

Global Impact One Step at a Time Sonnewald Farm and Food Connection

By J.F. Pirro

It was at neighboring York College, during the kickoff of a new minor in sustainability and environmental studies Earth Day 2010, that Willa Lefever, of Sonnewald Natural Foods in Spring Grove, Pa., continued refining a long-developed practical and philosophical approach to connecting farming and food.



Bill Kaiser, Willa Lefever and her stepmother, Grace Lefever.
Photo Courtesy of The Susquehanna Photographic.

She'll never forget the words of keynote speaker Julia Butterfly Hill, who once set up camp in an ancient redwood tree in a two-year environmental protest in the late '90s. Instead of watching television, she urged each person in attendance to go out and "tell of vision." In other words, team with others to share visions, to connect and wisely use technology's more powerful tools - the Internet, blogs, forums - and build networks of knowledge.

"The reality is that we are powerful beings, and we've been given a powerful tool: our voice," Lefever says. "But, rather than complain about how things are, let's use it to combine with others to share vision, and to create new models that make old models obsolete. We all share a certain frustration. Change is desired, but we do not know how to get change implemented if all we do is go from one inspiring event to another."

At Sonnewald (Pennsylvania Dutch for "Sunny Forest"), on the 60-acre chemical-free farm she shares with her husband, Bill Kaiser, Lefever says she's always out to answer burning questions like: "How can we help farmers?" and, "How can we educate others so they overcome their stereotypical view of farmers?"

Until recently, Lefever has focused all her energies locally. The day prior, she crossed the Maryland border to help supervise the showing of the movie "Food, Inc.," and to lead a discussion after it. Carole Morison, the Maryland chicken farmer in the movie, was also on-hand.

"A good portion of our discussion was on how to help farmers," Lefever says. "Most, or many, are so indebted to the bank that they're like indentured servants. So, how do we help those who want to break out of the vicious cycle? Farmers are like the rest of us; they're trying to find ways to pay bills and put food on the table."

The bottom line is providing an educational foundation for everyone. Raised a Christian, Lefever often comes at these critical issues from a spiritual perspective, but her universal hope at Sonnewald is to continue adding accurate information in the world. Plans for a future educational institute at Sonnewald add fuel to her passion.

However, when it comes to farming, food and production, she doesn't know of a subject where there's more missing, twisted or deleted information, and change remains an uphill battle.

"Farmers, as well as the public, have always been led to believe that the only way we can feed people is by using the current type of agribusiness," she says. "Unfortunately, people may be putting food in their mouths, but they're not always eating nourishing food."



A customer at the 8,000-square-foot store.
Photo Courtesy of Sonnewald Farm.

Also, farmers are inclined to think that they cannot produce enough food on small, diversified farms. "That's just not true," Lefever says. "Or to think they cannot make a living, and that's not true."

Among her messages to farmers in an increasing radius is the need to be stewards of the soil, to rebuild seriously depleted soil. She says we can grow nutrient-dense, large quantities of food in very small spaces, the antithesis of large-scale agriculture. Yet, she also understands that farmers can't afford to put back all that plants need with conventional equipment.

"So, let's work on putting back what's absolutely necessary," she says. "The most important thing we change - if we want to be a catalyst - is what we are believing. It prompts what we say and do and creates a current reality. We all make sure our highest priorities are addressed. Mine is to live a sustainable life in a way that sustains my life and my good health so that I can be a balancing influence on what's around me."

Finally, York County has a chapter of Buy Fresh, Buy Local, so there's an extra impetus for cooperation. Since farmers are profoundly busy from March to November, it's during the winter months that she can best help local farmers, especially sustainable, local farmers, get connected and informed. "I don't care if it's within a co-op, or what it is, but we need to be aware of each other and to work together to help each other," Lefever says. "If we're all growing cucumbers, no one will be successful."

A firm footing

Lefever's family has been promoting sustainable living for over 50 years. Her parents scoffed when word spread, even in elementary school in the late '50s, that the other children weren't to associate with the Lefever children. Rumor was their mother, who had an interest in medicinal plants, was a witch. Dad, Harold (though many called him Tim), was an imprisoned Conscientious Objector during World War II. He met his first wife, Lefever's mother, at a peace rally in Pittsburgh, but she died when Lefever was a toddler. Harold married her stepmother, Grace, when she was four.

