

Rumbling in the Soil

From kernels of inspiration to quarterly reports, empowering farmers and ranchers for success

Written by *Mike Burden* (<https://cafnr.missouri.edu/?author=12>) · February 24, 2012

Two-hundred years ago the ground shook with a force that hasn't been equaled east of the Rockies since. Towns were leveled, the earth rolled like the sea and according to accounts, the Mighty Mississippi reversed its flow.

After the New Madrid earthquakes (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Madrid_Earthquake), Federal Walker decided to take a walk—a long walk of more than 300 miles from the Missouri Bootheel near New Madrid where he lived to the rolling hills of central Missouri. During the journey, his father died, but Walker pressed on and staked his claim a few miles south of modern day Fayette. Walker, 16 at the time, returned to the Bootheel for the rest of his family and brought them to his farmstead, where the two log cabins he built (now united) compose the core of the current farmhouse at Blue Bell Farm (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Blue-Bell-Farm/152887624738046>).



[\(http://cafnrnews.com/2012/02/rumbling-in-the-soil/house/\)](http://cafnrnews.com/2012/02/rumbling-in-the-soil/house/)

The farmhouse at Blue Bell Farms is a combination of the two original cabins on the property, built sometime before 1820. Photo by Bill McKelvey

Seven generations later, Derek Bryant and his wife, Jamie Bryant, hope to preserve the farm tradition in the family, albeit with some new twists. On Valentine's Day, the couple, along with 25 other aspiring farmers and ranchers, delivered their business plans to Randall Westgren, professor of agricultural and applied economics and the McQuinn Chair of Entrepreneurial Leadership in the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources (<http://cafnr.missouri.edu/>) (CAFNR) at the University of Missouri.

The Bryants are two of 63 graduates of the Entrepreneurship Project (<http://muagentrepreneur.wordpress.com/>), an innovative program that guides aspiring farmers and ranchers in transforming their ideas into successful ventures in production agriculture.

A Diversified Approach

Their peers' farms stretch across Missouri, from the Triple "C" Chestnut Farm in Wayne County in the southeast, to Coleman Farms in Macon County in the north central region, and many places in between. Their ventures vary from growing produce in the heart of a city at the Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture (<http://columbiaurbanag.org/>), which was recently awarded a grant ([http://mda.mo.gov/news/2012/Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture Receives Grant to Support the Opportunity Garden Program](http://mda.mo.gov/news/2012/Columbia%20Center%20for%20Urban%20Agriculture%20Receives%20Grant%20to%20Support%20the%20Opportunity%20Garden%20Program)) for their outreach mission, to a diversified dairy production at the Bollinger Farm.

“We’ve explored every possible way to lose money,” Rich Bollinger said at his cohort’s first module last summer. “That’s why we’re here.” He and his wife, Erinn, have a rotational grazing dairy operation near Humansville, Mo.

Some EP graduates, such as Eduardo Crespi, have social goals driving their agricultural ventures. Over the last two years, Crespi has been transforming a property at 609 N. Garth in Columbia into the Comedor Popular (<http://www.scribd.com/doc/68943885/Comedor-Popular-Brochure-20100715-2>), or “People’s Diner.” By offering cooking classes, a daily menu of plant-based meals, retail shop with fresh produce, and wellness and obesity prevention programs, Crespi aims to promote health and combat obesity and diabetes, especially in Columbia’s central city. He plans to invite all the Entrepreneurship Project graduates for an open house later this spring.

Dan and Laura Pugh should have their first crops of organic greens by then. The couple, like many EP graduates, left successful careers in the city to farm. They planted their first crop of greens in February on their Mid-Missouri property they call Honey Creek Farm (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Honey-Creek-Farm/337065226315537?sk=info>). They plan to start selling vegetables and eggs at the Columbia Farmer’s market this spring, and are considering raising sheep and pigs too.



(<http://cafnrnews.com/2012/02/rumblings-in-the-soil/discussing-high-tunnel-copy/>)

Liberty Hunter, Leslie Touzeau and Dan Pugh share a laugh as they prepare for the day's ... Expand ▶

Paul Tinlin, who was part of the second cohort of graduates, is operating on a much larger scale, coordinating the marketing for a multi-state organic feed and food grain cooperative covering more than 500,000 acres of soybeans, corn and wheat in the Midwest.

Whether farming is a family tradition, or they wielded a hoe for the first time just months ago, all of the beginning farmers and ranchers graduated from the program with a professional business plan evaluated by Westgren. He'll return the third cohort's formal business plans at the end of February.

Growing Farms, Growing Farmers

That business plan is the culminating product of more than 100 hours of intensive classroom instruction, tours of dozens of successful food and farm businesses around Missouri and out of state, experiential learning activities and active discourse among the group.

