New Farmers
Farmers Share Their Start-Up Stories
PASA Pre-Conference Inspires Beginning Farmers
By Madeleine Charney

Participants interested in what it takes to “get started” as a farmer, climbed aboard Track One of PASA’s (Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture) pre-conference during the 14th annual Farming for the Future conference in State College, Pennsylvania. On February 3rd, one hundred new and aspiring farmers (with 50 farmers on a wait list) were treated to five lively case studies presented by farmers who have succeeded in making farming their livelihood. The blend of presenters’ unique stories and ingenuity created fertile ground into which the audience could sow their own ideas.

BLUEGRASS BEEF
Sarah Rider grew up in suburban Philadelphia as a self-proclaimed “horsey girl.” By the age of 22, with a degree in agroecosystems from Penn State under her belt, she began to ease her way into sole proprietorship of BlueGrassBeef. “Like all good ideas, it started with reading some good books,” Sarah muses.

Three years ago, when she began renting a horse Nan Bouchard owned in her hometown, she learned about the potential for raising beef on his land. It was after sharing with him what she learned from these good books (e.g. Joel Salatins’ You Can Farm) that Sarah “fell into farming.” Soon after their conversation, five steer were grazing just beyond her doorstep.

Based on that experience, she arranged four other rental agreements in her neighborhood. She notes that flexibility, collaboration, and ongoing dialogues with the landowners have been the keys to success with this “patchwork” system. In one instance, she sold the breeding stock of her herd to the landowner while retaining the beef cattle and bull calves for quicker finishing and cash flow.

Having worked for three years at a local CSA (community supported agriculture) provided Sarah with a built-in customer base, support, and a market for her products. Staying in close communication with her customers has also proved to be of immeasurable value. Although she has investigated how to market her products at farm shows and gourmet shops, she finds that it is her local customers who know and trust her and are willing buy nearly anything she sells. Besides being enamored of her grass-fed beef, her poultry and eggs turn around quickly as well.

GREEN HAVEN FARM
Brian and Holley Moyer know how to spin straw into gold. A prime example was the exceedingly muddy day when the chicken pens needed rotating on their 27-acre, steeply sloped property. With no mechanical equipment and an injured back to boot, Brian proceeded to cut the wire off the front of the pens. Allowing the 250 chickens to roam within the boundaries of electric netting, Green Haven Farm’s “day range system” was born. Labor was further reduced as the pens now only need to be moved every other day (instead of daily).

Starting small with 50 chickens and borrowed equipment, nine years later their operation has expanded to include sheep products. “You’ve got to use all of the animal,” Brian reflects. “Chicken feet are sold to ethnic shops, the satiny feel of sheep skins allure customers at their market stand, and even sheep heads are in demand as a Muslim delicacy.”

Like all the pre-conference speakers, the Moyer’s recognize that customers deeply value meeting the farmer that stands behind these products. Of equal importance is setting goals and maintaining careful records. QuickBooks is their tool of choice and trying to stay honest with themselves is their main challenge around this task.

Joining organizations such as PASA and American Pastured Poultry Association expanded their network and knowledge of a job they clearly love. Brian describes the work as varied, with “no doldrums about it.” He wrapped up their presentation with a personal motto: “There is no finish line; it’s all one big journey.”

HALF PINT FARM
A background in classical languages and anthropology is not what you’d expect to fuel an agricultural business venture. But these are the respective degrees first earned by Mara and Spencer Welton of Half Pint Farm. Handy with a checklist and being a former owner of a marketing business helped Mara hone her business management skills. As Peace Corps volunteer she taught small business courses while Spencer taught beekeeping based on books he read.

One unified lesson they both learned was the importance of observation. Later, as a graduate student of Sustainable Systems at Slippery Rock College, Spencer ran the small market garden and tracked the buying habits of their customers. Soon after, the couple became employed at a farm in Vermont where they scoured the product lists posted on the cooler doors of their customers’ restaurants when making deliveries for the farm. They noticed trends and prices, building the knowledge and experience that led them to the Incubator Program at the Intervale in Burlington, VT.

The Intervale provides the machinery, greenhouse space, land, and storage. The Weltons supply the labor and marketing savvy. With no-interest credit cards were the source of the $3,000 they needed for startup. Their crops of choice – baby and specialty vegetables. “If it’s not baby, it’s got to have color. If it doesn’t have color, it’s got to be a funky variety that no one else is selling,” explains Mara.

Like the Moyer’s, the Weltons credit their careful record keeping with their ability to guide their business to higher places. Both couples hold regular business meetings, the Weltons giving theirs the whimsical name “The Half Pint Farm Conference.” Twice a year, over dinner and a written agenda, they process all aspects of their completed records. “It makes decision making that much easier,” Mara adds.

Both couples also agree that the majority of their time is spent marketing, delivering, and selling. Wednesday is the only day the Weltons are actually on the farm all day. But this formula seems to be working. By setting and achieving their monthly goals, their farm income doubled after the first startup. Their crops of choice – baby and specialty vegetables. “If it’s not baby, it’s got to have color. If it doesn’t have color, it’s got to be a funky variety that no one else is selling,” explains Mara.

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Continued on next page