

Epilogue

I went into this project with a fair understanding of the context and history of the sustainable farming movement in Minnesota. For 20 years, I matured within its context and it helped me recognize and name the “disconnect” growing in mainstream society. Yet success stories abound and new names begin to pop up. My goal with this writing was to hear boldly from this next generation. It was not to arrive at *answers*, but to assess and compare differences, name influences, find themes, and put their words in front of you. I especially wanted to seek out any factors that spoke of an element of creativity, since I expect that it is the creativity—the informed imagination—of this next generation that will pull this human population back into sync with our planet.

The interviews were their own joy, and my challenge was to get enough of the same questions into each conversation so that there would be threads to pull in the total fabric of writing later—all this while listening hard to each unique life story in front of me. As themes fell out of this body of writing, some planned and some surprising, they influenced my own reading and study. I took off, for instance, on the *meaning* of farm work in a young person’s background. I’d love to write more on that topic.

I went into this work eager to meet a new generation—hoping they would want to talk through this publication. Granted, the interviewees were hand-picked by leaders in sustainable agriculture, yet it is still a gift that this group was so articulate. Again and again, I heard what I knew



The Lentz children, 1970s

were absolutely fresh words come up from absolutely fresh thoughts.

So I went into this work eager to meet this generation and now feel that I do know many of them. The name Katie Fernholz is as common on my tongue as the name Carmen Fernholz was ten years ago. If I think of the name King, I now think of Colin as well as Tim. And in meeting this new generation, I could immediately see that one thing could be said—the farm is in their blood. Inextricably. These young people responded as eaters, parents, gardeners, teachers, or policy makers, and many of them have chosen to stay in “the field” in some way as farmers or CSA owners.

The biggest surprise, however, in meeting some of the second generation of sustainable farm families, was to meet a few of the *third* generation! Jim Van Der Pol ~ Josh ~ Jacob. Dwight Ault ~ Melissa ~ Ian. Audrey Arner ~ Malena ~ Hazel. Carmen Fernholz ~ Connie ~ Maddie. Ralph Lentz ~ Deborah ~ Ariana. Dave Minar ~ Mike ~ Nicholas. The perennial nature of families on the land is in

itself an enormous sense of hope. These values are not dwindling; they are multiplying.

What effect did my interview questions have on these individuals? Or what effect might this small book have on them? This is impossible to name, and probably minute in the scheme of things. But everything touches everything, and hopefully good listening always opens new options. In at least a couple instances, I know my call instigated good conversations at home.

“Wouldn’t it be something to get this group in the same room?” asked Heather Benson, a lover of community. And she is so right. Maybe that’s one power of a publication. Whether it is through MISA or the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota or another venue, I expect that people will want to hear more of these conversations, host panel discussions, and help raise this new crop of leaders.

Finally, I went into this project wondering about this generation’s incentive to remain on the land. Immediately the questions became more complex than that, and I could see that it is not an easy answer. Some already have made farm-centered decisions (Josh Van Der Pol, Janaki Fisher-Merritt, Malena Handeen and Mike Jacobs, Mike Minar, Deb Lentz) yet some have only inklings of an urge to get back to the land, others are drawn to policy work and a few to distinctly different careers. A pull to land and land issues will somehow be known in all their lives, in one way or another. It is inevitable.

One further reflection, looking back on their hopes— This group of people have been handed a deeper-than-

ordinary knowledge about the land and its ills and losses. This knowledge could have buckled the knees of these young lives, yet it did not. To a person, they meet their knowledge with enthusiasm and resolve. Let me refine statements from their longer messages of hope so you can see exactly what they are calling for:

- ❖ Citizen awareness about food, from origin to plate
- ❖ Citizen involvement in the operation of community and society
- ❖ A clean environment for our grandchildren, and their grandchildren
- ❖ A mix of energy that swiftly increases the percentage from renewable sources
- ❖ Kids who know what makes them happy
- ❖ Children who can live without fear, and who refuse oppression
- ❖ Healthy farms and a society that values the farm, both as source of food and way of life
- ❖ Children who are “plagued with ideals” about their own piece of land, who get to fix their little piece of land and make it richer and healthier
- ❖ A third generation (and beyond) who share our love for the natural world, who see all things as connected
- ❖ A new generation that can farm creatively, paying close attention to and creating with the land
- ❖ Land, as a living entity that is free to heal itself.

In these hopeful words, you find the guiding principles behind a hundred potential policies in agriculture, education, and environmental protection. If you have read this book this far, you’ll agree that it is all of our responsibility to hear these dreams and use our power to



help them come true. We must hold our government accountable to the democratic values it still professes. And here, in these young people and their children, is our template for the new society that we know we need.

These are solid, sustainable hopes for a better world, spoken at a time when young people could very easily become hopeless. They have not, and therefore *we* should not—there is work to be done and now is the time to get deeply into it. Let's join our wisdom with theirs, add our experience to theirs, and whenever possible, enliven what we are already attempting with their energy and leadership. Or conversely—enliven what *they* are now attempting with our experience and encouragement.

