

Land Stewardship Project Farm Transition Profile: Mary Ellen Frame, Erin Johnson & Ben Doherty

Luck, Pluck & Relationships

By Alex Baumhardt

With any luck, a young farmer shouldn't need it—luck that is—to access land. Mary Ellen Frame, 77, is a retired farmer in Northfield, Minn., and she and the two young farmers she has helped get established describe their farming relationship as one in which each of them got extremely lucky. In reality, what brought them together has a little to do with luck and happenstance, and a lot to do with careful planning and negotiation.

The two young farmers are Erin Johnson and Ben Doherty, and their journey into owning and operating their own farming operation started when they were both working at the Food Bank Farm, a 60-acre

organic operation in western Massachusetts. There they both gained valuable farming experience and learned how to make a living with a small-scale produce



farm, sowing the seeds of their dream to one day own and operate their own Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation.

They chose to start in Northfield, a community south of the Twin Cities that in recent years has become a destination for sustainable agriculture in the state. Johnson's family had moved there and she and Doherty wanted to be closer to them and to a community that has become increasingly attractive to small-scale, low-input farmers. Northfield has two college campuses with research and student resources, a burgeoning farmers' market and co-op and the appeal of a diverse and lively town in the heart of rich farmland. These factors were conducive to finding a retiring farmer that wanted to transition her land. In turn, the community's dynamics helped a landowner like Frame find new farmers who shared her land stewardship values.

Northfield's Sustainable Ag Boom

In the early 2000s, Frame, a Northfield native, began noticing that many of the sustainable farming projects starting up in town were being pioneered by young people, fresh out of

college with liberal arts degrees. It was the start of a shift in thinking about the connection between the health of the planet and how food was being grown. More young environmentalists were taking to farmland to support, and participate in, cultivating local food systems. Doherty, 34, has noticed it accelerating even more in the last three or four years. “There has been this college-level focus on local food and it’s boomed in Northfield,” he says. A third of the produce Doherty and Johnson raise goes to the dining programs at Saint Olaf College and Carleton College in Northfield.

This focus on supporting small-scale farmers is a stark contrast to the agricultural trends Frame experienced in her 20s and 30s, when the philosophy of “get big, or get out” kept young people out of farming in droves.

“Young people were told that you couldn’t earn a living farming unless you got really big,” Frame recalls. The next generation of farmers tried to acquire more and more land and embrace the industrial model that still exists today. “At that time, the countryside was emptied out of a lot of young people. They were going to towns and cities to figure out how to earn a living.”

Seed Money

During Johnson’s four years and Doherty’s three at the Food Bank Farm, they had saved \$20,000 to put towards securing land. When they arrived in Northfield to begin scouting plots, they discovered they had much to learn. “We didn’t know anything about finding land,” Johnson, 38, says.



They were hoping to work with a land trust, a popular model in the Eastern and Western U.S. where a nonprofit organization buys the rights to the development potential of a piece of land, allowing a farmer to pay much less for it. But land trusts have not gained widespread traction in the Midwest, so it soon became clear to Johnson and Doherty that they would need to rent property at first.

Johnson’s mother had mentioned that they should contact Frame, who had deep roots in the sustainable farming community, had helped establish a local co-op and had held a number of positions with the Cannon River chapter of the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota. Frame was taken with the couple, whose dream of a CSA was similar to one she had always dreamed of starting. Frame had title to five acres of tillable land and four acres of woodlot with a house she had built on it. The five acres had been farmed by two brothers, and they had honored Frame’s wishes that it not be sprayed. The brothers owned many more acres of land and Frame told Johnson and Doherty she would consider asking the brothers if they would terminate their lease on her five acres in order to free it up for the couple.

Johnson and Doherty returned to Massachusetts to consider their farming future. Two months later, Frame sent them a hand-written letter asking them if they'd like to rent her land starting in 2006 and the couple jumped on it. Johnson's parents took photos and collected soil samples while Johnson and Doherty prepared to make the move to Northfield. Over the following few months, Frame and the young couple exchanged hand-written letters—the new farmers were shocked at how much trust and confidence Frame had in them.

“She knew we were coming from organic but she didn't know if we could grow anything. She just immediately trusted us,” Johnson says.

Doherty adds, “We were ready and experienced enough to start it, but there were so many things we still didn't know.”

The first few conversations that the three of them had about the land were simple and came down to one guiding principle: no chemicals. The rest was played by ear. Frame okayed a compost pile, irrigation system, greenhouse and electricity in the greenhouse. Johnson and Doherty were articulate in laying out their dream for the operation: ideal number of CSA members, how they intended to market extra produce and how they would both generate a living while making payments to Frame. The brothers who had farmed the five acres helped Johnson and Doherty with plowing and Erin's relatives and their friends helped them prepare the ground and plant even before the two arrived. The couple got an apartment in town and spent two summers getting everything established. They talked to the company in charge of spraying the brothers' land about ways they would need to mitigate potential chemical drift. During the winters, Johnson worked at the local food co-op while Doherty worked at a plant nursery and substitute taught.

They paid Frame the same rental rate that conventional farmers in the area were paying. The first year, they suffered through softball-size hail and growing pains learning how to operate the new farm. Besides dealing with soil, climate and pest obstacles that were new, the couple had the daunting responsibility of owning a business rather than simply working for one.

The difficulties of their first year, however, only strengthened Frame's faith in the young couple. “It was kind of a test for them, but I had thought they passed the test very well,” she recalls. The next winter, as luck would have it the renter of the home Frame had built on the woodlot moved to town and in 2008 Frame sold the farm — the five acres and the woodlot with the house— to Doherty and Johnson.

