



Chispas Farm

NATIONAL YOUNG FARMERS COALITION

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With the goal of helping 25,000 young people enter into viable farming careers by 2022, we tackle the most critical structural and economic issues that prevent motivated young people from starting and growing farm businesses.

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CASEY HOLLAND

"I grew up in Deming doing subsistence growing and gleaning fields. Farming was part of my life, but always as a chore and never something I thought I would do as a career. Not until I did an internship with Project Feed the Hood did I realize that sustainable agriculture was the work that needed to be done in my community. That was in 2011 and I've worked on farms ever since."

Over the past eight years, Casey Holland has worked her way up from that first farm internship to her current role managing the four-acre, certified organic Chispas Farm in Albuquerque, NM. At Chispas Farm, Casey and her team grow over 120 varieties of heirloom vegetables, manage a small orchard, and host 65 laying hens and two dairy cows. They sell produce and eggs at the Albuquerque Downtown Growers' Market and through a 35-family Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. Discussing plans for the 2019 growing season, Casey shares an exciting new initiative taking root on the farm: "This year we are excited to build a farmstand where we will accept SNAP and utilize Double Up Food Bucks on the farm. Neighbors can walk by and purchase fresh produce straight from our fields."

The Double Up Food Bucks program, managed by the New Mexico Farmers Marketing Association, uses federal and state funding to leverage SNAP dollars for purchases of locally grown, fresh produce at farmers markets and farmstands like Chispas. The one-to-one match encourages SNAP participants to build relationships with their local growers and to try produce that they may not have otherwise been able to afford. Casey says, "I see the work that farmers do in

their communities as so central to building networks of resiliency, food security, and neighborhood connections that create safety in a community, beautify spaces, and even make traditionally transient neighborhoods safer.”

Casey has spent the last eight years developing her farming skills, building out her business plan, and working tirelessly to contribute positively to the Albuquerque community. Yet, she shares that land ownership still feels out of reach: “After a couple years of growing and honing my skills, I was dreaming of buying land and having my own farm, but that dream was crushed going into mortgage and bank offices to see what kind of loan I would be eligible for. I was laughed out of the room when loan officers looked at my student loan debt and heard that I was farming for a living. Assessing my income to debt ratio, I realized that I would always have to work for someone else. Not owning this land, it is hard to feel real security. If you want to encourage true land stewardship, you have to create affordable, navigable avenues to land ownership for young people.”

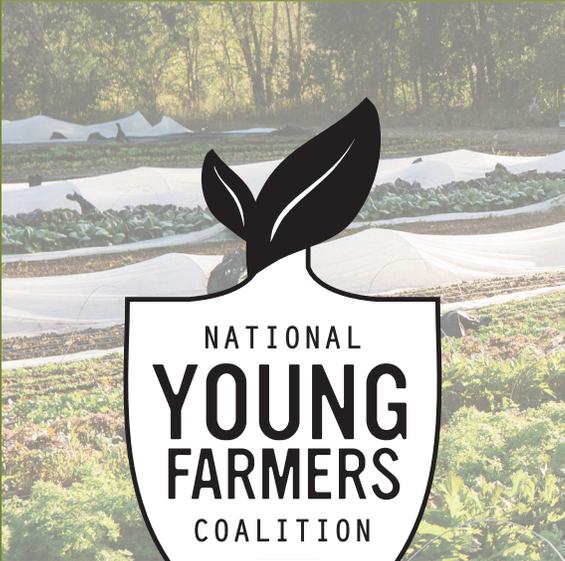
“If you want to encourage true land stewardship, you have to create affordable, navigable avenues to land ownership for young people.”

