

Sharing work and bounty at Allegheny Mountain School

BY BILL LOHMANN *Richmond Times-Dispatch* | Posted: Saturday, August 2, 2014 10:30 pm

HIGHTOWN —Former Richmonder Trevor Piersol grew up in The Fan, majored in history at the University of Virginia, taught English for a year in China and now works, teaches and lives on a farm in the lush mountains of Highland County where the harvest is something more profound than mere vegetables.

“It was a long and winding road until I found my passion,” Piersol said over a homegrown lunch in the dining hall of the Allegheny Mountain School, “but I ended up in the right place.”

Piersol’s “long and winding road” is metaphorical, but reaching Allegheny Mountain School does indeed require a trip on a long and winding road. The school is a dozen miles of seriously coiled highway west of Monterey — or, in other words, head west from Richmond on Broad Street (U.S. 250) for 160 miles, the last hour of the drive a challenging but spectacularly beautiful journey through the George Washington National Forest and Highland County, which is known as “Little Switzerland” and is Virginia’s least-populated county with 2,200 residents.

Just before hitting the West Virginia line, you must make the sharpest of left turns on Bear Mountain Road, a narrow, gravel road heading uphill toward the 550-acre farm that hosts the school’s six-month residential program. There, Allegheny Mountain School fellows — mostly young college graduates — live cooperatively, grow most of their own food, and receive training in skills such as organic gardening, land stewardship and nutrition. In the second, yearlong phase of the program, the fellows work with partner organizations throughout the Shenandoah Valley and Allegheny Highlands, organizing projects such as community gardens and advocating for sustainable land use as ways to promote the notion of growing good, accessible food close to where consumers live.



**Allegheny Mountain School:
Hard work, good food and
sharing the know-how of
sustainable agriculture**

Emily Lawrence (left) and Emily Sullivan work in the orchard at the 550-acre farm where fellows spend six months living, working and learning.

As a fellow, Piersol, 26, now an AMS project manager, helped set up an educational farm at the Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind.

The mission of the Allegheny Mountain School, says program director Ellen Butchart, is “to send people of this wonderful age out to work in organizations and bring that problem-solving spirit, that entrepreneurial, innovative, grounded-in-nature, health and food knowledge and expertise to the community.

“Because,” she said, “we want to change the culture.”

The Allegheny Mountain School was established in 2011 on a portion of a family farm that was once a bed-and-breakfast and later a school where outdoors skills were taught. Fellows do not pay to attend. They receive a stipend as well as room and board during the residential phase and another stipend during their year working in the community. The money comes from an endowment managed by The Highland Center, a local nonprofit.

Butchart, who worked in management for Amazon.com and Rosetta Stone, the language learning company, before earning an MBA in sustainable business and coming to AMS, said it is a joy of her job to approach nonprofits and say, “I’ve got these great, talented, smart, enthusiastic, well-educated fellows to work full time for you for a year, and you don’t have to pay their salary.

“It liberates the organizations to think strategically instead of just day-to-day,” she said. “Every single one of these fellows over the years has been able to launch new projects that the nonprofits had not had the time or the resources to launch.”

Often, the projects have proved successful enough to attract donors to sustain them, and the fellows wind up being hired by the organizations that didn’t have money for such a position only a year before.

For her project, AMS fellow Mandy Henkler had a particular interest in nutrition and is working with the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank in Verona. The food bank had no dietitian on staff but was interested in looking at the nutritional quality of its food sources and, in particular, what it serves children, so bringing in Henkler was a good match, said Cheryl Cooper, director of agency relations and programs for the food bank.

Henkler has helped with the food bank’s mobile food pantry and children’s outreach, led cooking classes, assisted in the development of nutrition education materials and researched and made recommendations for healthier alternatives in the organization’s summer and after-school snack program. She’s working with a local church to build, cultivate and harvest a community garden.

“It has been a wonderful year so far, working with Mandy,” Cooper wrote in an email. “She has creative

ideas and is working well with us to provide some research and enhance our understanding of nutrition, and she is helping families know what to do with produce that may not have been a significant part of their diets in the past.”

A 2011 fellow, Matthew Daniel, conducted his project at Richmond’s William Byrd Community House and now works as project coordinator for the Byrd House Farmlet, which grows food to be distributed to families in need.

This year’s group of nine residential fellows come from all over the country — Virginia to California — and with a variety of backgrounds, though a love of food, adventure and activism seem to be shared traits. Some have worked on farms, and many have an interest in environmental matters: science, history, policy.

They range in age from 21-year-old Samantha Taggart, who grew up in a condo in Arlington and recently graduated from the University of Virginia, to 33-year-old Aaron Burkholder, who was raised in Rockingham County and attended West Virginia University where he studied geography, worked for the Division of Plant and Soil Sciences and experienced an epiphany during a summer of field work when he lived in a remote area that required a 90-minute drive to get groceries.

“That made me think a lot more about where my food was coming from and why it wasn’t easy to get fresh, good food there,” he said. “I found out about this place soon after that, and it seemed like a perfect place for me. I love it here, and I want to do something like this with the rest of my life.”

The fellows live in cabins and work every day — from planting to harvest — in the gardens or hoop house or fledgling orchard, weeding, feeding chickens and shoveling manure, or attend workshops or seminars in an outdoor classroom where they learn about things such as permaculture, a concept of agricultural ecosystems designed to be sustainable and self-sufficient.

An equally important component of the program is the actual day-to-day living and learning from one another. They share chores and cooking duties, taking what they harvest from the farm into meals they enjoy family style at long tables with rich conversation.

At lunch on the day of our visit, the menu included two kinds of vegetarian frittatas, roasted potatoes with basil, applesauce, salads with roasted root vegetables and glasses of cold spring water drawn nearby. They had grown or raised nearly everything on the plates (though some was from last year’s harvest and had been stored in a root cellar): the onions, garlic, shiitake mushrooms, potatoes, asparagus, beets, parsnips, tomatoes, peppers, herbs and eggs.

Fellow Thea Klein-Mayer, 24, grew up in downtown Washington. Her connection to food comes more through cooking than gardening. In college, she studied environmental science and design, worked in

Chicago for a year, traveled a bit and reached a point in her life where AMS offered just what she was seeking.

“My interests are wanting to work outside, wanting to give back to the community, wanting to cook and eat locally,” she said, “and be around really wonderful people.”

Most can’t say exactly what they see themselves doing 10 years from now, but all have determined to take what they are learning at AMS and make it, in some way, their life’s work.

Piersol, who graduated from Maggie L. Walker Governor’s School, said he’d like to make a living in agriculture, and even though he doesn’t know precisely what form that will take, he knows he’s on the right path.

“I guess in college I was sort of searching for a way to work outside and not have to be in an office,” he said. “I also had a passion for trying to improve the environment, trying to undo some of the bad things we’ve done to it. Then I realized sustainable agriculture would be a way to do that: Improving our food system, improving the health of the land and the health of the people. It’s a win-win.”