

## **SUNFIELD FARM: GROUNDED IN THE LAND**

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How do you turn a dream into a reality? How do you turn an idea into a farm?

Well, there's some hard-working dreams playing out these days at Sunfield Farm. Growing a farm from the ground up takes vision and skill, courage, hard work and determination. Growing a community institution takes even more.

The dreams are pretty far-ranging: a biodynamic farm to feed the community through sales of produce at the Co-op, the farmers market and a CSA; community service to help people with limited means grow food and help teenagers learn marketable skills; a Waldorf School where youngsters can learn and grow, grounded in the land; stewardship of wetlands, woodlands and farmlands; strengthening of Jefferson County's local food production and self-reliance.

Egads! Is there anything they *aren't* trying to do at Sunfield?

These dreams have been quietly growing—perhaps the way seeds do—not initially visible to the broader world. Eight years ago, three local folks with a vision founded the Trillium Waldorf Education Association, planning to offer education for children based on the principles of Austrian visionary **Rudolph Steiner**. There are now approximately 50 families involved in the various programs.

The association board dreamed of a permanent farm-based site for the school to allow the unfolding of Steiner's ideas about children learning through guided experiences with the natural world and through real-life participation in a working biodynamic farm.

In 2001, an 81-acre property in Hadlock, the former Spalding Dairy, came up for sale. It looked as though it was headed for a future as 16 5-acre homesites, one more piece of fertile farmland and rich wildlife ecosystem gone to development. But wait! The board and community supporters marshaled an amazing amount of support, took a leap of faith, and leased the property with an option to buy, envisioning this as the place where all the dreams could come together.

Some people shook their heads and thought it was a crazy gamble to commit to paying \$425,000, an impossible dream. But by 2004, the organization, now the Sunfield Education Association, was able to buy the property! That became possible because of the property owner's support for the organization's mission, an alliance with Jefferson Land Trust, assistance from the county Conservation District, and a federal grant matched by county Conservation Futures Fund money, a PCC Farmland Fund contribution and many, many individual donors.

As part of the property acquisition, conservation easements have been placed on 46 of the 51 acres of open pasture, seven acres of wetland and 23 forested acres. The lands are protected forever from development. The conservation easement fits beautifully with one of the principles of biodynamic farming: allowing the farm to work in concert with surrounding natural ecosystems.

In the past two years, you might have seen some evidence of activity at the farm, just behind the Fiesta Jalisco restaurant along Rhody Drive. There have been work parties, seasonal celebrations, a corn maze, fundraising, eggs and chickens and a little produce for sale at the Co-op and the farmers market.

This summer you'll see a *lot* more activity, under the direction of the newest hard-working dreamer on the scene, farm-manager Sebastian Aguilar. He arrived in December with his wife, Kelly Gelina, and children Emma, Ezra and Noah. Sebastian has 10 years of solid experience as an organic and biodynamic farmer in Wisconsin and New Mexico. The organization connected with Sebastian through a notice on a biodynamic website, the marrying of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century technology with an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century vision of farming systems.

Sebastian conveys a steady optimism, even while talking about the challenges of trying to do everything at once: putting together all the needed infrastructure while at the same time growing the crops to bring in cash to keep the operation going. He has specific work plans mapped out for each season.

I visited in April and the farm was bustling: chickens in and out of where they were "supposed" to be, an acre tilled up and ready for planting, preparations for the weekly hands-on session with students from Jefferson Community School and two interns busy with farm chores.

Sebastian recruited the interns through the Internet also. Finding qualified and affordable labor is always a central farming challenge. Some farms, especially organic ones, recruit interns who are willing to trade their summer's labor for a modest stipend, modest accommodations, lots of farm-raised food to eat, and the chance to sharpen their farming skills. In talking with interns Natalie Robinson and William Middlebrooks, Natalie told me that she was especially attracted to Sunfield because of the strong educational component here, as Sebastian spends time each week teaching them about biodynamics.

The goals for this farm season are ambitious:

- Growing three acres of vegetables for sale through a CSA as well as the farmers market and The Food Co-op.
- Putting in fencing for Dexter calves, Nubian goats, chickens and "Long Ears" the donkey.
- Hosting Sunfield educational programs including an eight-week "Sol Project" that will give area youths a chance to learn job and leadership skills and learn about sustainable agriculture.
- Planting a corn maze and pumpkin patch for a fall festival.

- Stabilizing the old barns, installing irrigation, raising money for a tractor, planting hedges and much more.

Chris Nock, Sunfield's director, describes Sunfield as "an educational center using land as the basis for that education." It has three independent and interdependent facets: 1) a Waldorf school (now enrolling students grades 1 through 5 at the farm for September, pending county permit approvals), 2) land-based education programs for the broader community including public schools, and 3) a farm, functioning as a learning center and a producer of high quality, locally produced foods.

The Sunfield project now has a USDA grant. What a good use for some of our federal tax dollars! The grant is providing short-term, partial salary support for Chris, Sebastian and Marko Colby (Youth Education Coordinator), as well as a Food and Farm Network Coordinator at WSU, who has community-wide responsibilities. Part of the goal of the grant program is to strengthen our region's food economy and food self-sufficiency.

Sunfield has been able to secure grants in part because of its unique model: a farm imbedded within a community organization. It's a provider of quality food and a steward of land, an education center for sustainable agriculture, and a force for community strengthening and self-sufficiency.

When people hear about grant money coming to Sunfield, there's a temptation to think, "Oh, they have all that grant money—they're all set now." Well, that might be our subconscious way to stay uninvolved, to assume that "others will do it." The truth is, it's our food, our bodies, our health, our community, our earth. Sunfield still needs money (of course), but even more than that, it needs involved people. You can buy a CSA share and get a weekly "farm-in-a-box," purchase Sunfield produce at the Co-op and the farmers market, offer some help and come visit the farm.

Sebastian says: "People have to want it and help make it happen. When people come to the farm, they leave happy and grounded."

Getting involved in feeding yourself and others makes for a rich diet. Maybe you're part of the next step of this dream. As another visionary, noted anthropologist Margaret Mead, said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

For more information contact 360-385-3658 or go to [sunfieldfarm.org](http://sunfieldfarm.org). The CSA begins July 1, so there's still time to sign up!

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