

# Restoration agriculture

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Author: Melchior, Priscilla

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## Document Text

Holly Marcus / Special to the News Leader

Laurie Berman had made the trek across West Virginia many times, but during a trip in 2005, she happened to recognize what was missing.

Katie Currid/The News Leader

House after house, yard after yard, it was always the same: A rural mainstay had vanished.

"I just happened to notice out the window that there were no gardens anymore," she said. "When I moved here in 1975, there were gardens at every house.

"It didn't matter whether you were rich or poor, you had a garden. In fact, especially if you were poor, you had a garden."

And so on a seemingly innocuous journey back to Highland County the seed was planted.

Today, the harvest has begun.

Fellows from the Allegheny Mountain School, borne of that trip in 2005, have fanned out across Highland, Augusta, Rockingham counties and beyond. In their wake have come bottom-line boosts to nonprofit agencies devoted to fresh, local produce and better health.

Their mission, summarized by second-year Fellow Jenna Clarke, is simple: "We're trying to cultivate that awareness and connection back to the land."

The school is housed on a 550-acre farm atop the mountain from which it draws its name. It has attracted students -- or fellows, as they are called -- from across the nation. All are college graduates, some with advanced degrees, and all devote a full growing season to life on the farm. Each receives a stipend throughout the term of fellowship.

Life of a farm fellow

Each cohort of nine fellows arrives in April and stays through October. They live, eat and work together in an intensive program that represents the first phase in 18 months of training.

In their second 12 months, they'll move to area nonprofits to share muscle and knowledge, and create network to strengthen local ties to food.

"We're looking for people who are going to be leaders in this food movement, toward better food security in our regions," Berman said. "We want people who have dynamic personalities as well as great intelligence.

"We're looking for the cream of the crop."

Those chosen face a first year that will test them to the core. While on the mountain, they clear land, prepare soil, plant seeds and tend crops. Workshops on everything from mushrooming to nonprofit organizations are sandwiched between visits to the greenhouse, grafting trees and raising chicks.

"The first six months is a challenge for people, because it is a completely different way of living," said Ellen Butchart, leadership coordinator and outreach director.

It is a remote life without cellphone technology, and though the fellows do share a Wi-Fi connection, the virtual world seems a galaxy away.

"It takes the right kind of people with the right kind of energy," said Berman, now AMS program coordinator. "It takes really hearty people who understand that, when you start growing food, you are in a world of working, sometimes, around the clock."

When fellows leave the mountain each October, they look ahead to a yearlong second phase of training beginning in January. Then, they live and work separately in full-time positions at nonprofits around the region. They will have fought hard to reach that moment. Even entrance into the program requires commitment.

## Rugged commitment

For first-year fellow Ben Samuelson, it was a no-brainer.

Since graduating college, the Texas native has lived and worked in Europe, Asia and Central America to learn about growing food in a sustainable, organic way. He also has completed a three-month environmental fellowship in Connecticut.

Yet, he said, that wasn't enough.

"I heard about this program and wanted to take it to the next sphere," he said. "Food is central to our lives. When it is grown in a caring way, so many issues are improved, locally and nationally."

Samuelson, 26, is part of the nine-fellow 2013 cohort.

Like the others, he completed a rigorous application process that included a visit to the area for a face-to-face evaluation by school officials.

"We're looking for candidates who are looking for a place to grow, who aren't afraid of the kind of work it takes," Butchart said.

That visit also offers a look at the school, snuggled against the West Virginia state line atop Allegheny Mountain.

Its beauty may mask the rugged commitment it will require.

An outdoor classroom of gardens is nestled into a small valley beneath a village of three residential cabins, a bath house and three more buildings for gathering, eating and study. To the east, a mountain view seems to stretch nearly to the Shenandoah.

At times, even that expanse can be confining. Adjusting to the communal nature of 180 days isolated with eight former strangers can be tough.

But, said Lisa Millette, now in the second phase of her fellowship, it is invaluable.

"You really have to develop good relationships with everyone, despite interpersonal conflicts," she said. "In order to make the six months work, you know you definitely have those folks who become your allies and your best friends to lean upon, to rely on."

"Some weeks are pretty difficult," she said, "but when that happens, you have to remember that shared common goals keep a strong energy forward."

Those goals, inevitably, rest in the fellows' embrace of the school's mission or, as its website says, its vision: "A healthy, sustainable food system. Vegetables, fruits, nuts and grains growing where people live. Nutritious, fresh food available to all."

Tenets for any adherent of the local food movement.

## Where health starts

There was no simple leap between Berman's West Virginia observation and the Allegheny Mountain School. Friends helped her shape the mission. A private foundation is funding the fellows' stay and their second-year stipends. The land has been leased, and the financial structure established. The Highland Center in Monterey serves as its fiscal agent.

But for Berman, the garden-free rural countryside was just the beginning. As time went by, she began to wonder about the inner cities and the impoverished who live there, usually, without benefit of fresh, locally grown food.