"We end up with excellent business plans that are enhanced by the dialogue among the group that transpires over the course of four months," Westgren said. "They hash it out through conversation, comparing what they saw and heard on the tours and incorporating what they learned in classroom lessons. There's no program that has a similar depth of learning or higher degree of successful implementation in the country," he added.

The project was funded through the USDA [Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program](http://www.nifa.usda.gov/fo/beginningfarmerandrancher.cfm) (<http://www.nifa.usda.gov/fo/beginningfarmerandrancher.cfm>), designed to meet the needs of the next generation of farmers and address the rising average age of U.S. farmers, currently 57, according to USDA data. A beginning farmer is one who has 10 or less years of experience operating a farm or ranch.

Nationally there are more than 450,000 beginning farms, making up 21 percent of the nation's 2.1 million family farms, according to USDA.

"We're thankful to have the gracious support of the USDA [National Institute of Food and Agriculture](http://www.nifa.usda.gov/) (<http://www.nifa.usda.gov/>) (NIFA) for our innovative, high output program for the entrepreneurial approach to addressing today's agricultural challenges," Westgren said.

The Entrepreneurship Project team has been incredibly successful so far, with 58 of its 63 graduates engaging in farming in some way. The passion of the participants and the expertise of the Entrepreneurship Project team have the program firmly rooted for success.

Peter Hofherr, assistant director of McQuinn Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership at MU, teaches many of the sessions, including Entrepreneurship Finance, Opportunity Screening and Bootstrapping (growing a business with limited funds). Hofherr is an entrepreneur in the agrifood industry, serving as CEO of St. James Winery, and is the former director of the Missouri Department of Agriculture. Participants in the course raved about his financial expertise and candid stories from his business experience.

"I completely redid my financials as a result of the course," said Liz Graznak, a graduate of the second cohort who is entering her third year of production at [Happy Hollow Farm](http://www.happyhollowfarm-mo.com/) (<http://www.happyhollowfarm-mo.com/>). "After going through (EP) I'm doing a much better job keeping track of expenses and that helps me be able to evaluate day-to-day how my business is doing. The financial side is always on my mind now—how many heads of lettuce for my CSA, how many should I save for restaurant sales and markets. No beginning farmer that I've met is thinking that way—they're thinking about what it means to be a farmer," she added.

Westgren brings more than three decades of teaching and research experience in the agri-food sector to his sessions, including Brand Development and Management and Capturing and Creating value in Supply Chains, for example.



(<http://cafnrnews.com/2012/02/rumblings-in-the-soil/peter-points-the-way/>).

Peter Hofherr, co-director of the Entrepreneurship Project, points out a proposed vineyard at the ... Expand ▶

“Make listening to customers an effort that is systematic, proactive and ongoing,” Westgren said during a session in the Kansas City module. “It’s awkward and not easy to do but critically important to the success of your business.”

Jill Lucht, EP project coordinator, has 10 years of experience working with farm groups on policy and value-added agriculture initiatives. Her interest in agriculture and food stems from her experiences working on her family’s dairy farm in Wisconsin. Her connections in agriculture and agritourism have helped grow the network of farmers who gather for the monthly potlucks.

Graduates of the program vary tremendously in their available resources; few come from generations of farm families, but all are increasing their chances for success by leaning on one another.

“Because we spend more time than other programs working and meeting as a group there’s an excellent chance for networking,” Westgren said. “We reinforce it in what we say and demonstrate it through site visits and in case studies.”

Strength in Numbers

Inspired by the friendships they developed and lessons they learned in the course, many of the graduates have started a tradition—monthly potlucks, including a tour of the host’s farm.



(<http://cafnrnews.com/2012/02/rumblings-in-the-soil/derek-and-jamie1/>)

Derek and Jamie Bryant explain their future event space to their guests at the monthly farmer ... Expand ▶

Derek and Jamie Bryant, owners of Blue Bell Farm, hosted their first potluck at their nearly 200-year-old home Feb. 12. Homemade dishes, from sweet potatoes swimming in maple syrup to fennel and spinach salad covered their dining room table. While camaraderie is the goal, dinner conversations often shifted to serious farm matters—the benefits of establishing a Limited Liability Company (LLC), how to manage volunteers and interns, and offerings for Community Supported Agricultural (CSA) shares this season.

By sharing their strategies and often their labor, the farmers are, in a sense, enabling their competitors. But they don't see it that way. Since they started gathering last fall, they've erected high tunnels, planted garlic and processed a pig together.

