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## Appalachian Farmers: *Building Value from Values*

### Introduction

Make no mistake — Appalachia is plagued by poverty and economic dependence overall, yet Appalachian farmers in Southeast Ohio are leaders in the locally-sourced food movement. In the current global food economy, 1% of food consumed is grown locally. However, the rural Appalachia area produces 2.5% to 3% of food consumed, which is considered progressive (Bosserman, 2009). This group of leaders is comprised largely of people born into a family of farmers, or college graduates who began a career in agriculture. The highly successful, yet diverse, farming leaders share a common trait: they are driven by their values. While the values of these farmers are not all the same, such as would be the case in a religious group, they share common principles. These themes range from cultivating the land similarly to honoring the farming methods previous generations used (thus honoring heritage) to ceasing reliance on corporate agribusinesses to supply our grocery stores. These collective values were echoed by one farmer when he remarked, *In your general life, do you recycle? Do you try not to waste? Don't dump gas down the drain. Don't throw bottles out the window. Try not to drive as much. Try to buy locally. Use your common sense, folks. What is good for you and good*



*for everyone? Because you're living and your kids and your grandkids are going to be living here, too.*

## Collective Values

While we know that other social institutions are strong enough to bring together and organize a group of people, the most famous of which is religion, we are finding groups of people who share extremely strong values without a specific institution to help them unite. The common factor uniting the farmers, community members, and business owners is *good food that is also good for the environment*. Appalachian farmers are also brought together because they face similar obstacles. The size of land parcels and tracts is small and inconsistent when compared to the large American farms of the Midwest plains. In attempting to grow food in Appalachia, much of the machinery and equipment used is both quite old and smaller in scale than what is typically manufactured today. It is not



uncommon for farmers to work together to buy equipment and to share it.

In the local informal Appalachian food economy then, we found shared values based on food quality and respect for the environment. These shared values led to the sharing of resources which in turn feeds and strengthens the shared values.

This manuscript examines the values-based leadership of an unwittingly complex rural Appalachian community determined to create a sustainable local

food economy.<sup>1</sup> We wanted to know what rural Appalachian farmers can teach us about values-based management. As suspected, there was a lot we could learn. While the authors have now spent many years in Appalachia, regions or origin are divergent (one hails from a large Midwestern farm and another from a major metropolitan city). We instinctively knew there were lessons to be learned here that appeared to be absent in our prior experiences. There were lessons here that our business and other students would have trouble finding in textbooks and other traditional places. We began our research with the question of what local farmers and the informal Appalachian food economy they helped to create could teach us about values-based leadership.

## Methodology

The primary observations made occurred during an intense ten-month period of ethnographic data collection. Data was collected through participant observations, photography, and formal interviews with farmers, business owners, entrepreneurs, and community members. Conclusions were drawn about the values motivating these farming families to process and practice change leadership to create a more sustainable food system which benefits the health of the community. The result of their efforts is a local food system utilized by families, community members, practitioners, and scholars.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this project, a local food economy is defined as no more than a 250 mile distance from earth to mouth.

What we observed is that various community members, farmers, and business owners in this rural Appalachian area serve the community as leaders of sustainability in several ways. In addition to operating their own successful agricultural ventures, these leaders are found educating the public, creating economic opportunities for farmers, helping non-farmers enter the agriculture business, and establishing a sustainable community-business infrastructure.

## **Advancing a Sustainable Local Food Economy**

Farmers are at the forefront of creating a sustainable local food economy in Appalachia. The politics of food these days are such that farming is no longer simply the act of growing and harvesting. The mythic perceptions of the simple agrarian lifestyle (Rushing, 1983) or that of a “dumb farmer” are anachronistic, and earning a living by farming has become more difficult without diversifying crops or joining corporate agriculture. Having farmers willing to share their experiences, offer advice to help others enter the farming occupation, and ultimately become more sustainable, are the first steps required to increase the number of farmers who support local food economies.

The roles of the individual farmer and the food leaders in this informal economy are defined by the perception of what “good” food is. A central focal point of sustainability in this rural Appalachian community is a local eatery which operates with the clear mission of independence and sustainability: *We do not participate in corporate agribusiness that destroys our access to real food. Compare be wise. Get real. Celebrate your power to change the world every time you pick up a fork.* “Good” food at the Town Café is clearly advertised and communicated to the patrons and community members. A newsletter published by the Town Café reported its yearly earnings and broke down the “investments” made in the local economy. Defining “good” food as local and free of corporate control, the bakery newsletter itemized its yearly business which included, “\$43,000 invested in local organic produce. \$30,000 invested in locally raised pork, beef, lamb, chicken, and eggs. \$290,000 total investment in local and sustainable food and gifts. \$0.00 invested in Wal-Mart, Sysco, GFS, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Altria, or Monsanto.” This newsletter offers transparency and education to readers to illustrate the Town Café’s mission and commitment to local food (e.g., good food).

Much like the Town Café, farmers and community members define “good” food in terms of local, fresh, ethically-grown, responsibly-produced, environmentally-sound, chemical-free, non-GMO, hormone-free, and nutritious. Foods considered “not good” were foods with enriched bleached flour, processed with corn syrup, packed in bags and shipped across the country, or ripened with the aid of chemicals and gasses during shipping.

Another central community leader in the sustainable food initiative is *Mary*, a farmer and small business owner. Mary described her efforts of helping local populations access “good” food and her concerns were rooted in sociological problems, specifically obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. Mary’s small business processes and markets locally-grown and nutritiously-dense grains and beans. Mary spearheaded a community-wide Food Policy Council to bring together parents, business owners, farmers, and concerned individuals who wanted to know how they could become involved in strengthening the local food economy.