Now in its third year of operation, the school aims to revitalize those "food deserts," where fresh food and produce are unavailable.

For second-year fellow Jenna Clarke, such work is nothing short of a calling. Before enrolling at AMS, she worked at a nonprofit in Richmond.

"I was working with free health clinics who treat very sick patients," she said, "and it got me really thinking about where health starts: with healthy local food. I wanted to get back to the source."

Clarke's 2012 residential training classmates are all now at work in local nonprofits who have formed a partnership with the school. Most are in Augusta County, while others are in Highland and Rockingham.

"We learned the importance of keeping them together," said Butchart.

While the school's first class of fellows landed strong contributive roles in nonprofits across the country, Berman and Butchart believe geographic separation cost them much of the strength of the team they formed while AMS residents.

Now, with last year's residential fellows in close proximity, they can gather regularly with Butchart to discuss the rewards and challenges of working in the nonprofit world. They also compare notes, outline problems they have solved and seek support from their former residential program mates.

And they serve as informal mentors for those who're in the residential program now, laying the foundation of a network that one day, school leaders hope, will extend beyond the region and into those inner city deserts.

### Lessons learned

First-year fellow Emily Melvin came to AMS from the Pittsburgh area. A graduate of George Washington University, she carries a degree in international affairs and developmental studies.

The lessons she's learned at AMS have cemented the realization that dawned while she was considering world problems in an academic setting.

"I've always wanted to help bring communities together," she said, "and I thought I wanted to do it internationally. Then I worked in a college garden, and I saw how it brought all walks together."

She apprenticed on a farm, worked at a farmer's market and found what she'd been seeking.

"I saw something more, something more in depth. I saw how working directly in these communities helped bring them together," she said.

"When I found this program, I thought, 'This must be a joke -- that something this perfect not only exists, but that they pay you!'"

Highland Center Director Betty Mitchell said acting as fiscal agent school was a natural fit for her organization.

"The idea came to us -- it was a fully funded program when it came to the Highland Center -- and asked if we would be interested in being fiscal agent and project manager," she said. "We felt like the mission Highland Center, being a catalyst for community and economic development, fit very well into what AMS wanted to accomplish."

The Highland Center administers the funding through a contract with the private family trust that pays for all of the school operations. The relationship goes beyond dollars and cents, however, as AMS fellows from all three years are at work in its programs.

Phase II fellow Jessa Fowler is working there now to complete her training, and alumna Sarah Collins now works full time for the center as local foods coordinator.

Residential fellows are involved, too. One pair visited the center on a recent Tuesday morning to work with youngsters whose mothers were attending a cooking class. Using herbs and vegetables grown in the school's gardens, they mixed finger paints for the children, who practiced their arts with fully edible media.

Another pair came that Friday, to provide grilling demonstrations during the farmers market.

Mitchell said it is hard to measure the effect the school has had on the area.

"I think you can't even see the impact at this point," she said. "You have the direct benefit from just the energy of young people in the community is so important.

"Of course (we) have young people in the county who were born and raised here," she said, "but to see a group of young people come in with fresh eyes and recognize the assets and the possibilities just inspires so much hope among the people who live here."

Berman and Butchart would beam upon hearing those words, because hope clearly comprises the core of what they understand themselves to be doing.

### Seeking impact

Still, the mission is simple. Whether the fellows move to the rural countryside or the inner city, where Berman hopes the

school can have a long-range impact, the goals are clear and well-defined.

On that same trip across West Virginia, she stopped at a country store for a simple drink and a healthy snack.

She said what she found there affected her deeply.

"There was no produce, nothing fresh," she said, "and I noticed that the people in the convenience store were very overweight -- just pasty and unhealthy."

On the rest of her trip, she reflected on the garden desert of the countryside and began to wonder how that could be changed.

"I thought, wouldn't it be nice to teach people to grow food again," she said, "to work with those who have lost the culture or the initiative to take care of themselves."

Though the sentiment is, at its foundation, exactly the same, first-year fellow Ian Sawyer comes at the mission another way. Born in Japan and reared in Hawaii and California, he's at work on the mountain because he wants to share.

"I have come to appreciate the abundance we enjoy," he said of his time there, "and to learn that everyone is a producer. People are so generous. The soil is so generous."

## LEARN MORE

\* Find Allegheny Mountain School at [www.AlleghenyMountainSchool.org](http://www.AlleghenyMountainSchool.org) and sign up for notification of regular workshops open to the public. A call for applications will be added to the website during early September.

\* You can also join the Allegheny Mountain School group on Facebook to receive regular updates there.

## HIGHTOWN

Online today

More on ProjectGROWS and the school's fellows.

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### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

[...]especially if you were poor, you had a garden." Rugged commitment For first-year fellow Ben Samuelson, it was a no-brainer. Since graduating college, the Texas native has lived and worked in Europe, Asia and Central America to learn about growing food in a sustainable, organic way.

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