

From Crisis to Community

A Shared Threat Prompts a Shared Vision for a New Farm

By Brian DeVore

As the land auction progressed, it looked like the parcel was on its way to exchanging hands at a decent price. But the landowner grew increasingly anxious about the guy who was likely to get the highest bid—he was a well-known owner of large-scale hog operations in the region. If he was the buyer, it was clear the cropland, which sits atop the environmentally fragile karst geology that dominates this part of northeastern Iowa, would be the future home of a concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO), or at the least, the millions of gallons of liquid manure that would be produced by one of these operations.

The landowner, unwilling to expose his neighbors to that fate, stepped up in front of the gathered crowd and told the auctioneer to halt the sale and take the parcel off the market. That selfless act temporarily saved a tightly-knit community in Winneshiek County from having to live with a CAFO in its midst for decades to come, and sent a strong message that, given the failure of regulation, local zoning, or basic common sense to control the placement of a factory farm in an environmentally vulnerable area, some people were willing to utilize the ultimate governor: land ownership.

It also set in motion a series of events that resulted in neighbors coming together to support and launch an alternative approach to helping beginning farmers get access to land. This effort was based on the belief that there are ways of utilizing ag acres that contribute to a community's local economy and social structure, while protecting and improving the environment.

While many of the circumstances swirling around the development of Hidden Falls Land LLC and its offshoot, Humble Hands Harvest, are unique, this endeavor

could serve as a model for what can be accomplished when a group of neighbors get together and envision a different future for their community. It's also a good example of the importance of responding to a crisis, and then following up with a long-term plan once someone provides a little vision to fuel it. The key is to have in place the kind of farmer who can execute that vision.



Beginning farmers Emily Fagan (left) and Hannah Breckbill on the land that several members of their community teamed up to buy because of concerns a CAFO would occupy the property. “It was a crisis moment, so people were willing to buy the land without a vision,” says Breckbill. (LSP Photo)

The Crisis

Steve McCargar describes the mood in this hilly community near the town of Decorah as “foreboding” after that halted auction in 2013—it was clear this wouldn’t be the last time a CAFO operator would try to build in the area. Even though it’s in Iowa, Winneshiek County is by no means a pork powerhouse. But it has become increasingly attractive to companies producing hogs in CAFOs further south and west of the region. In fact, the pork industry’s recent interest in the region is because it traditionally has not housed massive CAFOs. Factory farm operators are seeking areas that are not plagued with the disease problems associated with raising thousands of hogs together in confinement buildings, going so far as northern Wisconsin to escape swine contagions.

“It’s present, and it’s encroaching,” says McCargar one early spring day while sitting in his house on Hidden Falls Road. That house, where he lives with his wife, Heidi Swets, is less than a mile from where the 2013 auction was stopped.

That foreboding turned into outright panic in early 2014 when another landowner on Hidden Falls Road decided she was going to sell a parcel that was similar in size—around 34 acres—to the land the CAFO operator tried to buy the year before. This particular parcel is literally next door to McCargar and Swet’s property, which sits on a wooded hillside that sweeps down to a major oxbow in the scenic Upper Iowa River. In this case, the land was owned by a woman whose husband had recently died, and she had made it clear she was going to put it up for public auction soon. A 12-acre parcel consisting of the farm’s house and outbuildings was sold separately, but that left 22 acres that would be available just a mile from where the CAFO operator had unsuccessfully attempted to buy land the year before.

McCargar and some of his neighbors approached the widow and asked what it would take to buy her land outright and keep it off the open market. She set the price at \$5,500 an acre.

“We said, ‘Don’t auction the land, we’ll buy it,’” McCargar recalls. “And she said, ‘Really?’”

He could understand the woman’s skepticism. “We’re not rich people. We’re not living a *Better Homes and Gardens* lifestyle,” he says with a laugh.

They had six weeks to raise over \$120,000. McCargar quickly set about talking to people on and near Hidden Falls Road about protecting this parcel of land from industrialized agriculture. He also approached the community at large. One night, he made an announcement about the idea to purchase the 22 acres at a meeting of the Peace and Justice Center, a nonprofit in Decorah that works on environmental justice issues, among other things.

It turns out McCargar is particularly well suited for raising money. Soon after moving to the region from Michigan in the early 1980s, he got involved with the Oneota Community Food Co-op in Decorah and co-managed it for 25 years; through that

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work he garnered a lot of capital fundraising experience. As a result, people from throughout the community, not just residents in the Hidden Falls Road area, agreed to help buy the land.

"We just felt this would destroy the quality of life for everybody in our neighborhood for miles around, not just on our road," says McCargar.

