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Rob and Susan Fleming of Carlisle to receive 2016 Farmland Owner Award from Practical Farmers of Iowa

AMES, Iowa — Practical Farmers of Iowa is pleased to announce that Rob and Susan Fleming have been chosen as the recipients of the 2016 Farmland Owner Award for using their farmland near Carlisle to help beginning farmers gain land access, and for their long-term commitment to land stewardship and conservation.

The award is granted annually by Practical Farmers to non-operator landowners who use their land to help the next generation get started, advance land stewardship, and promote long-term sustainability of farm businesses, environmental quality and rural communities. With this award, Practical Farmers is calling attention to the huge role non-operator farmland owners are playing in the future success of sustainable agriculture.

"Rob left as a young man to make his career elsewhere, but then returned later in life to make the farm he inherited – and Iowa – a better place," says Mark Peterson, who farms near Stanton and serves as president of Practical Farmers' board of directors, which selects the award recipients.

"We need more landowners like Rob and Susan. They are willing to provide farmers access to their land in the rapidly developing Des Moines metro area. They also are willing to go the extra mile to help a beginning farmer and an experienced refugee farmer succeed at their farming careers."

Carlisle Mayor Ruth Randleman will present the 2016 Farmland Owner Award to the Flemings on Saturday, July 16, during a ceremony and farm tour. The self-guided farm tour will start at 5 p.m., followed by the award presentation at 5:45 p.m. A dinner catered by Back Alley Smokehouse will start at 6 p.m. The farm is located at 2014 Scotch Ridge Road, on the outskirts of Carlisle. Please park at Carlisle Middle School next to the farm.

A calling to conserve and share

After Rob inherited part of his family farm – Danamere Farms, Inc. – he felt a strong calling to explore how the land could be used to support conservation and the community of Carlisle, which his parents, Robert Sr. and Ann Fleming, had been deeply committed to. He and his wife, Susan, purchased the shares of land his two brothers had inherited and started working with Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) and RDG Planning & Design on a master plan for conservation on the 100 acres they now owned.

As part of the prairie and savanna restoration efforts, Rob and Susan started renting pasture to PFI member Aaron White, a beginning farmer and lessee at the Fleming farm's next-door neighbor. They fenced off the portion Aaron wanted to graze, and cut a corridor in the woods between their properties to move the cattle. To make rental costs more manageable for Aaron, they worked out a fee based on the stocking rate instead of a per-acre agreement.

This spring, they started renting 2 acres to Alex Congera, of Des Moines, a refugee from Burundi and graduate of Practical Farmers' Savings Incentive Program, so he and his family can raise vegetable crops. Rob and Susan have also donated part of their land to the City of Carlisle for bike trail access, and are exploring how they can work with the Carlisle school district to use their land as an outdoor natural history and farm-to-school classroom.

"I'm in love with the place I grew up on," Rob says. "I had fantasized about being involved in conservation of the farm ever since I went to graduate school in the 1970s. The farm has a unique prairie and oak savanna environment, which is endangered. There are not many of these natural systems left in the Midwest. At the same time, I was intrigued by the potentialities of how the land could be used to assist beginning farmers in getting going, for open space preservation and for engaging the community."

Conservation, community-mindedness are family traditions

Rob grew up on the farm, which his grandfather first purchased in the late 1920s and his father later farmed. He moved to the East Coast for school, where he studied landscape architecture, and he and Susan settled in Philadelphia – but his interest in the farm and his parents' activities related to it remained.

Originally consisting of 280 acres, Rob's grandmother sold the first big chunk of it, about 100 acres, in the mid-1950s. His parents later inherited the farm, and Rob recounts how they were both conservation-minded and community-oriented. Both were active with Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation – his mother was a founding board member – and Rob's father served on the board of West Des Moines-based Hubbell Realty, with whom he worked to get new housing designs into Carlisle featuring denser buildings and narrower streets in order to accommodate more open space.

