

Pioneering a new model of beginning farmer education and training in the Applegate

BY STU O'NEILL

We have all seen the headlines and read the census reports. The average age of farmers is rapidly approaching 60. Less than one percent of the population farms for a living. Meanwhile, our farm economy is rapidly changing. Local food is all the rage. New farmers markets are opening all over the country. The very face of agriculture is changing right before our eyes.

What does the future of agriculture look like? Who are the farmers of the future?

In the Applegate Valley's growing sustainable agriculture community, the answers to these questions can often be found by going out into the fields and barns and working side by side with established farmers.

Young people from all over the country are exploring sustainable agriculture as a career path.

Rogue Farm Corps (RFC) Farms Next Internship Program is pioneering a new model of education and training for the beginning farmer, and is centered right here in the Applegate Valley. RFC was created in the Little Applegate by a group of farmers who shared a commitment to mentoring the next generation of farmers and banded together to develop curriculum and refine training opportunities for interns. From these humble beginnings, RFC has grown to include 13 host farms in Jackson and Josephine Counties.

Farms Next is a cooperative program combining hands-on training, classroom learning, and farm-based education on a diverse network of family farms in our community. Participants in Farms Next live and work full time on a host farm for an entire growing season, receiving ongoing instruction, and learning in-depth skills unique to the host farmer's operation.

The hands-on work experience component is tailored to meet the unique needs of each individual host farm. Host farmers are required to offer close supervision and mentoring to promote mastery of the basic skills needed to operate their farm. Interns are exposed to all aspects of the farm operation and develop skills throughout the growing season.

In addition, interns are offered a comprehensive classroom curriculum in skills and topics necessary for success as a farmer. Through this curriculum, interns are exposed to numerous farming operations and offered instruction in systems that may not be employed on their host farm.

Interest in on-farm internships has exploded in the past five years. Young people from all walks of life are seeking out opportunities to learn from farmers and participate in the new food system. And many of today's established farmers want to give back to their communities and share the knowledge they have accumulated over the years.

Yet this age-old model of sharing knowledge and teaching hands-on skills is in jeopardy. Farmers hosting interns in Oregon, California, and Washington have found themselves subject to wage claims and lawsuits for failure to adequately document the terms of their internship programs. The informal nature of most on-farm internship programs puts them in direct violation of these legal protections for workers. Handshake agreements between

farmers and interns do not stand up to the law.

The risks associated with these informal on-farm internships has recently sent a chill throughout the sustainable agriculture community and jeopardized the future of these valuable education and training opportunities. Many farmers stepped away from hosting interns all together. Others thought there had to be a better way.

Legal protections for workers are a cornerstone of our democratic society. These protections were won through many long, hard struggles of labor in all sectors of the economy. Historically, agriculture has been one of the worst violators of workers rights, and this is not something that our community of

farmers is striving to repeat. The intention behind on-farm internships is to teach the next generation, to transfer skills and knowledge, and to ensure a sustainable agricultural future.

With all this in mind, the legal status of on-farm internships has been a hot topic of discussion in the farming community. In the spring of 2010, Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) and the Bureau of Labor and Industries (BOLI) convened a meeting of stakeholders in Salem to discuss the quasi-legal status of on-farm internships in this state. Participants explored numerous options for addressing the legal concerns and allowing for this crucial education and training to continue. At this meeting, Rogue Farm Corps emerged as the leading organization in the state to meet the standards established for legal on-farm internships.

To meet these criteria, RFC initiated conversations with Rogue Community College (RCC) in the fall of 2010 to establish a pilot program in southern Oregon. Throughout the conversations between RFC and RCC, increasing the educational value of the intern's experience was a paramount concern, as well as meeting all the state and federal criteria for legal internships. In consultation with ODA and BOLI, RFC is close to solidifying a partnership with RCC that will launch in the spring of 2012.

Creating a model for legal on-farm internships will help ensure that the education and training of beginning farmers continues in Oregon. If the pilot program proves successful, RFC is poised to share the model with other communities across the state.

