

Two Decades of Giving a Damn About Ag

Stettler & Bacigalupo Talk about the Past, Present & Future of Farm Beginnings

Note: Over two decades ago, the Land Stewardship Project launched one of most successful beginning farmer training courses in the country. Over the years, Farm Beginnings has held dozens of classes, on-farm educational events, and workshops. It has also launched a follow-up course, called Journeyperson, and served as the model for the national Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. It has also served as the foundation for the Farm Beginnings Collaborative, a coalition of 13 organizations offering courses across the country. Over 1,000 people have graduated from the LSP version of the course, which is offered in Minnesota and western Wisconsin. One estimate is that 60% of those graduates are now farming.

Over the years, Karen Stettler and Amy Bacigalupo have served various roles with Farm Beginnings. Bacigalupo recently left LSP after several years leading up the Farm Beginnings Program, and is now running a fruit orchard in western Minnesota. Stettler continues to work with LSP to help retiring farmers transition their operations to the next generation.

They sat down with *Land Stewardship Letter* editor Brian DeVore to talk about how Farm Beginnings got started, the community-centric philosophy it's based on, and where it's headed. Below are some highlights from that conversation. You can listen to the full interview on episode 248 of LSP's *Ear to the Ground* podcast: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/1378.

Community Based Organizing

From its initial launch, Farm Beginnings has always been community-based and community-sourced. That was true back in the 1990s when a group of farmers called the "Wabasha County Give A Damns" approached Land Stewardship Project staff looking for ideas on how to support the next generation of farmers. It was also true when LSP did organizing in local communities before even offering the first classes to determine what people wanted and the best approach to achieving those goals. Steering committees were formed, and many of the farmers LSP has worked with over the years have served as course instructors and mentors. That required a lot of on-the-ground organizing that went beyond building a curriculum, say Bacigalupo and Stettler.

Holistic Management

Holistic Management plays a key role in both the Farm Beginnings and Journeyperson curriculums. Holistic Management is a decision-making tool that considers all aspects of a farm—not only financial health, but quality of life, ecological sustainability, and the operation's relationship to the rest of the community.

"The central part of Holistic Management is that the farmer is the person driving the decision-making," says Bacigalupo. "Most other trainings are set up just to move you into the boxes that financial institutions, or seed dealers, or equipment dealers already have for farmers. If you go into those boxes,

what you get out of it isn't going to necessarily line up with your own goals."

Pushing the Pencil

A key part of Holistic Management is dovetailing ideals and belief systems with good old-fashioned number crunching. As



During a Farm Beginnings field day in southeastern Minnesota, course graduates Paul and Sara Freid described how they estimate a market hog's weight. (LSP Photo)

a result, students are required to develop thorough business plan proposals. Students have an opportunity to not only learn how to develop a plan, but to get feedback from established farmers and other ag professionals.

"I don't think you can be successful if you don't actually think through a business plan," says Stettler. "You have to look at real numbers. If you're going to be doing it as a business and doing it down the road, then you need to think about the route involved."

Serving Other Communities

Farm Beginnings has predominately served white people. But in recent years, there has been a concerted effort on the part of LSP staff and the Farm Beginnings steering committee to change that. The 2020-2021 class is the largest and the most diverse one LSP has ever organized — of the 60 enrollees this year, 25% of the class are people of color, including participants from the Red Lake Nation and the Midwest Farmers of Color Collective.

"As a result, we're rethinking everything with our curriculum," says Bacigalupo.

Shifting the Narrative

One major barrier beginning farmers face is the conventional wisdom that there is no viable future for young people in production agriculture. "We would bring people into the class and they would say, 'Well, I've been told my whole life there's no future in farming. So here I am, tell me how to do this differently,'" says Bacigalupo.

LSP has attempted to shift that narrative by, among other things, publicizing the stories of Farm Beginnings grads who are proving there are opportunities in agriculture if one chooses a path guided by innovative management, production, and marketing. Despite the need to shift the narrative, Farm Beginnings also offers up a healthy dose of reality, and some graduates end up choosing not to pursue farming as a career.

"When that happens, we're doing our job — saving them money and the relationships that would be harmed if they threw themselves at a really bad idea," says Bacigalupo.

The Future

Stettler says that as Farm Beginnings looks to the future and how its curriculum is designed and presented, how post-grad support is provided, the need to diversify who it serves, and ways to help beginning farmers overcome barriers like land access, one fact remains unchanged.

"What excites me is that there are people who want to farm, and there are people within the community who want to support those who want to farm," Stettler says. □

FB Accepting Applications for 2021-2022 Class

Farm Beginnings is now accepting applications until Sept. 15 for its 2021-2022 class session. The early-bird discount deadline is Aug. 15. Classes will begin in late fall of 2021. See page 32 for details.