

John Kinsman Beginning Farmer Food Sovereignty Award

Presented by Tony Schultz to Blain Snipstal

MARCH 15, 2014, BARABOO, WISCONSIN

Tony Schultz

Out of the most impressive crop we've received in terms of applications, Blain's application stood out immediately. I met Blain four years ago in Mexico at a La Via Campesino protest of global climate talks. We were saying sustainable agriculture needs to be a part of the conversation. We got there early and our gathering was at a big public sports complex. Blain and I were playing basketball with some of the kids at the lot, and I went up to dunk on him, and he stuffed me. So as a basketball player I was immediately impressed.

I am so inspired to see what Blain is doing in Maryland right now. He and so many other young people— I just got back from the MOSES conference and I was telling Jim how inspiring that is, that there were 4000 people there this year at the organic farming conference and so many of them are young. We are up against so many things – genetically modified food, corporate agriculture propaganda and domination, the land price bubble, everything that family farmers face. But we have something so incredibly powerful on our side right now: young people want to farm. Young people are inspired to come back to the land, to start something on the land, and it gives me so much hope to see that every year, and Blain is the perfect example of this: a highly motivated, articulate, intelligent person. I feel like some of the most intelligent people in my generation want to have a farm. And this is Blain Snipstal. So I am incredibly honored to give him this award and present to him one of the two winners of the Food Sovereignty Prize this year.



Blain Snipstal

Thanks, Tony! For me, I will always say John Kinsman was the youngest old man I've ever met. I was farming in Kansas at the time, small town, about a thousand people, and the world was really small to me. I was writing about sustainable agriculture in my courses and I found out about FFD and the National Family Farm Coalition and about John and Mr. Ben Burkett and all these amazing people. Then I had the opportunity to go to the Social Forum, and there was a meeting of all the food justice and food sovereignty groups from the last decades in this one meeting. I was sitting in the room with them and I was like, holy shit, here is literally everybody I'm citing in my thesis right now, in the room just talking shit. I was like wow, this is beyond me. And after that I realized that I had to leave Kansas because I saw how big the world was and how much work there was to do. John was my initial inspiration to become more socially active as a farmer. I am who I am today because of John, and it will forever be that way.

There's a tremendous amount of things that I would like to talk about, but I want to speak about a process called "repeasantization." It's a language that we use within La Via Campesino that describes how the rural

peasant farming areas are being repopulated, what is that political process in the spaces where they are being contested. Or what is the process and the degree by which the peasantry is being rebuilt and contested within the current agrarian dynamic that we have talked about today. *Continued on pg. 13*

John Peck and I were talking earlier, and he had asked me to give a 55-minute speech, and I said John, I just can't do that. But I did prepare some words. You know I've had some incredible conversations in the last couple of days with folks and I wanted to try to synthesize that into a brief reflection on the experience of this conference and the last couple years being engaged with La Via Campesino and different sort of peasant movements here in the US.

"Repeasantization" is important to consider because it's not just a question about resettling rural and farming communities alone, it's also a question about the current state of the class struggle, the future of the food sovereignty movement in the US, and the question on our process and ability to wage a cohesive struggle against the agribusiness model of agriculture that we also have very well come to learn and love since rBGH and you know, all the struggles today.

It truly is agribusiness as a model of capitalist agriculture that we're in this historical struggle against.

For me, I'm always reminded of my own family's history. We're people of history, all of us, and my family moved from the south in 1914 in the midst of what some historians call the Great Migration, but we've been migrating for quite some years at this point. At this stage in 1914, 76% of the country was still rural and predominately farming. So it hasn't even been 100 years yet. But at that time the black farmer

population was 16-18% of the farming population. We controlled 23 million acres, predominantly in the south and there were roughly 800,000 black farm operators and owners. This is important to note because my family left the south, and soon enough a lot of us began to leave the south. And if we fast forward to today, the black farm tradition due to the USDA and a lot of other structural situations in our society, not to mention the social conditions, have led us to a point where we now control and own roughly 3-6 million acres, there's roughly 10-11,000 black farmers, and we're considered 6% of the farmer population. The farmer population is 1% of the US population, so you get the drastic dynamics that this paints. There's also a larger historic moment alluding to the young farmer prize and the context around this repeasantization process, which is that 85% of the country now lives in urban areas. So that's 15% of us that are in the rural countryside. Those of us that are in the countryside here, pat yourself on the back, because you're an endangered species at this point.

It's quite a historic moment because in the next 15 years, 400 million acres of land are about to go up for transition. There are no children behind them, there's no succession plan behind them. So we could be witnessing the single greatest moment for agrarian reform since the Reconstruction, since 1860, 1870 during the confiscation programs. So it's a tremendous

moment. I think there's two questions that we really have to consider in this political moment. One is what model of agriculture will those 400 million acres and this returning generation of farmers follow: will it be industrial agribusiness or small scale or agroecological? The second question is how will this turning group be politicized and organized to engage in social struggle? Will they (we) succumb to the American discourse of self-preservationism, individualism, and isolationism? Those, to me, are the two most important questions of my generation returning to farming today. We have to prove that living in the countryside, much like Tony has shown, can be an honest and beautiful living in which we can raise children, but it also can be a place in which we can build community and still be socially active with organizations like FFD and other social movements vying for fundamental social change in the system.

There's so many people back home who are extremely excited about this award. It means so much to my community back home because to us, it means that we're doing something right. When one of us got noted, all of us got noted. That's how we work back home. I'm only an individual so much as my collective is healthy. So again, my first and foremost thanks to John and the community here.

Thank you.