The newly formed Hidden Falls Land LLC ended up selling 44 shares to 15 people, with each share worth half-an-acre, or \$2,750.

Immediate crisis averted. Now what?

The Vision

That 22 acres had been row-cropped for decades, and the new owners, who were mostly in their 60s and 70s, weren't interested in exposing its hilly, worn-out soil to intensive corn and soybean production by renting it out to a crop farmer. With the assistance of an attorney, the LLC developed a restricted covenant that outlined in writing what would not be allowed on the property—CAFOs, pesticides, GMOs, and sewage sludge were on top of the no-go list.

For some people, putting such restrictions on a piece of rural property in the Midwest would mean, for all intents and purposes, banning a working farm. One serious consideration was to "retire" it by renting the land to the federal government via the Conservation Reserve Program. The land is adjacent to an Iowa Department of Natural Resources wildlife area and near the Upper Iowa River, making it attractive as a place to be idled for environmental purposes.

But the youngest shareholder in the LLC had a different vision for the land. Hannah Breckbill, who was not yet 30 at the time, felt that parcel could be a working landscape, a place where food is produced in a way that benefits the local environment and economy. To her, it was not an either-or choice.

"It was a crisis moment, so people were willing to buy the land without a vision," says Breckbill. "Then I found myself over the next several years really supplying the vision and saying, 'We can really do something different.'"

Breckbill had plenty of credibility to back up her argument that converting the land to a working, sustainable farm was viable. After getting a mathematics degree, she took the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course (see page 26) in Minnesota during the winter of 2010-2011. She then worked on a series of vegetable operations, including one in Texas, as well

as on the Decorah-area farm of the late Chris Blanchard, who was known widely for his innovative business management and marketing strategies. During the 2013 and 2014 growing seasons, Breckbill raised vegetables on land provided by Eric and Lisa Klein, Farm Beginnings graduates who raise pasture-raised livestock near Elgin in southeastern Minnesota.

But of all the places she had farmed in, the area that attracted her most was northeastern Iowa's Winneshiek County. Breckbill had made lots of connections with farmers and non-farmers alike while raising vegetables and working at Seed Savers Exchange near Decorah. Even while farming on the Kleins' land, Breckbill had spent a lot



"I definitely think it's a model that could be used," says Steve McCargar of the process he and other members of the community used to save a parcel of land and help launch a new farming operation. (LSP Photo)

of time in northeastern Iowa among people of varying ages who cared about land stewardship and sustainable food production. So it was no surprise that in 2014 she found herself holding two shares in Hidden Falls Land LLC.

In 2015, Breckbill moved back to Decorah and raised vegetables on land fruit and vegetable growers Perry-O and David Sliwa were farming near Hidden Falls Road at the time. While she was farming there, Breckbill made it clear that the 22 acres the LLC owned was a great place to have a diversified fruit, vegetable, and pasture-based livestock operation, and that a farmer like her was a prime candidate to manage it. The parcel has a south slope for sun exposure and well-drained, if somewhat worn-out soil.

Breckbill was tiring of farming on rented and borrowed land, and she felt that 22 acres would be a good home base for her Humble Hands Harvest enterprise, which had up until then been a bit transient. Members of the LLC were open to hearing Breckbill out, but at first, not all of them were completely convinced of the viability of her plan.

"Kind of the idea was 'Oh, so you own farmland and then you rent it out and you make your little bit of rental income.' And I was like, 'Yeah, I want to grow vegetables and I want to graze animals and I want to plant trees,'" Breckbill recalls. "And all of that is so outside the normal way things are done."

Breckbill's vision found a receptive audience in the Sliwas, who were original Hidden Falls Land LLC shareholders. David says it was key that the person offering up a different vision for the land had already proven her farming chops, as well as had a commitment to living in the neighborhood long term and being an active member of the community. Besides seeing Breckbill's skills firsthand on their own land, the Sliwas had visited her when she farmed on the Klein operation. They are also familiar with the training the Farm Beginnings Program provides.

"We had experience with farming over several years and we knew what it took to have a successful operation," says David. "And when we saw it, we recognized it."

It doesn't hurt that Breckbill has developed an ability to share her vision for the future of a rural community partly through her involvement with LSP's Organizing Leadership Cohort, which works with members to help them develop the skills to be leaders in their communities (for more on the Leadership Cohort, see the No. 4, 2017, Land Stewardship Letter).

"It takes a Hannah," says David. "It just seemed like her vision for the land captivated my interest and our interest."

