

Donald "Jahi" Ellis & Polly Dalton and Oren Jakobson

PROUD WINNERS

2016 John Kinsman Beginning Farmer Food Sovereignty Prize
at this Year's Family Farm Defenders Annual Meeting in Madison, WI

By: Lisa Griffith, National Family Farm Coalition



Donald "Jahi" Ellis with his "FFD family"



Oren Jakobson and Polly Dalton

The Family Farm Defenders' 2016 Beginning Farmer Food Sovereignty Award Ceremony and Conference Held on a brisk March Saturday in beautiful downtown Madison with roughly 120 people fortified by Just Coffee.

The award recipients offered inspiration from different backgrounds and perspectives which were reflected, in part, in the keynote presentation, "So You Want to be a Farmer"

John Kinsman loved promoting the seven principles of food sovereignty as the solutions to problems worldwide such as poverty, food insecurity, environmental destruction and rural displacement. He would have been proud of the 2016 recipients of the award bearing his name - Donald (Jahi) Ellis from Vidalia, Georgia, and Polly Dalton and Oren Jakobson from Custer, Wisconsin - and pleased to introduce keynote speaker Dr. John Ikerd - who strive to lift up those principles.

Jahi Ellis described his circuitous path from an urban upbringing in Detroit to working his family's 91-acre farm in Georgia. On a scholarship he attended the University of Texas-Austin and started his path to basketball stardom, but a crime he committed his senior year ended that, sending him to prison for more than 20 years. Eventually he was pardoned, and he looked to saving his family's farm in Georgia as a way to return to society and to heal himself. Jahi rents out most of the 141-year-old farm's acreage to other farmers and raises organic produce for selling at local markets on the other, which includes the home and family cemetery. Like many beginning farmers, he works diligently and spends cautiously in order to be eligible for and to repay loans for farm expenditures. His family continues to call him back to Detroit, but he is determined to save the farm (known as JEP Organic Farms), save himself and feed his community. He has also become an ambassador for SAAFON, the Southeastern African American Farmers' Organic Network, which was established to help small-scale, underserved farmers and their communities to access training and education necessary to be profitable and self-sustaining.

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Polly Dalton and Oren Jakobson co-manage Field Notes Farm, where they grow foods organically to sell through their CSA (community-supported agriculture) shares and local farmers market. They also document and post notes regularly about working on their farm while becoming ensconced in their rural locale, and even established an on-farm pizza business last fall to use excess produce. The two met as undergrads while working at the Sustainable Lawrence University Gardens, and seem as interested in documenting their efforts and solving problems for other farmers as in maintaining their own farm. On their website (*fieldnotesfarm.com*) they discuss various tasks, including saving seeds and raising livestock, and depict the harvest and preparation of produce for their CSA boxes through a short video. Their interest in developing a forum for conversation and analysis is unique and important.

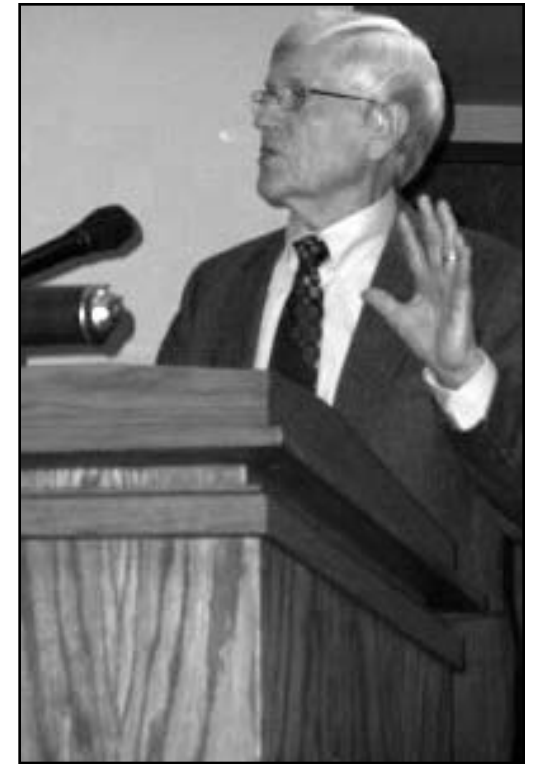
John Ikerd delivered a thoughtful presentation on one's consideration for becoming a farmer. He noted: 'Ironically, much of my 30-year academic career was focused on changing farming from a purposeful way of life to a bottom-line, profit-driven agribusiness. We told farmers to either "get big or get out," because only large farms could achieve the economies of scale needed to be competitive. However, during the farm financial crisis of the 1980s, I was forced to confront the reality that there was no future in this kind of farming. I eventually understood that in order for some farmers to "get big," others inevitably had to "get out" - even if they had to be forced out. If this process continued, I could see that eventually there would be no farmers left - just a handful of large corporate agribusinesses. Then, no one would have the choice of being a farmer.'

This is the road described for many young and beginning farmers, yet it is impossible for most. Farming families are often weighed down by debt from one year to the next; beginning farmers cannot even access the credit necessary to get started, or are given ridiculous goals to pay back their loans. As John said, 'Fortunately, the sustainable agriculture movement emerged in the 1980s. It was a response not only to the demise of family farms but also a variety of growing environmental and societal concerns. Sustainable agriculture is about meeting the basic food needs of all in the present while leaving equal or better opportunities for both farmers and consumers in the future. ...The sustainable agriculture movement gave a new sense of purpose and direction to my professional and personal life, as it has for many farmers.'

We are fortunate that people like John Ikerd and John Kinsman became involved with and promoted sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty when they did. As discussed by the strategy panel on "Reclaiming Local Democratic Control Through Food Sovereignty" with Dr. Ikerd; Tressie Kamp, attorney with Midwest Environmental Advocates; Jim Goodman, organic farmer and board member of Family Farm Defenders; and Patty Lovera, assistant director of Food and Water Watch, we have opportunities to advance food sovereignty despite corporate agribusiness pressure to the contrary. Promoting education and mentorship, as well as establishing markets and processors for local foods (exemplified in the array of meats, cheeses, produce and breads served for the luncheon meal), supports a local food economy and a healthier regional economy, overall.

John Ikerd said, 'I have proposed an Ethic of Sustainability:

A thing is right when it tends to enhance the quality and integrity of life on earth by honoring the unique responsibilities and rewards of humans as members and caretakers of the earth's integral community. A thing is wrong when it tends otherwise.' If we apply those criteria to our activities beyond food production, harvest, marketing and trade/consumption, we will not only have more farmers like Jahi, Polly and Oren, but stronger and healthier communities, by far.



John Ikerd - Keynote Speaker