

Real Milk Stories

by Siena Cristman

Siena Cristman is working for grassroots-up community based food system change supported by just federal policy. She is a 10-year advocate for a just food system, through writing at Civil Eats & Grist, 8 years at WhyHunger, book editing, policy analysis based on research, relationships, and on-the-ground observation. Her heroes are the small farmers, farmworkers, and others in marginalized communities fighting every day to preserve their livelihoods, families, and communities. "I learn from them and follow their lead - and work with them to tell their stories."

Last fall, Wisconsin dairy farmer Joel Greeno, whose family had been farming for 140 years, made the gut-wrenching decision to sell his dairy cows and get a job at a local fruit processing plant. For 20 years, Joel has fought for justice for farmers. He led a farmer tractorcade in support of Wisconsin public employees union, testified before the USDA and Department of Justice, and almost been thrown out of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. Joel's still a fighter, but he's not a dairy farmer anymore.

Joel has been featured in articles and books for his activism as a farmer. But the story of Why he left farming isn't be told - and neither are the stories of the 47,000 dairy farms across the country that have shut down since 2000.

We're getting to know our produce farmers - and maybe even our meat farmers and butchers - through Farmers Markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, but when it comes to dairy, there's much more mystery. It's hard to get a glimpse of dairy farmers' lives behind the yogurt or ice cream carton - not just how

they're raising their cows, but how many of them are barely getting by, only just hanging on to farming.

I got to know Joel and other farmers through my work at a NYC-based nonprofit. When I could, I've written about their stories, sharing why their struggles matter to the organization's largely urban audience, but I've long wished I could dig more deeply into the issues and write about them more extensively.

This summer I'm finally making that wish a reality, and heading to Wisconsin in July. I'll be spending time with Joel and neighboring farmers, investigating the pressure that have made him and thousands of others sell their cows after generations of farming, and shedding light on what farm and trade policy looks like at the human level, in the fields and around the kitchen table - and, again, why it's important to all of us who live far from the farms.

Help me tell farm stories!

Why me? I have experience writing about complex farm policy issues in an accessible way, and I have background knowledge and relationships to build a com-

PELLING story from a new angle. I'm pitching to publications, with the goal of getting a conversation going about the ongoing crisis facing dairy farmers.

Like community-supported agriculture, this is community supported storytelling. I'm raising seed funding to support my weeks in Wisconsin for research and interviews Funds will cover travel expenses- airfare, car, gas and minor equipment like a portable hard drive to store interview recordings. Anything I raise beyond my goal will enable me to reach additional farmers - whether in Wisconsin or closer to home in New York or Pennsylvania.

Additionally, this entire project is inspired and made possible by the tremendous amount I have learned from the 20-year-old farmer advocacy group Family Farm Defenders and the friendship and trust its farmers members have given me. Your support will also help me contribute to their vitally important work.

Other ways you can help:

- "Like" Real Milk Stories on Facebook, www.facebook.com/RealMilkStories
- Read my blog at www.carrotfreshlyobserved.com

Crisis in Dairy Country

by Siena Cristman

www.carrotfreshlyobserved.com

I was on a call last week with the board and allies of Wisconsin-based Family Farm Defenders, a twenty-year-old progressive dairy farmer group. More than half the participants were dairy farmers, or used to be. It was a regular monthly board call to talk about business items, but conversation turned quickly to farmers' stories. The reality of the ongoing dairy crisis- more of a hemorrhage by now; I'm not sure the "crisis" is still appropriate after 25 years - is devastating.

The stories, each one different and each one the same, lose none of their impact after hearing so many of them over five years of working with independent farmers - on the contrary, each year feels worse: "How is this still happening?" We know all about the "dairy crisis" by now: the numbers are there, we know that 42,500 dairy farms have closed in the last decade and that rural American is crumbling; there have been two farm bills in that time- and a noble but entirely failed investigation into consolidation in the food and ag-industry, stymied by meat packer and dairy processors - and yet nothing has changed to improve the situation of the small and midsize dairy farmer.

And in dairy country across the U.S. those farmers are struggling every day. On the call, a farmer in Pennsylvania told us the her



family sold their cows after 47 years of dairy farming. "We got tired of throwing our money down a big dark hole," she said. The family is now planting corn; there is usually a good market for grain from her Amish neighbors, who buy the corn for their livestock. This year, though, she's concerned that so many of them are getting out of dairy too that she'll have not market for her new crop. "It's like a rural slum in some areas," she said.

A Pennsylvania neighbor of hers was on the call too; she's still holding on, barely. Milk prices for farmers have gone up, but the gains are eroded by high grain costs. Her last milk check was nearly a third less than her cost of production. Milk prices are slowly creeping higher, she said, but, she said, "We have so many dark holes dug by years of insolvency that it will take a long time to get out." Our communities," she added, "are broken."

My friend Joel Greeno is the president of Family Farm Defenders and facilitated the call. He didn't share that night, but

we know his story: his family has been farming in his southwest Wisconsin county for 140 years; last fall, he sold his cows and got a job in a cranberry processing plant. "You shouldn't lock a farmer in a concrete box all day," he told me the first time we talked about the job. After spending most of his life on his fields and in his barn, with nothing but the sound of cows and the clicking of milk lines, he said the noise of the frozen cranberries pouring through the metal tubes is deafening.

The reasons behind the dairy catastrophe are many - and at first glance, a partial list is wonkish and something of a snooze: a complicated system of pricing and governmental price supports; consolidation in the industry; corporate-like coops that act more like corporations; lack of Justice Department action to enforce fairness in the market, and more. (I have come to terms with the sad reality that most people don't get as jazzed about antitrust enforcement as I do...)

But for as arcane as the causes are, farmers' stories of the impacts are that much more compelling. In the next few months, I aim to introduce some of these farmers here - and break down just why, at a time when so many people around the country want to get to know their farmer, dairy farmers are only barely surviving.