

NEW FARMERS**Holistic Training Helps Women Farmers Thrive**

by Ann Adams

There's a group of women farmers in the Northeast that are turning their farms around and making an impact in their communities. They've been able to accomplish it as a result of participating in a unique training program managed by Holistic Management International (HMI) and partially funded by the USDA National Institute for Food & Agriculture's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. These women are implementing the Holistic



Central New York Farmer Tricia Park (participant in the project).

Management whole farm planning system and are successfully managing their farms for profit, land health, and quality of life. Here are their stories.

Creekside Meadows Farm

Tricia Park claims that she and her family got into farming by accident. Accident or not, Tricia knew that when they started farming, they needed to get some business planning help. That's why she joined HMI's Beginning Women Farmers (BWF) Program in 2010. Since completing that program, Tricia has sold her 26-acre farm and purchased a 150-acre farm near Cazenovia, New York and begun making a tidy profit on her farm.

Tricia, her husband, Matt, and their son, Cameron, now raise grass-fed beef and pasture-raised chicken, turkey and pork on their new farm and are excited to be selling to an ever-increasing local market as a result of some key marketing efforts and word of mouth advertising.

One area of improvement has been forage management. "We used to run out of grass around July," Tricia says. "Now we're grazing until Halloween. This was at the old farm. Now at the new farm we never stopped grazing - all winter!!! We fed hay outside on the ground when we ran out of forage. It was pretty easy since we only overwintered 8 head of cattle (2 mom cows and rest young steers). The field we wintered them on hadn't seen cows in at least 10 years! It had been a hay field for that long."

Tricia also realized that just because you sell all your product, doesn't mean you are a successful farmer. After looking at the numbers, she realized they weren't making any money. In HMI's Beginning Women Farmer Program, she learned what she needed to do. "The financial classes helped us figure out expenses and get a grip on what money was flowing out the door and how it was happening. By then the egg enterprise was out the door. We ditched it. It failed for everything.... Too much time, no profit, and we

didn't even like them anymore! We decided to concentrate on 4 main enterprises: Grassfed beef, pasture raised chicken, pork and turkey."

In the first year of participating in the program, Tricia found that using the Holistic Management testing questions helped her make more informed decisions, create \$7000 more profit, and have more time to do the things she wanted. When she went to the bank manager to procure a loan for the new farm, she was able to show the jump in one year from \$1,000 net to \$10,000. "The bank manager didn't even want to see our business plan," says Tricia. "She could see we had a solid understanding of our financials. I even showed her my certificate from the Beginning Women Farmer program. They gave us our loan."

The near-term goal for the Parks is to make enough money farming that Matt can quit his off-farm job and farm full-time with Tricia and Cameron. The longer term goal is to make the farm successful enough that Cameron will be able to start his own enterprises and be the second generation farming on Creekside Meadows Farm.

Maple View Farm

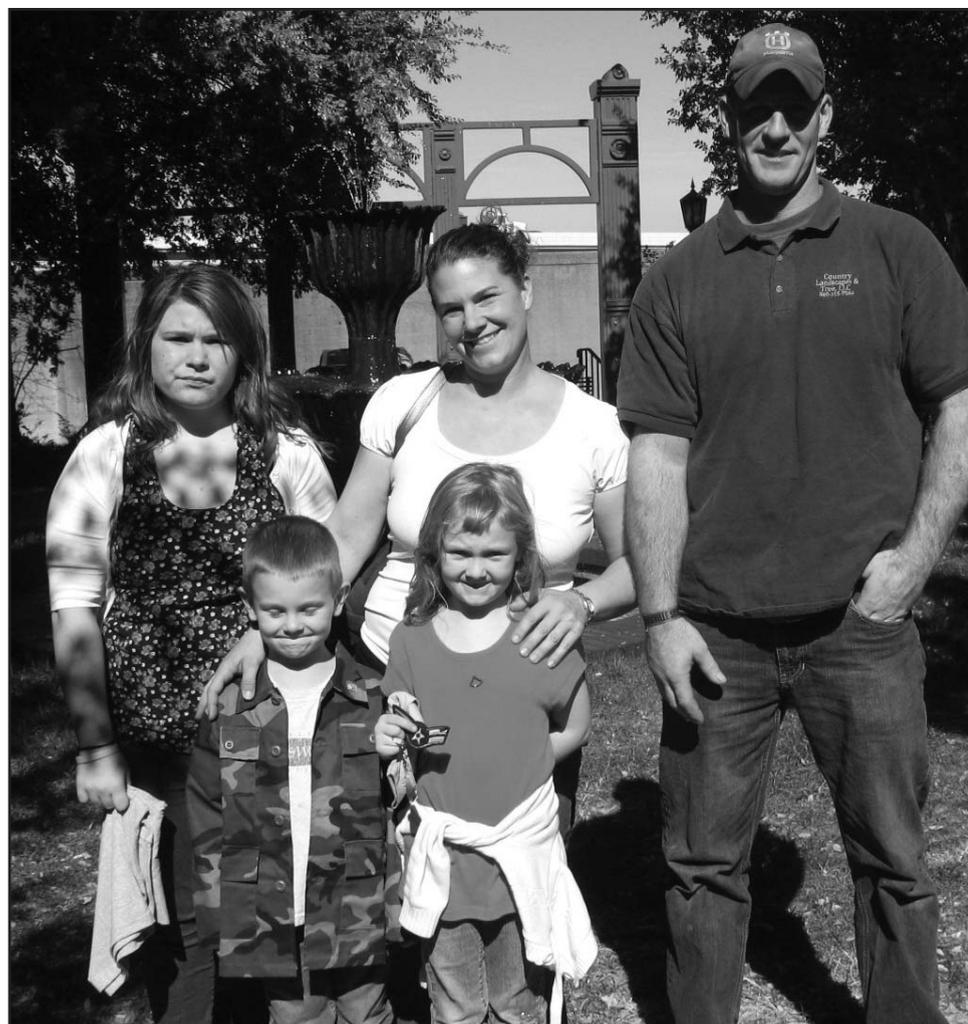
Kate and Jason Bogli moved back to Maple View Farm, the Bogli family farm, in 2003. This 50-acre, 3rd-generation farm founded in 1950, is near suburban Hartford, Connecticut. Kate had previously worked in the fashion industry and had no farming background, but when Jason, an attorney, said he wanted to return to the family farm, she agreed to take on the role of farmer's wife as well as new mother. When she heard about HMI's Beginning Women Farmer program through HMI's Connecticut collaborator, Northeast Organic Farming Association-Connecticut (NOFA-CT), she decided to join the 2010 class to improve the success of the farm.