“Seeing what people are doing on their farms and talking about the way they're dealing with certain challenges, and how we can apply what they're doing—it's been really great,” Graznak said. “The most important thing I've learned amongst the new growers in our community is that there is so much knowledge and experience and the benefits of us working together to achieve success,” she added.

The Bryants welcomed the group dialogue, most of which took place in their recently completed [high tunnel](http://mda.mo.gov/abd/financial/hightunnel.php) (<http://mda.mo.gov/abd/financial/hightunnel.php>). “We learned we don't have powdery mildew on our spinach, which was great news,” Derek Bryant said.

Blue Bell Farm

While the [farm](http://extension.missouri.edu/centuryfarm/centuryfarmstable.pdf) (<http://extension.missouri.edu/centuryfarm/centuryfarmstable.pdf>) is two centuries old this year, The Bryants moved to the property from St. Louis just last spring. Jamie had her own interior design business while Derek was a project manager for a commercial construction company.

“In 2008 the family tree was narrowing,” Derek Bryant said. His grandmother, Nannie May Hughes, lived on the farm, but her health started to fail, and Derek and his mother had to discuss the future of the 350-acre family farm that Derek’s ancestor, Federal Walker, had started 200 years ago. About the same time, Derek and Jamie started gardening intensively.

“We used nearly every square inch of our yard to grow something,” Jamie said. They attended Slow Food St Louis meetings, read voraciously about food, participated in [crop mobs](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/environment/2010-05-19-crop-mobs_N.htm) (http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/environment/2010-05-19-crop-mobs_N.htm), or collective work days for farmers who need help, and started thinking about the farm near Fayette. They asked themselves, ‘could we do this on a larger scale?’

They took the [Grow your Farm](http://extension.missouri.edu/growyourfarm/) (<http://extension.missouri.edu/growyourfarm/>) course from MU Extension near St. Louis, attended the Missouri Organic Association Conference, and Jamie interned at [Earthdance Farms](http://www.earthdancefarms.org/about-us/) (<http://www.earthdancefarms.org/about-us/>) in Ferguson, Mo. There she met Molly Rockamann, founding director of Earthdance, and recent Entrepreneurship Project graduate. Through that experience Jamie learned about flea beetles, row cover and starting a diverse array of plants from seed. Through that connection she also heard about the Entrepreneurship Project.

The Bryants joined the third cohort of Entrepreneurship Project participants last July, in the middle of their first season of growing vegetables on two acres at Blue Bell Farm.

“Going to Vermont, and really all of the tours was amazing,” Derek said. “To go there and see it; it really reinforced what I’ve read, getting to see the different commercial kitchens, and asking questions of the folks who operate them was invaluable.”

“What Randy (Westgren) talked about and how he showed the successful businesses that he’s seen and been to was really inspiring,” Jamie said. “When Peter talked about financials, I realized the complexity of record keeping for all we want to do. It prompted me to simplify our plan.”

With their professional business plan penned, the Bryants are figuring out the dynamic of working closely together. “It’s challenging because in a work environment, if you disagree with a coworker, you’re not always going to be quick to tell them your immediate opinion. But if it’s your husband and something doesn’t sound right you feel more at ease in telling him your opinion, which isn’t always welcome.” Jamie said.

“On the other hand we do get to know each other a lot better, on levels sometimes you wish you didn’t, she said jokingly. For good or bad you’re close together all the time.”

They’re dividing labor and specifying duties to avoid power struggles on the farm. Jamie manages the growing and Derek coordinates events.

“We want to create emotional connections to the farm—pieces of mental real estate that keep people coming back for events, and telling their friends about their experience,” Derek said.



(<http://cafnrnews.com/2012/02/rumblings-in-the-soil/plants-2/>)

Gourmet lettuce in the Bryants' recently completed high tunnel.

Last season they hosted a wedding, farm-to-table dinner and a big party for Derek's fortieth birthday. Their vision is to have events throughout the year including seasonal celebrations, weddings and parties catered by local chefs with food grown and prepared on their farm.

Currently, they're selling kale, arugula, spinach and value-added products such as orange marmalade, farm photo cards and seed bombs rolled up like robin eggs at the [Columbia Farmers Market](http://columbiafarmersmarket.org/) (<http://columbiafarmersmarket.org/>) and [Fayette Farmers Market](http://www.facebook.com/fayettefarmersmarket) (<http://www.facebook.com/fayettefarmersmarket>), which Jamie helped start along with EP graduate Cathy Johnmeyer.

The Bryants are also expecting their first child—and potentially eighth generation farmer—later this spring.

While the Bryants are growing their farm and their family, Entrepreneurship Project leaders Randy Westgren and Peter Hofherr are exploring ways to bring their innovative approach to more potential agricultural entrepreneurs.

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