In the early 2000s, Rob's father sold 90 acres to Hubbell Realty with the proviso that they integrate conservation development. To make good on the agreement, Hubbell is maintaining the open space as restored prairie. "Dad was intrigued at enabling this relatively new kind of development – like a golf course community with the open space, but without the course," Rob says. "Part of the deal was that he'd go to bat to have a new zoning category approved in Carlisle that allows housing to be closer and streets narrower, to allow for this open space – and he succeeded."

Part of the land sale helped Carlisle expand its frontage – including construction of a grocery store, which it lacked at the time – and part was used to provide the Carlisle school district with a place to build a new school.

"Right next door to Danamere Farms is the middle school, now 10 years old, which Dad offered as a way to keep Carlisle walkable for school children," Rob says. "He believed, as I do, that any school should be close to downtown and accessible. Dad was a believer in the town and wanted to make these developments possible."

A long-term vision

When Rob took over managing the farm, he laid out four main goals for his vision of Danamere Farms' potential. He saw the farm as a place where land restoration; working lands; youth education; and recreation – including fishing access from the farm's pond, and the bike trail that gives residents access to Warren County's 11-mile Summerset Trail – could all co-exist.

Achieving this vision has involved ongoing research, financial and personal commitment, and a broad consortium of groups and people whom Rob has sought for advice and support. Through word-of-mouth, he discovered Alex Congera. Practical Farmers of Iowa's Find-A-Farmer website linked him almost instantly to Aaron White. He credits Mark Ackelson, Lisa Hein and Joe McGovern of INHF, and Doug Adamson and Eric Iverson of RDG Planning & Design, for their role in helping develop the master land conservation plan.

Other milestones on his journey as a farmland owner were partly serendipitous. A personal connection led Rob to Fred Kirschenmann, of the Stone Barns Center in New York and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University, who helped him realize the imperative of adding grazing livestock back to his prairie-savanna ecosystem. Rob says he was also inspired by now-retired Carlisle school teacher Sue Boll who, until she retired, used to bring children to the farm to learn about natural history.

While he's making progress on his vision for the farm, the work continues. Rob patch-burns one-third of his prairie and oak savanna each year, which Aaron's cattle then graze, to promote species diversity. He is excited to

see how Alex's farming venture, which just started this spring, unfolds. He is also eager to see young people learning from his land once again.

"I want to develop a farm-to-school relationship. It could be education about where food comes from, or growing food to eat in the school cafeteria. It could be summer programs, or teaching the art of food preservation," Rob says. "There are all kinds of things that could happen between our farm and Carlisle Community Schools."

Lessons to other farmland owners

Farmland ownership continues to be a source of inspiration for Rob as he sees the pieces of his vision coming together – and imagines other ways he can use the land to better the community and environment.

Rob encourages other landowners to be creative with their land – and to approach the question of farmland succession with an open mind.

"There are alternatives to renting your land to corn-and-soybean farmers," he says. "Especially for those who own land close to a metro area, there are a lot of interesting things you can do besides simply leaving the land to your heirs – which also has tax consequences. But if you do have row crop farmers as tenants, it's still possible for a vegetable farmer to make money on even a small part of that land. It's important to diversify."

"What we're doing here at Danamere Farms, it's all in the realm of doing good and doing the right thing – helping farmers get started, and preserving the land," Rob says. "The payoffs in personal fulfillment are huge."

Previous winners of Practical Farmers' Farmland Owner Award include Helen Gunderson (2013); Charlotte Shivers, Martha Skillman and Marietta Carr (2014); and Dale Nimrod, Faith Sherman and Vance Nimrod (2015).

Suggestions for future recipients of the Farmland Owner Award can be sent to Teresa Opheim, PFI's farm transfer program director, at teresa@practicalfarmers.org or (515) 232-5661. Anyone who owns land but does not labor on it is eligible.

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Practical Farmers of Iowa strengthens farms and communities through farmer-led investigation and information-sharing. Our values include: welcoming everyone; creativity, collaboration and community; viable farms now and for future generations; and stewardship and ecology. Founded in 1985, farmers in our network raise corn, soybeans, livestock, hay, fruits and vegetables, and more. To learn more, visit <http://practicalfarmers.org>.