In addition to struggling to access farmland, many young farmers across the country also report that climate change threatens their farm businesses. With unpredictable weather patterns, temperature increases, and raging storms, farmers like Casey are seeing the effects of climate change first hand. She shares, “When I’ve talked to folks with much longer experience than I have, they say there was more regularity in the weather. 2019 was exemplary in how unpredictable the weather has become. We saw a much cooler spring, a late frost followed by a scorching summer, and then weaker monsoon season that stunted a lot of summer crops that we are usually dependent on for summer income.” When asked about how Chispas is adapting to a changing climate, she shares how important investing

in infrastructure has been. This year Chispas put up two hoop houses that will allow them to grow beyond the freeze date, thanks to funding from a Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) EQIP grant. Casey says, “Working with NRCS has been incredible. We signed on to a grant this year that will also help us hold acequia water to use in drip irrigation in case of drought and the hoop houses to help avoid frost damage and hail, and to more efficiently irrigate and reserve water resources. The grant will help pay for the work that we are already doing, such as cover cropping, which helps make the overall operation more sustainable.” Casey also mentions the importance of saving her own seeds when possible to develop stronger, drought tolerant and disease resistant varieties.

Vegetable farmers like Casey are an integral part of their communities. In addition to providing fresh produce to the neighborhood through their farmstand, Chispas also worked with the City of Albuquerque to cover the cost of hosting paid on farm internships for high school students. The students receive high school credit for their internships: “We targeted lower income and not A-students, and did a lot of work reaching out to teachers to encourage the students who were struggling to apply. It was powerful to hear reflections from the kids about feeling connected to something bigger in the city that they didn’t know about before.”





Groundstone Farm

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Young Farmers Podcast



MATHEW LADEGAARD

Mathew Ladegaard first came to Santa Fe after graduating from Evergreen College and becoming enchanted by the high desert and the rich agricultural history of New Mexico. Though his father grew up dairy farming in California, Mathew's first direct experience working the land was during college. After graduating with a degree in Sustainable Agriculture, Mathew worked as a farmhand across the west for seven years before finding his way to Green Tractor Farm in Santa Fe. At Green Tractor, Mat further honed his skills in everything from planting schedules to harvest techniques to customer relations, as well as adapting to growing in a high desert environment. After nine years of working on other farms, in 2018 he made the leap and started his own operation, Ground Stone Farm, in Pojoaque.

Like many producers in northern New Mexico, Ground Stone Farm is dependent on water from the *acequia* system to irrigate crops. The *acequias*, or irrigation ditches, have been the agricultural lifeblood of the New Mexico area for thousands of years. Originally developed around 800 AD by the Ancestral Pueblo people to divert river water to cropland, these ancient waterways continue to bring life to the arid southwest. At Ground Stone, Mat combines traditional *acequia* flood irrigation with more modern technologies: "We are completely reliant on the Acequia del Rincon, but it has been a learning curve to figure out how to water from the ditch. We have a pond on the property where acequia water is stored, then that water is pumped through pool filters and run through drip irrigation lines."

Though Mathew is new to the Pojoaque area, he has been lucky

to learn from longtime farmer and Mayordomo of the Acequia del Rincon, Alex Trujillo. Mathew says, "This last year [2018] was one of the worst water years NM has seen in a century. The *acequia* was nearly dry in July, but my Mayordomo recognizes that I am one of the only people on the Rincon who is farming for my livelihood, and he did what he could to prioritize my farm whenever water was available."

Ground Stone Farm is located on five acres, with over an acre currently in vegetable production. Mathew signed a five year lease in 2018 and has since done an incredible amount of work on the property to combat weeds while also building soil health: "I've put in a lot of compost on the farm, and don't have cover crops going on right now but plan to incorporate some this coming season. I'm using organic practices, and try to use low-till methods, but still have to prepare the top few inches fairly thoroughly due to the soil composition. I've been doing a lot of tarping to keep moisture in the soil and to keep weeds at bay."

Mathew sells his produce at the Santa Fe Farmers Market, as well as through Squash Blossom Foods, a local food aggregator and distributor based out of Santa Fe that works with over thirty farms to distribute produce to over twenty-five restaurants and a weekly CSA program. "Almost 75% of my income comes from the farmers market," Mathew says, "which is an amazing community of supporters and fellow farmers; however it's incredibly taxing physically and time consuming ... I prefer wholesale orders, and would do more wholesale if I could. Squash Blossom has been an incredible asset for farmers up north, but we need to further expand the wholesale markets for local food! It would be amazing to have incentives for wholesale buyers to purchase from local producers."

