

Changing direction

Five farmers reflect on leaving good careers to find success (and fulfilment) in agriculture

by DAVID SCHMIDT

LANGLEY – What do a policeman, a social worker, a teacher, an office administrator and an auctioneer have in common? They all chose farming as a second career. They told their inspirational stories at the Langley Sustainable Agriculture Foundation's Farming as a Second Career workshop last fall.

As is becoming usual at LSAF workshops, Langley Township mayor Jack Froese welcomed participants with his own experience. Although he grew up on one of BC's largest egg farms and initially bought his own egg farm, he soon sold his quota to become a Vancouver policeman. But farming wouldn't leave his blood and he started growing turkeys on the side. After retiring from policing in 2004, he focused on making the farm profitable.

"We changed the whole farm and found a way to diversify by marketing our own turkeys," Froese said.

Thanks to the hard work of his entire family, the effort has paid off. Now run by his son and two daughters, JD Farms has become a successful specialty turkey grower, processor, wholesaler and retailer.

No experience; no problem

Although "I grew up with farm stories on both sides of my family," Vista D'Oro Farms' Patrick Murphy had no direct experience when he chucked a successful career as a marketing manager for Ritchie Brothers Auctioneers to start farming in south Langley in 1997. He planted a vineyard and an orchard and grew vegetables for sale to restaurants and farmers markets.

Since that was not rewarding enough, he took the advice of then-BC Ministry of Agriculture direct marketing specialist Brent Warner to expand into value-added agri-tourism and the advice of his old boss, Dave Ritchie, to think globally.

He started producing

preserves and, later, wines and marketing them both locally and around the world. Nothing is sacrosanct, he says, noting "we've shipped pallets of pineapple jam to Hawaii."

His keys to success: "Look at as many spokes as you can, find a home for what you grow and develop relationships with distributors and retailers."

An addiction

Cathy Finley of Laurica Farm in Langley, Dan Oostenbrink of Local Harvest in Chilliwack and Ashala Daniel of Sapo Bravo Organics in Lytton are more recent converts but all are making a successful transition.

Finley, a former social worker from England, began her transition to farming "from gardening." She started growing her own food at her Surrey residence and was soon growing enough to feed

many of her neighbours as well.

"Farming is not a job, it's an addiction," she said. To feed that addiction she moved to an empty five-acre plot in Langley three years ago.

Since the farm had "no soil," she invested in four pigs.

"They till all day and create great loamy soil. After the pigs graze the first year, we use the land to grow vegetables the following

year."

She now has 20 pigs as well as goats, chicken and sheep. One neighbour raises beef for her while others grow chicken and turkeys to her specifications. Saying "you need to be aggressive in marketing," she sells most of her products at farmers markets, to restaurants or through a CSA (community-supported agriculture) box program. Many former Surrey

neighbours have become her customers, paying for vegetables they used to get for nothing.

"Our farm evolved from our values," she says. Since some customers balk at the prices, education has become "a big part of what we do. People don't want to pay what food really costs."

That can be a lot.

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Jack Froese, centre, is surrounded by his family, from left to right Jenny, Debbie, Jason and Marilyn at family-owned JD Farms. SUPPLIED PHOTO



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Ashala Dannel of Sapo Bravo Organics says never give up on your dreams. SAPO BRAVO ORGANICS PHOTO

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In addition to having to create her own soil, she has spent \$100,000 just to get potable water. To make matters worse, her house burnt down at Thanksgiving.

"You have to be resilient," she said matter-of-factly.

Overcoming obstacles

Oostenbrink has also had to overcome considerable obstacles since deciding to abandon teaching in 2013 and start farming 30 acres his father offered him. The first obstacle was his idea of what farming was. He started by spending a lot of money on equipment, fertilizer and planting acres of blueberries, raspberries, potatoes and sweet corn. Despite all the money thrown at them, insects and diseases ravaged his crops.

His best investment was hiring "a young guy" and giving him an acre to grow vegetables. Despite being armed with just a handseeder and a hoe, the young fellow's acre produced much more than his did.

"I underwent a complete transformation before my first year was up," Oostenbrink says. "I was focused on chemistry, not biology."

He realized "healthy plants have an amazing ability to look after themselves" and "one acre of land can make you a lot of money if you can sell the produce."

He started using organic principles on his farm and converted his barn/machinery shed into an on-farm market.

"The first day we sold \$1,000 of produce, I knew could do something so I decided to produce food year round."

He is now firmly convinced

- you can make money farming on a small plot
- machines do not do a better job than people – you have to work with nature and not against it
- institutions do not know everything
- farms must be community-centred.

Jump start

Unlike Murphy, Finley and Oostenbrink, Daniel did not start Sapo Bravo from scratch, although it took "25 years of dying a slow, painful death"

before she was ready to transition into agriculture.

"Never, never give up on your stupid, stupid dreams."

The former office administrator and avid home gardener started by attending the Richmond Farm School 10-month program in 2011.

She moved to a half-acre incubator farm, started a canning CSA (now turned over to farm school students) and co-ordinated the farm school for two years.

But she wanted more and last year purchased Sapo Bravo, "a completely off-the-grid" certified-organic heirloom tomato and vegetable farm in Lytton.

"I fell in love with it," she says. Although the farm encompasses 21 acres, she grows on only five, half planted in fruit crops and half in ground crops.

"You can grow so much on so little land," she says, echoing Oostenbrink's observations.

Marketing is often the biggest issue for new farmers. Although Daniel was fortunate in getting a farm with established marketing channels allowing her to farm instead of spending her time marketing, that is rare.

Finley admits she spends less time farming and more time marketing as her farm continues to grow, saying, "I spend only 20% of my time farming and that's not what I wanted to do."

Marketing takes up 90% of Murphy's time. He does not rue that, saying "when I hop on the tractor or pick grapes, it makes it all worthwhile."

Finding affordable land to farm and financing the enterprise are two other obstacles although there appear to be new options for both.

Murphy notes he has been approached by a number of offshore investors who are "offering free land in Langley for 10 years for farmers."

And in early December, Farm Credit Canada's Young Farmer Loan program was changed, doubling the amount of credit available to \$1 million and reducing the minimum down payment to 20% of the value of the loan. Young farmer loans incur no processing fees and offer either a variable interest rate at prime plus 0.5% or a special fixed rate.

"This potentially makes more working capital available to qualified producers, under age 40, as they look to enter the industry or grow their business," FCC said.

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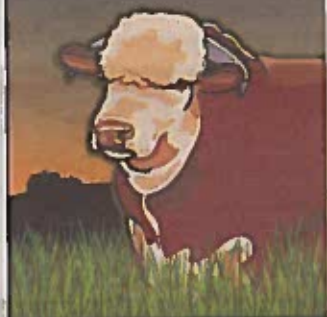
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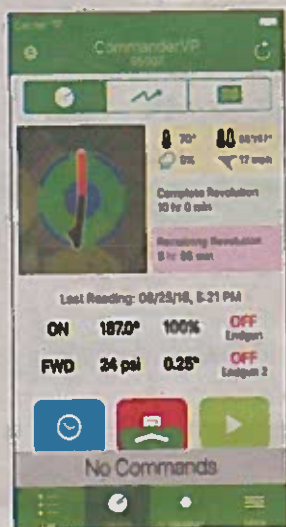
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