement because I got to do what I loved and be in a place that I loved,” he says.

The passion Travis has for working on the farm cannot be matched. His freshman year he made a conscious decision to return to Garber after graduating and join his family’s farm. To stimulate economic development, he also plans to start an agricultural manufacturing or marketing business in Garber.

Travis says with a grin, “I realize farming is not a common career path for my generation.” Many people react with surprise when they hear his plans.

He recalls a conversation he recently had with an older farmer. The man asked him about his future plans. When Travis said he wanted to farm, the man shook his head and replied, “It’s a tough way to make a living.”

“It’s been a livelihood for generations before, and I don’t want to be the generation to let it slip,” Travis replied.

As he gazes across the farmland before him, Travis pauses and says slowly, “The land and the heritage mean a lot to me. It’s something that just kind of gets stuck in your blood. There’s been a lot of sweat and tears gone into holding onto this land.”

Travis, Tyler, and their sister, Carly, were raised in the house that was built on the farm when their father, Lee, was five years old. Though Lee and his wife, Becky, live and work on the farm, Lee was the first generation to not farm full time.

Travis says his father had to pursue another career because farming had become less economically viable. While his father worked, Travis spent his childhood hiking around the farm with Myron Schnaithman, his late grandfather. Surely, it was hands-on experience that ignited his passion for the work.

“I was really fortunate to be around my grandpa for so long and learn from all that knowledge and wisdom and experience,” he says.

From his father, though, Travis gained an enthusiasm for something else: the Future Farmers of America (FFA). Travis was playing in his parents’ bedroom as a child, when one day he stumbled across a blue jacket with gold writing stitched across the chest. It was his father’s high school FFA jacket. Travis decided he should get one of his own.

Joining the FFA chapter at Garber High School in eighth grade was

the beginning of a path that would hone and demonstrate his natural aptitude for agriculture. As an upperclassman, Travis served as president of the Garber FFA. His senior year, he was awarded one of organization’s highest honors: 2005 State Star Farmer. He was also one of 699 FFA members to earn a State FFA Degree that year. Just before graduating, Travis was elected FFA state secretary and during the spring of 2006, he was elected state president. Though he served state-level FFA offices, Travis says his true passion lies is his own community. He has made it his personal mission to serve as an ambassador and advocate for small, rural towns.

Garber, a primarily agricultural community, boasts a population of roughly one thousand residents, many of whom—like the Schnaithmans—have been in the area for generations. Travis claims they are the finest people on earth.

“Garber’s a great place to raise a family,” he says. “It’s a place where you don’t have to worry about your kids playing in the street. I definitely want to call it home again some day.”

A growing problem facing towns like Garber, though, is the fact that most young people do not come back. With the youth goes money and jobs, too.

“It’s really sad,” Travis says. “You go to small rural towns and all of the businesses are closed down. That’s what really hurts our country. People two and three generations removed take small town heritage and agriculture for granted, and lack a sense of understanding of what small town generated products do for them.”

According to Travis, the best way to revitalize small towns is to be good stewards of the land and to provide a safe and affordable environment that everybody can benefit from.

Citizens of small towns, Travis says, must also make individual efforts to support schools and to promote town image. He has tried to do his part, joining the Garber Citizens in Action. He has helped to fix old buildings, establish a citywide clean-up, and assisted with the community theater.

“A lot of people in Garber take pride in keeping Garber alive and thriving,” he says. “It’s a good experience to give back to the community. When I get out of college, I hope to do more of that.”

As for youth returning to small towns, Travis has hope. “History sometimes likes to repeat itself,” he says. “I think that in future generations, young people will want to get out of the city so they can better understand small towns and agriculture.”

The last Dr. Pepper can jangles on the bottom of an empty cooler; break time is over. The pickup is revving and Tyler motions for Travis to come. Travis smiles broadly, wipes his hands on the knees of his jeans, and gets back to work.

“People two and three generations removed take small town heritage and agriculture for granted, and lose a sense of understanding of what small town-generated products do for them.”



Herbs and Heritage

texas : noemi alvarez

“I actually like weeding,” says Noemi Alvarez, a week shy of fifteen. “And nobody likes weeding. But I don’t like picking green beans!”

Everything coming out of her mouth sounds normal, but life is anything but for this young woman.

This will all be very confusing unless we back up a couple decades. Noemi’s parents, Sylvia and Miguel, were teenagers when they came to America from Mexico in the late 1970s. Sylvia studied teaching in El Paso, and Miguel—well, Miguel was a tourist, spending a few days in Texas. He was watching some boys playing football, a sport he’d never seen, and a few minutes after joining the game, he scored a fifty-five-yard field goal. A scout signed him nearly on the spot, and he played for the Houston Oilers for a few years before starting a small dump truck business in Austin.

In 1984, Miguel and Sylvia bought ten acres of land in Lexington, fifty miles east of Austin, where the quiet landscape of neatly tilled fields is disturbed mostly by clouds of dust following pickup trucks. The soil was sandy and their land almost entirely wooded.

“You can grow watermelons here, some black-eyed peas maybe,” old-timers told them. “Don’t hold your breath for much beyond that.”

Sylvia remembered warm milk from her grandparents’ farm in Zacatecas and homegrown honey. She planted a little garden for the summer: tomatoes, peppers, squash. Surprisingly, they grew. The Alvarezes have managed to coax an amazing abundance of produce out of the sandy soil.

Noemi is the youngest of Sylvia and Miguel’s three children. She was born on the farm and has helped with the family enterprise for as long as she can remember. Lucky for her, nothing about the Alvarez’s farm gets boring.

Each year the view out the kitchen window changes. This is a trial-and-error

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