

TALKING ORGANICS

A SPECIAL EDITION ON ANGELIC ORGANICS LEARNING CENTER

ORGANIC BEGINNINGS

It's Thursday evening just north of Rockford, near Roscoe. After a three hour drive from Chicago (taking the long way around), Warren King, Ben Perkins, and I shuffle through a squeaky layer of snow to enter the embracing warmth of a barn bustling with voices and the soothing aroma of coffee. We're late—and for class, no less.

As we make our greetings and apologies, the coffee break ends and class resumes. It's a marvel to behold: Some twenty students, residents from around the Wisconsin-Illinois Stateline, sit at a rectangle U of tables that open onto another table lined with three farmers and three businesses. They are sharing their marketing and distribution strategies for the organic market. There's a ten-speed hanging from one of the rafters, a wood stove to the back of the room, a work table adorned with necessary and unnecessary items, and a kitchenette. And then there's this candid wish that fills the room: To learn about local, organic farming.

The class is part of [Stateline Farm Beginnings™](#), an adaptation from a curriculum by the [Land Stewardship Program](#) that has grown out [CRAFT](#) and [Angelic Organics Learning Center](#), the non-profit arm of Angelic Organics (renowned for its real dirt farmer, John Peterson). The Beginnings curriculum is an educational training and support program designed to help people plan and begin sustainable farm practices. In its second year, this year's program runs from October 2006 to October 2007 and is comprised of monthly strategic business planning classes and field day workshops. After March 2007, participants will pair up with mentor farmers to become either summer interns, employees, or recipients of one-on-one technical assistance for their own new farms.

The Coordinator, Parker Forsell, moderates class discussion by asking the panelists questions. With the farmers, he wants to know what has made their marketing plans successful, what they learned not to do in marketing, what has been the biggest challenge in running their business, and what advice they have for the students who will be beginning their own farming businesses. The farm panelists are: Tracey Hall from Grace Note Farm in Whitewater, WI; Jody Osmund from Cedar Valley Sustainable Farm in Ottawa, IL; and Noah Engle from Driftless Organics in Soldiers Grove, WI. All their answers are down to earth and practical, such as, know your unit cost and accept nothing less for its sell, be passionate about your product and its story and it will sell itself, pace yourself—pay attention to your physical and time limits.

Parker also alternates questions to the organic farmers with questions to the businesses that worked directly with farmers. Our General Manager, Warren King, and our Produce Buyer, Ben Perkins, answered Parker's questions about the challenges we've experienced in working with farmers, the advice we have for farmers who want to work in a market like ours, and the opportunities we see for farmers in that. Also in attendance to answer these questions was Sunday Dinner Chicago chef, Christine Cikowski, and Irv Cernauskas of Irv



A Stateline Farm Beginnings™ Field Day; last summer.

& Shelly's Fresh Picks. The answers from these panelists prove to be widespread, but they unanimously agree that current supply doesn't meet demand, so anything's possible; keep your product consistent and efficiently harvested, stored, and transported so its shelf life and quality creates a following; get out there, get online, let people know you're out there.

For a three hour evening class, the students are attentive to the end, and it's contagious. To find out bits of their stories is even more inspiring. David Zarante currently works as a book publisher but is renting land to develop a new chicken processing plant he recently heard about; he found out about Stateline Farm Beginnings™ from Rock Valley College and thought the class would be key. Susan Joseph is a family physician who, with her husband George, looks forward to a different lifestyle; their kids are leaving home and it'd be like, "A retirement...yeah right," she says, chuckling, "It's more like a career change for us, a long-anticipated one." Jenny Borchardt is from Chicago and currently works as a textbook publisher; her current work is with the Midwest Organic Farmers Cooperative. She hopes to advance the coop with the strategies she's learning through the program and get products into Chicago through a CSA.

And the hosts whose ten-speed hangs high above us, Don and Tresea Larson, moved to this spot two years ago. Their chickens and eggs they've had for one year. The reason for chickens? "I didn't want to fertilize all this land, grow grass, and have to mow it," says Don with a smile, "So why not set chickens to graze it? The more I learned about how to do it, the more it seemed possible." Don's a reed-instrument musician, teaching classes at a local community college, and his wife Tresea is a nurse. They hope to expand into produce.

Of course, I couldn't go home without some of these eggs. All I had was a ten dollar bill to pay for a large dozen priced at three dollars. When Don didn't have small enough change, I decided to buy another. "Now that's a good marketing strategy," Ben joked, "Don't have enough change so they have to buy more." Don chuckled at the coincidence and joked in return, "Well, I guess I really did learn something from tonight." Thankfully, it's just that easy, to learn something new.

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