If you are a farmer interested in participating, an aspiring beginner looking for an opportunity to learn, or simply someone who appreciates and supports local farmers, RFC could use your help. RFC is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization that depends on community support to continue its education and training programs. Tax-deductible donations of any amount are greatly appreciated. Applications for 2012 internship positions will be posted on our website this fall.

Together with the farmers and community in the Applegate, we can help create a steady supply of young, able and willing farmers to grow our food. The future of our food system demands it.

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Healing wounds: visible and invisible

BY DELLA MERRILL

Sanctuary One is a care farm where people, animals and the earth come together for mutual healing. We are a working farm where folks help with barn-mucking, feeding and caring for animals, sheet-mulching, composting and the like. But there's another kind of work that unfolds every day that is magical, transformational and powerful. That is the work of healing wounds that are both visible and invisible. Let me share some examples.

Every day the animals show us the magic. Bubba, a beautiful orange tabby, is soft, friendly and one of the sweetest cats you'll ever meet. He arrived with an injured pelvis, probably the result of being hit by a car, and a back leg that he would drag around like a limp rag. We consulted our vet about having the leg amputated because we were worried about possible complications. It's a good thing we held off. After a few short weeks at the farm, Bubba's leg began to gain strength. He is now able to put weight on that leg without his foot buckling under him, and he actually uses the leg to help him climb over the various furniture, trees, and obstacles in the cat cottage. And now, most folks can't even tell he had been injured.

Transforming the soil, and taking back those parts of the farm that blackberries, star thistle and poison oak have claimed, is an ongoing commitment and effort of all of us at Sanctuary One. In keeping with permaculture principles, we constantly add organic ingredients such as manure, hay, and compost, giving the earth and its inhabitants something to work with as the microorganisms do their jobs of returning the soil to a balance of health and vitality. Every day we see the results of our efforts as the rocks, hardpan and invasive species make way for healthy soil, grasses and other beneficial plants. The work isn't easy, it's often hot, "stickery," and monotonous, but the results are extraordinary, making the effort all that more fulfilling.

Then there are the people. We get regular volunteer help from a variety of individuals and groups, including Lithia Springs Residential Program, Southern Oregon University (SOU), and the Boy Scouts. We have a growing contingent of folks of all ages wanting to help, but the group capturing my heart are the veterans who visit from the Veterans Administration.

One such veteran is Kevin Ferguson, a 28-year-old former Navy serviceman. Kevin has been through some tremendous stuff—from experiencing the devastation of earthquake-torn Sumatra to fending off his

own personal demons as he recovers from a history of alcohol and drug abuse. Kevin has been clean and sober for nine months,



Top photo: Bubba the cat. Bottom photo: Kevin Ferguson with Friday the goat.

has reconnected with his young daughter, and wants to finish his degree at SOU in criminology and social work.

He discovered Sanctuary One at last spring's Earth Day celebration. After looking at a picture of our pig, Lisa, Kevin said, "I just wanted to meet a really big pig." He then learned of our volunteer program and helped gain the interest and participation of a small group of veterans who now visit monthly to help around the farm. And the really cool thing is this group keeps growing in numbers.

"There is a direct link between broken people and broken animals," said Kevin. "We receive a lot of care from others and it's important that we give back. Working with the Sanctuary animals fills a void and gives us a sense of purpose."

These stories and others help make our efforts at Sanctuary One more meaningful. We invite you to come share in the experience as a visitor, a volunteer, or a donor. We are making this world a better place and it will take all of us to complete the project.

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Enjoy Wine Tasting and Support a Good Cause

Applegate Valley Wineries are pleased to announce the annual Thanksgiving Weekend Canned Food Drive to benefit the Applegate Food Pantry. From Friday, November 25, through Sunday, November 27, participating Applegate Trail wineries will waive the tasting fee for a donation of two cans of nonperishable food such as canned tuna, soups and beans. For further event details, go the Applegate Trail website: www.applegatewinetrail.com.

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