But he is quick to point out that this isn't just about one farmer carrying the day. The Sliwas, as both growers and major players in the local farmers' market and food co-op, have seen the regenerative agriculture movement grow over the past several decades. Decorah itself is home to several small- and medium-sized farms that supply the local market. David and Perry-O remember attending the MOSES Organic Conference in Wisconsin three decades ago when it attracted around 50 attendees. When they returned this year, there were over 3,000 participants in the conference, and many of the attendees were young farmers.

"Our involvement with Hannah and

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that land is just an extension of that feeling that young folks might need a little help in getting started,” says David. “Young folks are looking for access and older folks have resources that might make that possible.”

While talking to LLC members about the future of that 22-acre parcel, Breckbill showed she was serious by buying three more shares with money she had set aside through matched savings accounts available through LSP’s Journeyperson Course and the Practical Farmers of Iowa. LLC shareholders agreed that no one could speculate on the land by selling shares for more than they had purchased them for. “Which is basically like them holding a no-interest mortgage for me,” says Breckbill.

All of the shareholders were eventually won over by Breckbill’s argument, and over the past few years have been gradually selling, and in some cases donating, shares to her and Emily Fagan, a second cousin of Hannah’s who recently joined the operation. The land was in hay for three years, which meant that in 2017 it was able to be certified organic. That year, Hannah moved onto the property, erected a yurt, and started raising vegetables on two acres. For the first time since she launched her farming dream, Humble Hands Harvest (www.humblehandsharvest.com) had a permanent home.

The Future

On a blustery day in late March, Fagan and Breckbill take a break from preparing for the 2019 growing season to talk about their future plans on these 22 acres.

“This will be the first year we haven’t had a major construction project going,” says Fagan as she shows off a couple of high tunnels, a pole shed, the fenced-in garden and their wintering area for the flock of sheep they raise, as well as Breckbill’s yurt and a large utility shed Fagan has fashioned into a home. They have also hooked the land up to electricity and drilled a water well.

Fagan, who is 27, joined Humble Hands as a partner in 2017 after getting a physics degree and working on farms in Oregon, Colorado, and Iowa. She has also bought shares from the Hidden Falls Land LLC.

They market their vegetables via a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model as well as through the Decorah Farmers’ Market, and raise sheep and hogs on pasture for direct marketing. The two women have planted 300 nut trees of various varieties and

would like to add apple trees.

As of this spring, Breckbill and Fagan own 13 of the 22 acres. Some of the original shareholders, such as the Sliwas, are no longer an official part of the LLC, given they either sold or donated their shares to Humble Hands. McCargar says eventually, when all the shares are transferred, Hidden Falls Land LLC will be dissolved—its goal accomplished, it will have worked itself out of a job.

When the issue of future plans comes up, Breckbill, who is 31, isn’t afraid to look far into the future at a time when she’s ready to get out of farming herself. She and Fagan have made Humble Hands Harvest into a worker owned cooperative, and they have plans to bring other farming partners in



Fruit and vegetable producers Perry-O and David Sliwa felt strongly that Hannah Breckbill’s vision for starting a farm in the community was viable. “We knew what it took to have a successful operation,” says David. (LSP Photo)

to manage, for example, fruit production. Breckbill feels one thing that has gotten small- and medium-sized farms in trouble is that so many lack an exit strategy. Forming a cooperative that has a life beyond any individual farmer is a way to create a relay system of sorts, one that avoids the problems which arise when an individual farmer moves on or dies. Breckbill wants to create a situation where when she transitions off the land, the farm enterprise will remain, just the faces behind the food will be different.

“It’s just taking a big picture view of how this land looks in 50 years and how I can ensure that it’s used in a just way and in a regenerative way,” she says.

In other words, it’s a way to avoid having a community go into crisis mode when a CAFO owner shows up at a land auction.

Luck vs. Intentionality

Are the circumstances surrounding Hidden Falls Land LLC and Humble Hands Harvest too unique for this to be replicated elsewhere? It should be pointed out that many of the people involved with the Hidden Falls Land LLC moved to the Decorah area in the 1970s and 1980s, mostly looking for a way to live in sync with the natural environment in a rural setting. In addition, a thriving local food movement allows people to believe in a beginning farmer who is willing to try something that’s not part of the conventional corn-bean-CAFO-machine.

Emily Fagan says a version of this initiative could work in any community where people care enough about its future to fight a negative influence like a CAFO, and where there are competent beginning farmers available who can provide a viable alternative.

“Vision is important — making people understand how much better it could be,” she says. “But not just vision—you have to prove you can actually do the thing.”

As he walks through his woodlot just a few hundred yards from Humble Hands Harvest, Steve McCargar talks about how most rural communities have groups of people of an older generation who have financial resources they could utilize to help beginning farmers gain access to land. The trick is to connect those two generations when a major threat to the community arrives on the scene.