After just two years, Frame had found farmers outside of her family who shared her land ethic, and she had discovered that she was willing to sell them some of her land and the very home she'd built on it. Frame hadn't thought about how she would transition her farm before she met the couple.

“They [Johnson and Doherty] were talking about their vision for their farm and I hadn't been able to achieve that. There are two of them, they're young,” Frame says.

The three worked out a contract for deed, which means for the first 10 years of their mortgage payments, Frame is essentially the bank. She holds the mortgage, and Johnson and Doherty pay her every month based on the price and interest rate they agreed upon with her. Frame told Johnson and Doherty the assessed value of the land and property (the assessed value of property is often lower than the market value) and had Johnson and Doherty come up with three prices and interest rates that they thought they could pay based on that value. She accepted both the lowest price and the lowest interest rate the two proposed.

The contract for deed is beneficial for Frame because it includes a balloon payment after the 10-year period. This means that when the contract is up, Johnson and Doherty will go to a bank to take out a loan for the remainder of the money they owe Frame, pay her, and then finish paying off that loan at the bank. When the time comes for them to take out the bank loan, they are more likely to secure it given their experience paying a 10-year mortgage to Frame.

More Thank Luck

Besides selling wholesale vegetables to local institutions, Doherty and Johnson's operation, Open Hands Farm, is also a CSA. It started with six members, Frame being one of them, and has grown to 160 members today. Johnson and Doherty intend to keep it at that number for the time being. Farming neighbors and community members that have grown up around the farm comment to Frame about the speed with which it has been established and how beautiful it has become. Frame has the satisfaction of not only seeing it thrive in the hands of people she respects, but of still being seen as a part of its success. The amount of work Johnson and Doherty put into the farm worries Frame at times, but she can't help getting excited about the respect and admiration the two have earned from the community.

"I could sense their dedication to farming," Frame says. "You aren't really dedicated to any land until you've worked it, but when you have worked on a place, then you begin to love it. It's a connection that grows and it's exciting; it gives me hope. They're doing what I had hoped to do; they're carrying my dream forwards."

That's an awesome responsibility, but Johnson and Doherty say that taking it on creates a win-win situation.

"I think the hardest part is probably finding somebody outside of the family that you feel shares your values," Johnson says. "She poured her heart and soul into the whole place. I think she's pleased to have us here doing what were doing and taking care of it and feeding lots of people with great food."

Alex Baumhardt served a Farm Beginnings journalism internship in 2013.

Ben Doherty and Erin Johnson weigh in on starting a CSA and finding a Mary Ellen Frame:

- Start by interning on somebody else's farm.

“Work for many years for other people,” Doherty says. “Learn from their mistakes — no less than three years, five or more would be better.”

- Start interning or working on a farm *in* the area you intend to start your own farm.

“Start learning about that community and the land,” Johnson says. “If my parents hadn't been here [in Northfield], we don't know how it would have come together.”

- Ask for help.

“Farming is a community event, especially if you need help,” Doherty says. “There are some local, conventional and organic corn and bean farmers around here that are really supportive and encouraging and open with equipment and knowledge.”

- Save money.

“Save as much money as you can,” Doherty says. “At least \$20,000 — more is better, of course.”

- Be flexible.

“The vision of the farm has changed over the years, but we've really achieved what we set out to do,” Doherty says. Johnson and Doherty have thought about bringing goats onto the farm; they've expanded to more acres and decided to cap at fewer CSA members than they had initially planned; they've considered adding chicken and grains. “You have to be really nimble,” Doherty says.

- And to the future Mary Ellen Frames who may consider a farming couple outside of the family to transition land to:

“Trust and be open,” Doherty says. “Be discriminating and careful, but it's so easy to just say, ‘they can't do it’ and stop there.”

Mary Ellen Frame weighs in on transitioning land to non-family and how to choose a new farming family for your land.

- Get to know their farming background.
“Erin and Ben had farming experience. They’d been working on a CSA in Massachusetts and had learned how to do everything. I had been watching [while they rented] what they did and how much knowledge and skill they brought to farming.”
- You can’t farm forever.
“Nobody is going to live forever and nobody is going to be able to farm when they’re 90- and 100-years-old. It is important to start thinking about it. I didn’t think about it then. I just got lucky. We can’t all count on being lucky. I could’ve had some accident that made it impossible for me to work. I could’ve gotten sick.”
- Consider the legacy you’d like to leave.
“If you have a long-term interest in what happens to the land, if it is important to you, think about the health of the land.”
- Take into account the farmers’....
 - Character: “The way people talk about what they are going to do.”
 - Dedication: “There are going to be really tough times; farmers have to be super adaptable. So if you get hit by a flood or hit by a drought, or three years of drought, what kind of dedication will you have to be able to work and adapt to the new climate and conditions you’ll face? And market conditions will change all the time.”
 - Ask yourself: “How realistic is their business plan? Is it something that is actually going to work?”
- And to the future Erin Johnsons and Ben Dohertys who may seek out a retiring farmer, outside of the family, to transition land to them:
“Not everyone is going to succeed; there are going to be failures. One of the plagues of the sustainable system is economic — you have to be able to pay for the land, and that’s not easy. It’s very hard in the present market for somebody to pay for the land by farming it, in any system. So you have to find out if the [potential renter or buyer] has skills to not only do the farming but the business — promotion of the products and things like that. There are plenty of young kids who are idealistic but don’t know how to work, don’t have a practical attitude toward what they’re doing, and it doesn’t do anybody any good for them to take over some land and fail.”