Another form of emerging leadership is actively creating economic opportunities and connecting people physically and mentally to their food. *Brad*, a family farmer, works with neighboring poor people in his county to pick local fruits and nuts from trees grown



indigenously in the woods of southeast Ohio. For Brad, this stimulates the local economy in two ways: first, because he is locally sourcing his materials and goods to later add value, and second, by providing employment for his neighbors. Brad also buys crops such as walnuts, from people who have existing walnut trees on their property and who need economic opportunities. While Brad considers himself part of the “local hillbilly economy,” Brad and others like him have concentrated their efforts on community-based, sustainable food production and are helping others make that vision a reality. As Brad explained:

*I'm really interested in community because I feel like sustainability is a community concept. You're not sustainable by yourself. Sustainability is a system, like an ecosystem. And economically, the farmer's market is a perfect example of a community system that's financial. There're a lot of really good things that happen when we work together. I look at what I do as providing jobs and coming up with sustainable solutions.*

The individuals who support, sustain, and sell produce at the local farmers' market serve as the primary leaders of public education. Many farmers spend equal time selling produce and talking to customers. Because of the area farmers' market, more community members understand organic certification regulations and are becoming actively aware of the place of origin of their food. John, another family farmer, uses the farmers' market to network with other farmers to share ideas and discuss problems and solutions. John encourages people to be involved in their food production, whether through gardening or for-profit farming. John explained how he enjoys teaching others about farming and helps in any way he can, such as sharing implements or tools to help other people plant or harvest food. As John explained, “Teaching is a big thing. If more people are educated about where their food is coming from, then there will be a lot more small farmers.”



Growers who sell directly to customers at farmers' markets take home a greater percentage of the profit than growers involved in the large nationwide food system due to removing processors, distributors, and retailers. As Brad explained,

*If you can be the farmer who does the value-added processing and you sell direct to the customer, that's where the farmers' market is so awesome because you're getting the best deal, and also, the customers are getting the best deal because they're getting the highest quality*

*products at pretty reasonable prices. There's an instinctive need to get some real food here. And people want to get farmers around them. It's like a survival type of thing. They realize we can't just be trucking all this stuff around forever. I think that's where farmers and farmers' markets can help; that whole idea of community food security.*

## **Symbiotic Development**

The interdependent nature of food systems complicates the independent nature of farmers. In order for there to be independence from national food chains, the farmers and community members need each other, thus making food a very interdependent variable of community. Key leaders throughout the community ensure customers for locally-grown produce. Farmers work with sustainable restaurants to project next year's consumption, and the business owners create additional outlets to augment the farmers' customer base.

In a rural area with agricultural diversity, leaders work together to support each other. The diverse population and cultures combine to create a community that welcomes diverse perspectives and alternative farming practices. Many farmers and business owners referenced an older man who recently passed away. This man served as an initial leader of change by teaching and introducing alternative farming practices to current farmers. The support in the town to help new farmers start up is tremendous, and through this support and leadership, sustainable food economies are made possible. While there is a great deal of poverty here in rural Appalachia, the values-based leadership here has caused the community to draw on their natural resources and learn to grow more of their food locally than is grown locally in most places in the nation.

## **Lessons Learned**

We, as the authors, consider ourselves scholars who get their hands dirty. We have personal gardens at our homes. We see this research as the utmost applied form of scholarship; our focus on values-based leadership and thus values-based farming influences the academy as well as our own personal grocery shopping choices. As the local food economy in Appalachia and others across the country start to develop and emerge, we apply leadership theories for direction and wisdom on how other geographic locales interested in achieving food sustainability can jumpstart and streamline community leadership (Darnhofer, 2009; Ikerd, 2005). The values we hold as scholars are very similar to the values held by the farmers in Appalachia. Our goal is to leave a world for our children better than how we found it.

We have gained significant insight from Appalachian farmers and the informal Appalachian food economy they helped to create and sustain. Our academic and practical knowledge were expanded. We know from our academic lives that scholars of values-based leadership (Burke, 2009; McGregor, 1960; O'Toole, 1995) put forward the theory that leading change to achieve more sustainable business practices requires certain types of values. In order to develop more sustainable business practices, we need more sustainable economic and societal leadership. Appalachian farmers in rural Appalachian Ohio are practicing such leadership.

One of the interesting observations we made about this community of farmers is that there is not a single, recognizable "leader" acknowledged as the primary authority. As needs have emerged over time, different individuals have volunteered to fulfill leadership roles. This economic ecosystem is not a hierarchy, but a fluid exchange of power and resources, characterized by situational leaders. This system allows individuals to lead in areas that

reflect their personal strengths, while knowing they are supported by others to mitigate their relative weaknesses.

## Conclusion

The research on sustainability is evolving at a lightning-fast pace. We have so many more questions to ask and conversations to have about what drives the goals of farmers and how their leadership styles impact the local community (academic) as well as how we get the local food available for purchase in more grocery stores (practical). The desire for sustainably-grown food is finally parallel to increased profits and economic growth. Small-scale farming is not a highly lucrative occupation, but the shared values of this close-knit group of entrepreneurs have allowed them to create a viable local food supply chain that retains a higher percentage of the value created using the region's resources within the pockets of the local population.

Especially within Appalachia, this is something we can cheer about.

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## **Biographical Notes**

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