

A First Generation Farmer's Evolution How Food Sovereignty Prize Fertilized My Food Activist's Roots

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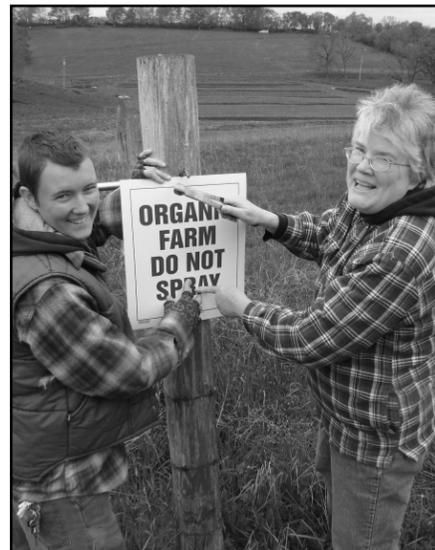
I first stepped onto a vegetable farm in the Spring of 2004. I had recently come home to the Midwest after 3 years in Philadelphia, where I discovered, among other things, that I did not want to be an artist. My search was not long before I began farming in Stoughton, Wisconsin, fumbling with seed packs and plug trays in the greenhouse, making my first few attempts to handle a scuffle hoe, getting introduced to new vegetables - and for the first time, making them the main component of my diet. I got hooked on farming. Instead of creating art, I was creating beautiful food.

In 2007, my mother Gail and I purchased 40 acres in Monroe, Wisconsin that became Grassroots Farm. By Fall 2008, I was breaking ground to plant our first crop of garlic. The following Spring I began production of 15 acres of vegetables for sale at a Chicago Farmers Market. 2010 was my first year of managing a CSA and Organic Certification and the first livestock came onto the scene; laying hens and a pig. By 2011, I had invested in a small herd of beef cattle. It seemed our Chicago Farmers Market neighborhood community could support my growing scale and yield goals, despite the physical distance and disconnect from our farmland.

In 2011, I shared my story with Family Farm Defenders for the First Annual Beginning Farmer Food Sovereignty Prize. With the news that my submission was chosen, I felt a deep sense of encouragement for joining a movement to feed people - without poisoning the earth or its inhabitants. I used the prize money to supplement the acquisition of a BCS walking tractor. In the spirit of environmentalism and autonomy, I felt this was a good way to more efficiently



2016 - My Tomato Field



Me & my mother Gail Morris

work soil, burning less fossil fuels than a four wheel tractor, while making equipment maintenance more practical. A reinforcement of my commitment to a small, intensive scale.

For the following five seasons, I made several efforts to sell food hyper-locally, which felt more like a gesture than

a lucrative marketing move. I was discouraged by making a few local dollars for countless hours of production and preparation. I felt locked into Chicago's vast market potential, and to going the distance. To increase my revenue, I taught myself to keep poultry and livestock, forming a Winter Meat and Egg Share. Income flowed into the farm seasonally. CSA share money in the Spring, farmer markets in the Summer, Meat and Egg Share in the Winter.

By 2015, Grassroots Farm grossed over \$55,000, employing 2.5 people for 8 months. I worked myself an average of 60 hours/week. We produced and aggregated for a CSA membership of 80 families and brought home an average of \$1,000 weekly from our Andersonville Chicago Farmers Market. Fuel burned and new material packaging to pull this off was extreme. We had payments to FSA, mortgage lender and credit cards, all from getting started in farming. Despite my best efforts, our take-home was not enough to cover our expenses. Was I a bad farmer?

We are plugged into our current food system believing we can succeed in marrying this earth healing, life giving work to some form of financial sustainability. I assumed if I worked efficiently and skillfully, I could achieve this goal. I could not. In the process, however, I realized my mission and values as a farmer and human being didn't naturally prioritize profitability. My passion lies in growing high quality food for local, equitable access. These internal values conflict with running a successful farm business. By late 2016, I knew it was time to navigate a change. Thanks to a scholarship from Lesbian Natural Resources, I attended the 2016 Women in Sustainable Agriculture Conference held in Portland, Oregon. Through conference networking, I found a connection to a farm and a group of people that presented me with an opportunity to work with a vast array of equipment, knowledge and landbase at our collective fingertips. So I discovered I possess an ambition to take a different role in aiding this much needed food system transformation.

Come Spring 2018, I ventured home to Wisconsin and put forth a plan where my produce and livestock products barely left the county. My fuel use and plastic and paper needs were slim, my scale very small. Consequently, I was able to spend time working for farmer friends, and toward a new set of goals.

Come Spring this year, after my hiatus, I took a position as a relief milker for a women-owned Organic Dairy Farm. I was elected Vice President of our South Central Chapter of Wisconsin Farmers Union. I began collaboration with Green County based education, health and agriculture focused non-profit partner, Emerald Heart Center. Together we are working on a proposal in conjunction with the UW Madison's UniverCity Alliance Project to further our idea for a Community Powered



First Farm - Shorthorn Highland Cattle and Highland Cow



2011- Batch of Piglets

ing with farmers of all types to develop a hemp growers cooperative, in preparation for the incredible opportunities that await farmers in legal industrial hemp production.

Receiving the Food Sovereignty Prize was an incredible honor and provided me with the confidence that my work was recognized and valuable. But I needed to move through each of these 15 growing seasons, collecting the challenges and continuous rewards, all-the-while consuming countless farm meals, in order to find my calling as a non-capitalistic farmer. Scaling back and re-focusing, I have shifted my work to intentional community collaboration, working to create a sovereign, local, chemical-free farming and food system, I truly feel good about for producing and within.



2015 - Walking Tractor
Upgrading in my Potato Field
Kitchen - a sliding scale, membership-based, take home or delivered locally sourced meal project. I am also work-