“I definitely think it’s a model that could be used,” he says. “You’d have to have a group of people that are capable of coalescing around an idea like this and putting their resources into it, and then translating that into a transfer process for young people.”

He acknowledges that not all communities will be able to respond quickly to a crisis situation. After all, what if that original landowner in 2013 had not stopped the auction?

“There was more luck than intentionality at the beginning,” he says of the Hidden Falls collaborative effort. “Intentionality came after we raised the money, and then we had to figure out now that we’ve done this, what the hell are we going to do?”

Also, McCargar is frank when he says pooling resources in a neighborhood to buy land will only work on smaller parcels. When farmland is going for \$5,000 to \$8,000 per acre, it can add up to \$100,000 or more pretty quickly.

Perry-O Sliwa says the key to an arrangement like this working in a community is that there is some sort of intergenerational connection. In this case, Breckbill attends a neighborhood church and is involved in local music groups, bringing her into regular

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contact with people like the Sliwas—Perry-O is 80 and David is 77. Breckbill and Fagan also invite members of the community onto the land on a regular basis to help with tasks like weeding and to share meals. Breckbill is not afraid to ask for help, and she makes it clear she sees this access to land as a significant gift to Humble Hands Harvest. Perry-O, for her part, feels in many ways she and other older residents in the area are on the receiving end of something quite nice as well.

“It just seemed like it was a gift to us to find a use for that land that aligned with our values,” she says. “It’s definitely a community I want to grow old in.”

In the end, any kind of shared experience can help build community. While having lunch in Fagan’s maintenance-shed-turned-house, Breckbill recalls a conversation she had while visiting an octogenarian in the neighborhood. The older farmer talked about paying \$100 an acre for their farm in 1955, and how back then they were told that was too much to pay for land and they would never be financially successful as farmers.

“Here we are paying over \$5,000 an

acre,” interjects Fagan.

“Right,” adds Breckbill, “but we have that shared experience of, ‘Oh wow, we’re both trying to do ridiculous things.’” □

Give it a Listen

Episode 227 of the Land Stewardship Project’s *Ear to the Ground* podcast features original members of Hidden Falls Land LLC talking about how they reacted to a crisis by creating an opportunity for a new farm in the community: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/1201.

Land Stewardship Project 2019 Field Day Season Begins

The Land Stewardship Project field day season is here. At press time, here were the events that were scheduled in the region:

→ **July 13 — Soil Health Field Day on Grazing**, Bedtke Farm, 1 p.m.-3 p.m., Altura, Minn. Contact: Liana Nichols, LSP, 507-523-3366, lnichols@landstewardshipproject.org.

→ **July 18—Farming in Karst Country: How No-Till, Cover Cropping & Intensive Rotational Grazing Can Improve Soil Health & Underground Streams**, Niagra Cave, 3:30 p.m.-6:30 p.m., Harmony, Minn. Contact: Shona Snater, LSP, 507-523-3366, Shona Snater, ssnater@landstewardshipproject.org.

→ **July 28—Getting Started with Permaculture & Regenerative Agriculture**, Nettle Valley Farm, 1 p.m.-4 p.m., Spring Grove, Minn. Contact: Annelie Livingston-Anderson, 507-523-3366, annelie@landstewardshipproject.org.

→ **Aug. or Sept. — Three consecutive days of soil health workshops on cover crops interseeded into corn on three different farms**, Byron, Ridgeway & Preston, Minn. Contact: Doug Nopar, LSP, 507-523-3366, dnopar@landstewardshipproject.org.

→ **Sept. 15—Workshop/Field Day on On-Farm Events**, A to Z Produce & Bakery, 1 p.m.-4 p.m., Stockholm, Wis. Contact: Annelie Livingston-Anderson, 507-523-3366, annelie@landstewardshipproject.org. □



Hallie Anderson of 10th Street Farm and Market kicked off the Farm Beginnings field day season in April. Anderson (right) explained how the farm, which is located outside of Afton, Minn., utilizes weekly planning, innovative tools, and efficient work systems to consistently produce profits on a limited number of acres. The field day was co-sponsored by the Minnesota Food Association. (LSP Photo)

For the latest field days and workshops, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/morefarmers/farmbeginningscalendar.



During an LSP Soil Builders’ Network field day in May, Art and Jean Thicke described the benefits of utilizing managed rotational grazing for 35 years on their southeastern Minnesota farm. “I don’t add fertility, my cows are my fertility,” said Art. “There are a lot of advantages to grazing—it’s good for the soil, it’s good for the animals.” (LSP Photo)