As we see more young people returning to the land to grow food for their communities, access to reliable land and water remains one of the top challenges for beginning farmers across the country. Farmers like Mathew face the challenges of finding skilled farm labor, limited markets, and a changing climate, all while pouring resources onto leased properties and facing irregularities in water availability. Mathew says, "Climate change is terrifying, but our biggest goal at Ground Stone is to build systems to mitigate risks and protect ourselves in these times of climate struggle."

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Polk's Folly Farm

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ZACH AND ETHAN WITHERS

In the mountains east of Albuquerque, brothers Zach and Ethan can be found feeding their heritage hogs tens of thousands of pounds of rescued food waste. This food is hauled from the city and cycled into compost to feed their animals, quarter-acre orchard, and the nutrient depleted ground they call home. The brothers named the farm after a Scotch-Irish ancestor who, after migrating to the U.S. in the late 17th century, suffered many years of failed attempts to farm his flood-prone swampland in Maryland. His neighbors derisively referred to his plot as "Polk's Folly." When Zach and Ethan were deciding upon a name for their operation, they chose to pay homage to their ancestor's early attempts at farming in North America.

After going to school and farming in the Northeast, Zach returned to New Mexico, where he and Ethan started their own operation on their late grandparents' dilapidated horse ranch. As third generation farmers on 40 acres of family-owned land, Zach and Ethan are fighting the ever-growing pressures of extended drought, residential development, and the challenges of navigating government programs. With each of these challenges, the pair have become ever more creative with their solutions.

When their grandparents started farming the land in 1976, they dug a lake to hold water for the farm year-round. The lake has historically been fed each spring by snowmelt, but snowfall in the last decade hasn't been what it once was. The monsoon rains in July used to fill up the lake for the fall and winter, providing a reliable water source.



“Last year the lake filled up five times and never held water more than 72 hours,” said Zach, the elder of the two brothers. The floods that once submerged the original Polk’s Folly, are ever less present at its Southwestern namesake.

A changing climate has shifted the seasonal precipitation that used to offer relief, making it less and less reliable.

In addition to changes in rain cycles, the brothers are also seeing the impacts of rapidly changing land use in their area. “A lot of the environmental problems are localized and generated by humans,” said Ethan. Now commonly seen as a suburb of Albuquerque, the East Mountains was a rural landscape in the not-so-distant past. The xeriscape was wild grasslands, populated by subsistence farmers and a small number of summer cabins for wealthy families. With increasing population, infrastructure development, and water acquisition, the land is now estimated to be 100 times over carrying capacity, with the water table dropping an average of two feet per year.

Zach says that even those engaged in better land management are facing an internal battle about how to re-establish native grasses that don’t generate income and depend on flooding. The water shortage limits the

projects they can take on. “Ethan and I have this same discussion about watering the orchard with our limited water resources from our well,” said Zach. “It’s hard to farm, it’s hard to farm at 7,000 feet, and it’s hard to farm at 7,000 feet with limited water and a changing climate.” With water as scarce as it is, it can be hard to justify nearly any project.

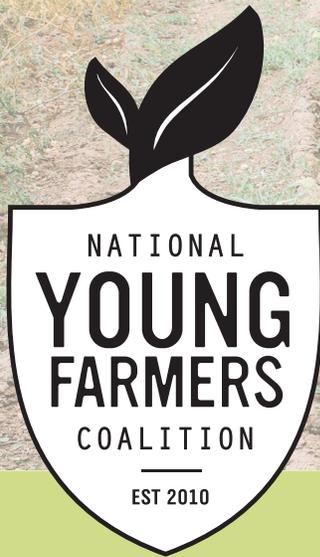
Despite the challenges they face, the two have taken on the mounting issue of food waste with gusto. When they started raising hogs, the pair stumbled upon the nation’s food waste epidemic and decided to utilize it, killing two birds with one stone. The pair now feeds their hogs on food waste collected from Costco, local food banks, and breweries, saving tens of thousands of pounds of food each month that would otherwise end up in landfills.

Polk’s Folly will be re-directing over a million pounds of food this year that would otherwise go to waste.

