

A Program for the Farm-Curious

Labor4Learning provides important farm experience

by Steve Carlson

Margaret and Brad Wolter are in a position that's not too uncommon in Iowa. They have lived for years in a big city (Cedar Rapids, in this case), they have well-established non-farming careers – and they have the opportunity to buy a portion of family farmland, in this case, the heritage farm belonging to Margaret's family. Over the past few years, they made the big decision to move from Cedar Rapids to Chelsea, Iowa, in rural Tama County, and take over the 10-acre homestead.

In order to realize their dream of inhabiting the old family farmhouse and turning the 10 acres into an income-generating farm, Margaret and Brad needed to overcome some common hurdles. They decided to first focus their resources on renovating the farmhouse so they could sell their home in Cedar Rapids and move to Chelsea. During this process, Margaret and Brad began to think about their transition for jobs and income. Full-time farming doesn't happen overnight, and the transition is even more difficult when relocating away from the security of existing off-farm jobs.

The next major hurdle for the Wolters was learning about the business of running a farm, not to mention deciding what enterprises to pursue. Last spring, Margaret discovered Practical Farmers of Iowa's Labor4Learning program, and particularly the job opening with Donna Warhover at Morning Glory Farm in nearby Mount Vernon, and decided to apply. It was a perfect fit.

As a trainer farm in the Labor4Learning program, Donna agreed to hire an aspiring farmer and provide additional training beyond what a typical employee might receive. Practical Farmers provided some compensation for Donna's additional time spent training, and also helped with advertising the job and overseeing the experience throughout the program.

Donna sees the value of a program that provides an immersive farm experience for those just starting out: "Farming is not for the faint of heart. Some folks think it would be so fun to be their own boss and play in the garden all day without factoring

in work days that begin at dawn and end at dark, seven days a week, for six months straight. It is hard physical labor in all kinds of weather, paired with all the brain work of running a business."

Margaret and Donna first decided on a set of topics they agreed were important for Margaret to learn about, including production issues like crop rotation and pest and disease management. They also focused on business management topics, such as market evaluation and crop decision-making, and lifestyle issues like maintaining off-farm income while starting a farm.

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"I not only got the hands-on farming experience I hoped for, but also learned much of the business side of things," Margaret says. "Both are very important components in helping me decide which direction I will go with my own farm."

In addition to learning from Donna, Margaret attended several PFI field days throughout the summer to learn from other PFI members. Seeing how T.D. Holub raises vegetables on his rural farm near Coggon, or how Jon Yagla provides for a CSA by farming in backyards in his Iowa City neighborhood, gave Margaret insights into various approaches to raising vegetables. She also visited Mike and Cheryl Hopkins' goat farm, learned from



Donna Warhover (left) and Margaret Wolter

the Tallgrass Prairie Center about using prairie plantings to add pollinator habitat and helped with a high tunnel build at Laura Krouse's farm ("the closest thing to a barn-raising that I will ever be a part of!" Margaret says). As any PFI farmer will attest, building a community of peers is an important part of starting a successful farm.

"Being a part of Morning Glory, I got a good feel for running a CSA, selling to restaurants and working at farmers markets," Margaret says. "Because of the contacts I have made through Labor4Learning and PFI, I feel confident things will work out eventually." ■

Learn More

Find a Labor4Learning Job

See the full list of trainer farms participating in Labor4Learning in 2018, along with their job descriptions, at practicalfarmers.org/labor4learning.

Applicants should contact the farm directly. For more information about Labor4Learning, contact Steve Carlson at (515) 232-5661 or steve@practicalfarmers.org