The farm offers a variety of farm products including chickens, goats, cows, and Christmas trees which they sell through their on-farm store as well as offering horse boarding and riding lessons.

"We've had to figure out how to make money," says Kate. "The financial planning sessions really helped with this. I started with the horse boarding enterprise. One boarder had a special deal with us. When I started doing the numbers, I realized I was paying him to keep his horse. I felt bad about asking for more money, but I did the numbers and knew it was crazy not to do something now that I understood what was going on. That knowledge then helped me do the numbers for the other enterprises. It even made it fun. Things have improved 1000%."

Kate says the networking in the Beginning Women Farmer program has been really important. "It's really cool to be with other women doing the same thing. I decided to get together with other Granby women farmers so we can use each other as resources. Now there are 18-20 of us meeting regularly."

"What I learned from the program was that it's okay to get started. Do anything. Bravo for you! It's like a little baby walking. Try some things and don't worry about failing. It



Heather and Daniel Driscoll with children, Megan, Riley, and Gavin.

made me want to come to class, and the whole class with all the women was an inspiration."

Green Valley Farm

Heather and Daniel Driscoll began farming in 2007 at Green Valley Farm in Eastford, Connecticut. At that time it was a homestead operation where they raised a few pigs for themselves and family. "It was a lot of work, but we wanted to raise a heritage breed (Berkshire) and be able to sell a quality product," says Heather. That commitment to a great product and the desire to make a full-time living from farming is what brought Heather into HMI's Beginning Women Farmer in 2011.

"I was frustrated when people would tell me you can't make a living farming," says Heather. My grandparents raised 7 kids on the profit they created from their dairy farm. I believe you just need to be a good business person if you want to be a successful farmer. That's why I participated in the program."

After working the kinks out of the system, the Driscolls started to sell to the general public in 2008. They started with a handful of customers. By 2010, they had about 30-40 customers which included organic grocery stores, the University of Connecticut, and some restaurants. Their primary marketing strategy was by word of mouth. They have about a 50/50 split between retail and wholesale customers.

But to grow the farm, Heather knew she had to push the marketing. "I really like my retail customers. These people come to the farm with their kids and it's a great experience for everyone," says Heather. "We had 50 pigs in 2011 and we are planning on doubling that

to 100 for 2012. We can increase the production so we are working to get all of the products sold."

To address this marketing weak link, Heather worked with Beginning Women Farmer Program mentor, Emily Brooks, on her marketing plan. In particular, they focused on gaining clientele from the internet, through their website and social networking.

"The marketing is really paying off. We can begin to pay ourselves the wages we want for our work," says Heather. "I worked as a paralegal before and was making \$30/hour. I need to think about making that same wage as a farmer."

"The program really helped me to get a handle on the numbers. You've got to be clear about the numbers so you know what you can or can't do. We were originally thinking about getting into breeding and doing feeder pigs. The good news was we would be able to get rid of the product quickly. Taking the pigs all the way to finish was more of a commitment, but when we did the numbers we saw how much more profitable that was. Selling them as feeder pigs cut into the profit and just wasn't worth it."

With the Driscolls' focus on good business planning, Green Valley Farm is moving toward being a steady supplier of premium Berkshire pork products and an integral part of the local food system in Connecticut.

Dr. Ann Adams is the Director of Education with Holistic Management International. She can be reached via email at anna@holistic-management.org. To learn more about Holistic Management go to www.holistic-management.org.