Their composting doesn’t stop at food waste. Wood material generated from forest clearing (that is otherwise a huge fire risk and therefore a threat to the community) is deep-bedded in the pig pens, food waste is layered on top of the wood material, and the hogs effectively mix these carbon and nitrogen sources creating nutrient-rich soil. “We are dirt farmers more than anything else,” said Zach. “We are here to take care of our soils.”

At the end of his life, their grandfather instructed the brothers to “take care of this little corner of paradise—hold onto it and keep it in one piece.” A few years down the line, the pair upholds this promise, expanding their vision beyond just their family land to their community and the landscape around them.





Ts'uyya Farm

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Young Farmers Podcast

REYNA BANTEAH

Ts'uyya Farm is nestled between a historic *acequia* to the west and bustling traffic along Isleta Boulevard to the east. Reyna Banteah, 33-year old owner and manager of Ts'uyya Farm, got her start farming three years ago through a training program called Grow the Growers (GTG). Reyna is from Zuni Pueblo, home to the A:shiwi or Zuni people, one of the largest and most isolated pueblos in New Mexico. In 2017, Reyna was accepted into GTG and began farming a collective training plot with six other participants under the guidance of members of the Agricultura Network. Over the course of nine months, the group learned how to successfully grow diversified vegetables for sale through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs and farmers markets. After completing the initial year of training, graduates are invited to take on half-acre incubator plots on the property, to develop their own brands and improve their farming skills.

Reyna has now been managing one of these incubator plots for two seasons under the name Ts'uyya Farm, which is the Zuni word for hummingbird, an important pollinator in the southwest. At Ts'uyya Farm, Reyna melds traditional farming practices with more modern technologies. In just one half-acre field, Reyna showcases three distinct watering techniques and grows a wide variety of heritage vegetables. Reyna says, "The majority of my market veggies are on drip irrigation, but my waffle garden is watered by hand using a dipper gourd. The waffle garden is where I plant more of my heirloom drought tolerant varieties. In another area, I use flood irrigation, which is water diverted from the *acequia* and then onto the field." When asked about how she



learned to build waffle gardens she explains, "Growing up I didn't see farming happening in waffle gardens, I just kept hearing stories and seeing photos from before my time. I didn't even know how to build them, much less how to grow food in them. So, I did research with the museum and went to my elders to ask what they remembered. My aunties and grandparents taught me, and I knew this was something that I wanted to keep alive on my own farm and keep teaching to other people."

Now at the start of each growing season, Reyna hosts community workdays at Ts'uuya to share this knowledge and continue the tradition of building waffle gardens in the southwest.

Now at the start of each growing season, Reyna hosts community workdays at Ts'uuya to share this knowledge and continue the tradition of building waffle gardens in the southwest. She has also hosted multiple cooking classes, as well as weekly yoga sessions, aiming to bring together a diverse range of people to connect with their food source in a more meaningful way. Though she is currently tied to the farmland in Albuquerque,

Reyna regularly drives the two and a half hours to Zuni to bring fresh produce back home and to host pop up farmstands on the pueblo. Eventually, Reyna plans to move back home and root herself even more deeply in the agricultural community there.

"I have been trying to keep southwest heat-tolerant and drought-tolerant varieties alive, and seek out seeds that I hope will survive a changing climate..."

"I have been trying to keep southwest heat-tolerant and drought-tolerant varieties alive, and seek out seeds that I hope will survive a changing climate. Back home we still depend on the monsoon rains to come and water our crops, but now when weather patterns are not as consistent, you can't tell what will happen in any given year. This season, New Mexico had so much moisture in the winter and spring, and now we are just waiting and not getting the usual late summer monsoon rains. Someday I want to have a farm back in Zuni, but there is no water there. Our lake is dried up, the river is dried up, even our community wells are shutting down for weeks at a time to replenish. There are so few water resources back home. I need to be strategic and practice ways to grow food here in Albuquerque that I will still be able to cultivate back home in such dry conditions."

The challenges of cultivating drought and heat tolerant crops, while also juggling customers and markets, multiple watering systems, organizing community events, and assisting new trainees in the Grow the Growers program are substantial. Yet Reyna continues to have a smile on her face, seeds in her hand, and hope for the season ahead.

