

OUR FARMER WORKFORCE IS SHRINKING AS FARMERS ARE GETTING OLDER—ACCORDING TO THE CENSUS, THE AVERAGE AGE OF A FARMER WAS 58.3 YEARS AND A THIRD OF FARMERS WERE OLDER THAN 65 IN 2012. IN OUR REGION, 20% OF FARMERS ARE APPROACHING RETIREMENT. NEW FARMER TRAINING THAT FOCUSES ON FINANCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY IS ESSENTIAL TO RAISE THE NEXT CROP OF FARMERS AND ENSURE OUR REGION'S FUTURE FOOD SECURITY.—*SARAH SOHN, FUTURE HARVEST CASA*



BACK-TO-SCHOOL: FARMER EDITION

BY WHITNEY PIPKIN

For Vincent Matanoski, raising sheep and goats alongside vegetables and cut flowers was a significant departure from his most recent gig as a Naval reservist deployed for nearly two years to Africa. He worked as an attorney at the U.S. Department of Justice before that so, when he and his wife, Carin Celebuski, decided to buy land in Monkton, Maryland, and become farmers, “I felt like a total neophyte,” he says.

So, at 57, he went back to school.

The Beginning Farmer Training Program, offered by the Future Harvest Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture (CASA), is where many local greenhorns like Matanoski begin becoming farmers, says the program’s director, Sarah Sohn.

The 9-year-old program has churned out more than 100 graduates so far, and this year, expanded to offer three tiers of courses for farmers at various stages of their budding careers. Many of these farmers go on to sell their produce or animal products locally, growing and raising them with their environmental impact in mind.

Sohn says the program added additional tiers for farmers who have been at it for three to five years, recognizing that they are still learning the ropes as they go.

“Even though these people are all categorized as ‘beginning farmers,’ their needs are very different,” she says.

After nearly a decade of training farmers in the area, the chances of running into a graduate or farmer-mentor at a local farmers market “are pretty good,” says Sohn. “It takes a village to do this type of farming.”

GARY PALMER

HOLIDAY MEMORIES FARM
ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY, MARYLAND

Gary Palmer jokes that he’s the beginning farmer program’s token senior citizen. But, at

Opposite page: Laura Beth Resnick and Jascha Owens at Butterbee Farm. Photo by Stacy Bauer.

This page: Former firefighter, Gary Palmer, rides his vintage Ford tractor at Holiday Memories Farm. Photo by Susan Able.

Next page: Farmers Vince Matanoski and Carin Celebuski at Ladybrook Farm. Photo by Stacy Bauer.

57, he’s far from the only one finding a second career in the field.

After retiring from nearly 30 years as a DC firefighter, Palmer began a year-long search for the right piece of farmland, “kissing a lot of toads” and eventually landing on almost 23 acres in Maryland’s Anne Arundel County. The land seemed to lend itself to Christmas trees, which is how Palmer got started and how the business got its name: Holiday Memories Farm.

Palmer, who also owns a picture-framing business in Annapolis, has since added vegetables, free-range laying chickens, flowers and high tunnels for extended growing seasons to the farm operation. And he credits the beginning farmer program, as a third-year participant, with showing him the ropes.

“Not only was I learning how to farm, but I got exposure to a lot of vegetables and things that, to be perfectly frank, had never crossed my plate before,” he says.

His son-in-law, Zeke Pearson, a disabled veteran, works on the farm, and Palmer’s grandkids are often on site as well. The produce is sold at a farm stand along a major artery, and Palmer’s gone out of his way to get the attention of passersby. He painted an American flag on the top of the barn for the Fourth of July and added a Maryland flag across the front this past year.

“People pretty much know when they drive up and down that we’re the farm with the flag,” Palmer says.

But, just in case, he planted 6,000 sunflowers across the farm’s façade this past season “to attract both bees and customers.”





LAURA BETH RESNICK & JASCHA OWENS
BUTTERBEE FARM
BALTIMORE COUNTY, MARYLAND

Laura Beth Resnick was going to school in New York City and hating it when her roommate went to work on a farm—and met a boy.

“I was, like, ‘I want to meet a boy,’” Resnick chortles. “So I went to work on a farm but did not meet any boys. That summer, I fell in love with farming.”

For Resnick, 28, the love part would come later, when she met her now-husband Jascha Owens, 31, who was an artist at the time, and turned him into a farmer, too.

When Resnick started the Beginning Farmer Training Program, she was interested in growing vegetables but quickly saw that the market near Baltimore was becoming saturated. After helping with her sister’s wedding (and still dreaming of her own), “I decided I should grow flowers.”

Now, she says, “I really think I would not have been as happy doing vegetables. I love the collaborations I get to do with florists, with these people who appreciate beauty.”

Resnick was 23 and just setting up her farm business when she was connected to mentors Jack and Beckie Gurley of Calvert’s Gift Farm through the program. If she was hunting for

a particular piece of farm equipment or curious about growing in hoop houses, she now had someone to ask. Resnick already had a few farm internships under her belt by then, but the training program was particularly helpful to her husband, who participated the same year they got married, in 2016.

“For Jascha, just having an overview of what a farming season is like was crucial,” for both business and marriage, says Resnick. “It was nice that I didn’t have to teach him to farm but that he got his own education in farming somewhere else first.”

CARIN CELEBUSKI & VINCE MATANOSKI
LADYBROOK FARM
MONKTON, MARYLAND

Carin Celebuski had already been back to school at the University of Maryland for a degree in horticulture when she signed up for the beginning farmer program in 2016. She and her husband, Vince Matanoski, had recently bought an 80-acre farm in Monkton, Maryland, and, the couple says, they needed all the help they could get launching a diversified business.

The program, Celebuski adds, “gives you a place to think about your business and de-

mands that you think these things: What’s your business plan? How are you going to pay for things? What’s your farm philosophy?”

That’s why Celebuski, 58, insisted her husband do the program as well. Her interest in horticulture has segued into a budding career growing cut flowers, raising chickens for eggs and keeping bees for honey, and she knew her husband would need to carve out his own niche.

Matanoski, 57, had just gotten back from almost a year-long deployment in Africa when he hit the ground running at the farm, working to fence in pastures, plant trees and build barns to accommodate animal husbandry as part of the business. He’s learned the most from his mentor through the program, a former extension agent who raises sheep in Baltimore County.

As a former lawyer, “the interesting thing about farmers is they are extremely willing to share their knowledge and experience with all comers,” says Matanoski, who’s currently in the training program. “You have this shared passion and there’s an immediate bond.”

For more information on the Future Harvest CASA Beginning Farmer Training Program, or to apply for next year’s training classes, go to futureharvestcasa.org.