In that spirit, I will give the interviewees the last word. This is their story, after all, and with due respect to the whole group, I will highlight moments from four last conversations. In a few interviews, we arrived at a point of magic—where neither parents nor politics nor direct

experience could explain why they are as committed as they are to these issues, or why certain doors have opened for them. In moments like this, I felt I had stepped inside a force boldly existing, already moving souls, and already active on behalf of this planet Earth.

"This is our hope against hope, that your efforts on behalf of our planet are not ours alone but that the source and power of life in the universe is working in and through us for the well-being of all creation, including our tiny parts in it."

—Sallie McFague, *Body of God*.

Says Janaki Fisher-Merritt: **"I have no illusions about how lucky I am to be able to do this. Things have fallen into place, and it wasn't just me or my parents. It was my responsibility to be open enough—to allow it rather than to force it."** ❖

Melissa MacKimm wondered at the way in which she found her first job at the Minnesota Food Association. **"I started reading this proposal [of MFA's] and I'd just finished my degree and I thought, 'OK . . . I have to! Something put this in my lap!' It was so unlike me to do anything like that, but . . . it was divine intervention."** A match happens—where the soul starts searching, shaking off ego or fear along the way, and stuff just starts to click. ❖

Colin King recalled serendipitous events: **"I look back at my life and see how spontaneity has come into play—when you are free to recognize the opportunity to do something**

**Richard Andres
and Ariana
bagging
potatoes**

really neat with another person. What may appear at the moment to be spontaneous, does seem to be leaning in a direction; there is a distinct path." ❖

**Brandon
Rutter,
1996**

Sometimes the path has less to do with serendipity, but is just boldly present during a whole young lifetime. It may later weave its way toward a lifelong commitment. Such a path is apparent when Brandon Rutter reflects on the nature of his dad's work, and draws upon a vivid memory of life on their land with his brother, Perry. "I guess it's a unique situation. What Dad [Phil Rutter] is working on—woody agriculture—makes a very big difference and takes a lot of work. At this point, things are starting to take off. Without Perry or me? Well, let's say this—if Dad were to die tomorrow, there would be no choice for me but to go pick up that work, because it would be utterly stupid to do anything else.

"When Perry was ten and I was thirteen, we were both standing on what we called 'the practice rock.' This was a big rock overlooking the valley by our house, and the acoustics were really good in that spot so we'd practice our musical instruments there. Anyway, on this particular morning, we were looking out at about 40 acres of woods and noticing some tall trees across the way. That day on the practice rock, Perry and I swore to each other that we would not let the farm be lost. We felt good about it. And it's still true." ❖



Those Interviewed:

**Malena Arner Handeen and
Mike Jacobs**
Milan, MN

Melissa Ault MacKimm
Minneapolis, MN

Amanda Bilek
St. Paul, MN

Connie Fernholz Carlson
Center City, MN

Craig Fernholz
Minneapolis, MN

Katie Fernholz
Crystal, MN

Janaki Fisher-Merritt
Wrenshall, MN

Heather Greeley Benson
San Francisco, CA

If you want to learn more about this project or the people interviewed, contact the MISA Office, 411 Borlaug Hall, 1991 Buford Circle, St Paul, MN 55108; (612) 625-8235 or (800) 909-6472; www.misa.umn.edu

Inga Haugen
Fargo, ND

Colin King
Minneapolis, MN

Deborah Lentz
Chelsea, Michigan

Merrisue and Mike Minar
New Prague, MN

Brandon Rutter
Cleveland Heights, OH

Josh and Cindy Van Der Pol
Kerkhoven, MN

Adam Warthesen
Minneapolis, MN

About the Author

Beth Waterhouse directed The Minnesota Project for seven years during the 1990s. She then followed her love of the earth and words and launched a career in writing and editing as well as the teaching of business writing. Two current books which Beth has been a partner to are *Renewing the Countryside-Minnesota*, a collection of stories about ingenuity in rural and farm places (2001), and *The Farm as Natural Habitat* (Island Press 2002). She also teaches Environmental Ethics at the University of Minnesota.

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Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture

MISA is a partnership between the University of Minnesota's College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences and the Sustainers' Coalition, a group of individuals and community-based, nonprofit organizations.

MISA's purpose is to bring together the agricultural community and the University community in a cooperative effort to develop and promote sustainable agriculture in Minnesota and beyond.



The School of Agriculture

Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems

This project was undertaken during Beth Waterhouse's tenure as the School of Agriculture Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems. The Chair is filled on a revolving basis, and provides a forum for farmers, consumers, business people, students, educators, legislators, and other stakeholders in agriculture to help sustain the dream that the School of Agriculture at the University of Minnesota (SAUM) began more than 100 years ago.

In 1888, the School of Agriculture was established on the St. Paul campus to serve the state of Minnesota as an agricultural high school. During its 72 years of existence, the School fostered the development of many outstanding state and national leaders in agriculture.

Thanks to the dedication of its alumni, the SAUM legacy lives on today. Together with the Minnesota State Legislature and the University of Minnesota, the SAUM Alumni Association created the Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems in 1995. Their pioneering spirit flourishes in the Chair's continuing quest for new and innovative approaches to producing quality food and fiber while sustaining the environment and rural communities. For more information about the Endowed Chairs and their work, contact the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, (800) 909-6472 or look under Programs at www.misa.umn.edu