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*Sustainable Connections*



LEFT: Common Threads Farm owner Laura Plaut, program coordinator Shonie Schlotzhauer, and Bellingham Food Bank Executive Director Mike Cohen  
BELOW: Holistic Homestead owner Gretchen Norman



Story and photos by Greg McCracken

## Food TO BANK ON

'Nurturing the earth and feeding the community'

**Every Saturday,** Gretchen Norman brings tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and other organically grown produce to the Bellingham Farmers Market, hangs up a banner proclaiming the name of her fledging

business—Holistic Homestead—and waits for customers to arrive. She repeats the process on Sundays in Maple Falls, and again on Wednesdays on the Fairhaven Village Green.

"Yeah, it's a full nonstop program for about six or eight months," says the 28-year-old Georgia native, who also contracts with several restaurants and retailers.

On Thursdays, though, Norman varies her entrepreneurial routine and delivers as much as \$70 worth of vegetables to the Everson Food Bank as part of an apprenticeship with Food to Bank On, the new-farmer incubation program run by Sustainable Connections.

"Sustainable agriculture is a way to restore the health of the soil, which restores the health of the plants, animals and, therefore, people, so it is a health preventative method for all life," she says. "It's nurturing the earth and feeding the community."

And that, simply put, sums up both her values and the goals of Food to Bank On.

"It's to help new farmers get established and, as we're doing that, to supply fresh, top-quality produce to food banks," says program coordinator Shonie Schlotzhauer. "It's a beautiful dual purpose, which is what really appeals to me about the program."

It also encourages people to buy locally, Norman says.

"It helps people remember that when we buy things that come from California or Florida, that's fuel. We're having to pay extra for the fuel to bring it here," she says. "Supporting your local community is very important, and it also helps preserve farmland in your county."

Founded in 2003 through the Community Food Co-op's Farm Fund, Food to Bank On is a three-year program that helps new farmers develop sustainable farming and business skills through training and mentorship. During a 17-week growing season, members are paid as much as \$70 a week to deliver fresh produce to Whatcom County food banks or



TOP: Mike Finger, owner of Cedarville Farm and Food to Bank On mentor

ABOVE: Simone Rogers, owner of Paradise Farms, former apprentice and now a mentor in the Food to Bank On program

places including the Sean Humphrey House, a local residence for low-income people with HIV/AIDS. Apprentices learn to set crop schedules to meet the needs of the market and future clients such as restaurants and retailers.

"A big part of it is the experience and training they get," Schlotzhauer says. "The financial contract is the heart of the matter, but I think even more valuable is the mentorship...That and just encouragement they get in what can be a relatively discouraging occupation."

The program saw nine apprentices in 2005 and has eight this year. Much of the funding still comes from the Farm Fund, but other resources play a part; Schlotzhauer, for example, is the program's second Americorps/VISTA volunteer.

Past participants and mentors applaud Food to Bank On.

"It got me connected with a group of farmers on my beginning level of experience as well as with more experienced farmers, so there was a sense of comradery," says former apprentice and now mentor Simone Rogers, owner of Paradise Farm. "And getting to visit other people's farms and having potlucks, it just gives you a sense of community and belonging and connectedness."

Cedarville Farm owner and mentor Mike Finger, who has farmed organically for almost 20 years, says the program is a bonus for the community as well.

"I think by encouraging [new sustainable farmers] you're going to be encouraging the production of food locally, which I think is just a sensible thing to do," he says. "I don't suppose we can get all of our food this way, but the fact that we're a community getting some of its food this way is just prudent. If we can help create a more viable agricultural economy in Whatcom County, that might contribute in some small way to preserving a little more farmland or keeping a little more farmland in farming. So I think that's why it's important. It's not earthshaking, but it's just one small way a community can help itself."

Schlotzhauer admits that for places like the Bellingham Food Bank, which

provides more than 1.5 million pounds of food annually, the amount delivered is "a small drop in a big bucket."

"But at the Sean Humphrey House, it's a really big splash in a small bucket," she says. "And it's developing relationships between farmers...and the food bank, and I would highly suspect that this relationship is going to continue long past the Food to Bank On program."

Bellingham Food Bank Executive Director Mike Cohen thinks the program also serves as a reminder.

"The program does generate a lot of press, and so I think it helps to educate the community about hunger and about

the role that local businesses—whether they farm or some other business—can work to solve and address hunger," he says. "And it forms a link between local agriculture and hunger relief efforts, which I think is critical and essential if we going to someday actually solve hunger."

On Thursday, Common Threads Farm owner Laura Plaut brought apples to the Bellingham Food Bank. She says the apprenticeship will allow her to use sustainable agriculture as an educational tool, a purpose new to the program.

"My passion is not market growing," says the novice farmer. "My passion is education and social justice issues; my goal is to work with junior high and high school students to grow and deliver to either here or other places in the county that need food."

"I'm definitely living proof that the Food to Bank On program was enough of a tipping point for me to say that this is something that I'd like to do...When I saw the little ad at the Co-op for the program, the thing that caught me was, 'Oh, I can learn about growing while providing a valuable community service.'"

Schlotzhauer says Plaut's idea illustrates one of the many directions the program might go, including possibly a dedicated food bank farm or a youth program growing produce for schools.

"We can do as much as we have funding for," she says. "We have lots of great ideas." ☺

### To apply

Prospective farmers can apply now to the Food to Bank On program for the 2007 growing season. Sustainable Connections has as many as four openings for this three-year program.

Applicants must plan to farm in Whatcom or Skagit county and be committed to sustainable farming practices. They must also have a viable farm or business plan, a plan to target a new market or a market that has sufficient room to grow, a business license and one to three years of farming experience but less than three years of experience as an owner/operator.

For more information, contact Shonie Schlotzhauer at 647-6902 or shonie@swconnect.org.

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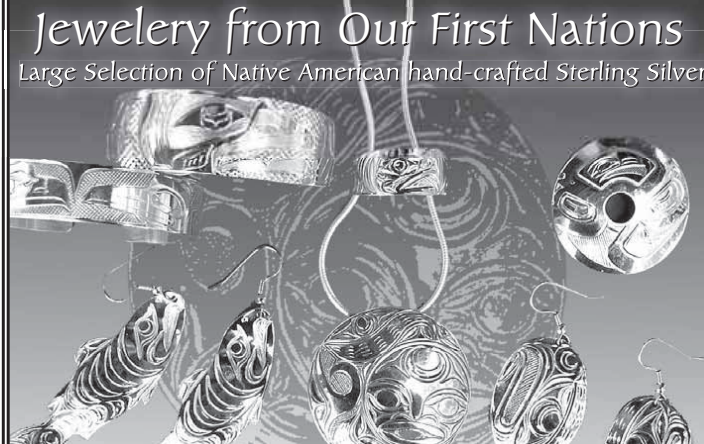
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