The family rarely traveled, but when they did it was to a natural food convention. Her parents helped start the Pennsylvania chapter of the National Food Associates, which later became the Pennsylvania Natural Living Association. Harold, an electrical engineer, built his first experimental solar building in 1945.

Known as homesteaders, there were fruit trees, extensive vegetable gardens and wheat fields. In 1955, Harold bought a flourmill to grind whole wheat into flour for family, friends and neighbors. It was a commercial mill with a 100-pound hopper set up in the utility room. There, Grace began the natural food business, which by the early '60s moved into a small corner of her husband's shop, then to its current location in the late '90s.

"Now, 50 years later, parents around here are saying we were so ahead of our time," Lefever says. "With all the things my parents were doing - encouraging township recycling and composting - now everyone is saying, 'You guys were right.'"

Lefever left home for 20 years, but when her dad died suddenly in 1986, she came home, not necessarily to carry on, though that's what happened. She's led Sonnewald, and its rather utopian ideals, into the future.

Today, Sonnewald Natural Foods, which may be the oldest existing natural food store in Pennsylvania, remains a source of natural, organic and sustainably produced products, foods and information for special diets, as well as a catalyst for classes, lectures and workshops promoting healthy, green and sustainable living. There's the 8,000-square-foot store and also a booth at Morningstar Marketplace in Thomasville, Pa.

A local radio show (WHVR 1280 AM), called "Sundays with Sonnewald," features topics ranging from medicinal herbs to apple cider vinegar to grass-fed beef and often has guests like Morison, the poultry farmer, and Joel Salatin, who has been called America's Most Influential Farmer. Each September, Sonnewald exhibits at The York Fair, America's oldest since 1765.

Sonnewald's farm

While the family's 60 acres isn't currently in production, in 1998, a call from Steve and Carol Moore, sustainable farmers extraordinaire, had Sonnewald back in production for some of its most bountiful years. When the Moores first called, Lefever paused, and then said, "We've been waiting for this call for 10 years." She says, "It was a match made in heaven."

Things worked well for six years, but then as Steve planted more and more each year, there was more and more waste, which didn't jive with Lefever or Kaiser. The couples parted ways, though each is still teaching and inspiring others in agriculture. The Moores are in North Carolina.

They left behind an improved infrastructure, including 2.5 acres of solar-powered greenhouses and also a small greenhouse in a former chicken house. There will come a day when Sonnewald is back in production again. It may coincide with the couple's gradual departure from the daily operation of the store.

"We have to be willing to go beyond helping one person at a time, especially when we're able to help so many more," she says. "It's beginning to happen."

She notes the new chapter of Buy Fresh, Buy Local, of which she is on the steering committee. In York, there's also the opening of a Healthy World Café, which is modeled after One World Café, and dedicated to serving locally grown, unprocessed food. While not a franchise, this is the first site in Pennsylvania. Lefever, a self-described networker, is also involved with a local Food Availability Taskforce/Healthy York County Coalition that's sprung up.

The next visions

With the purchase of a 3-acre track in downtown Stoverstown, 8 miles southwest of York, and help from customers and friends, Lefever and Kaiser have salvaged an old grocery store and bar that's 200 yards from their farm. They're calling it the Okete project, and they'd like to open a separate natural food café and a warehouse for the distribution of sustainably produced farm products.

"It's not that we wanted more to do," Lefever says. "But we're happiest when we're designing and building and helping others. We're providing a facility that can meet many needs, which in itself is sustainable. We think Sonnewald's destiny is to be a teaching community."

To that end, there are also plans for the Sonnewald Life Institute, an inspirational and educational nonprofit in her father's old two-story plumbing-electrical building on the homestead. Plans are to add a third story, which will then become home to the institute. She says, "We'd like to make a global impact one step at a time."

The author has been published in national and regional magazines as well as daily and weekly alternative city newspapers. A gentleman farmer in Quakertown, Pa., he writes about people, social trends, historic preservation and 18th century America, agrarian culture, land use and sports and recreation topics.



Photo Courtesy of Photo Courtesy of Sonnewald Farm.



Willa Lefever at the grain mill.