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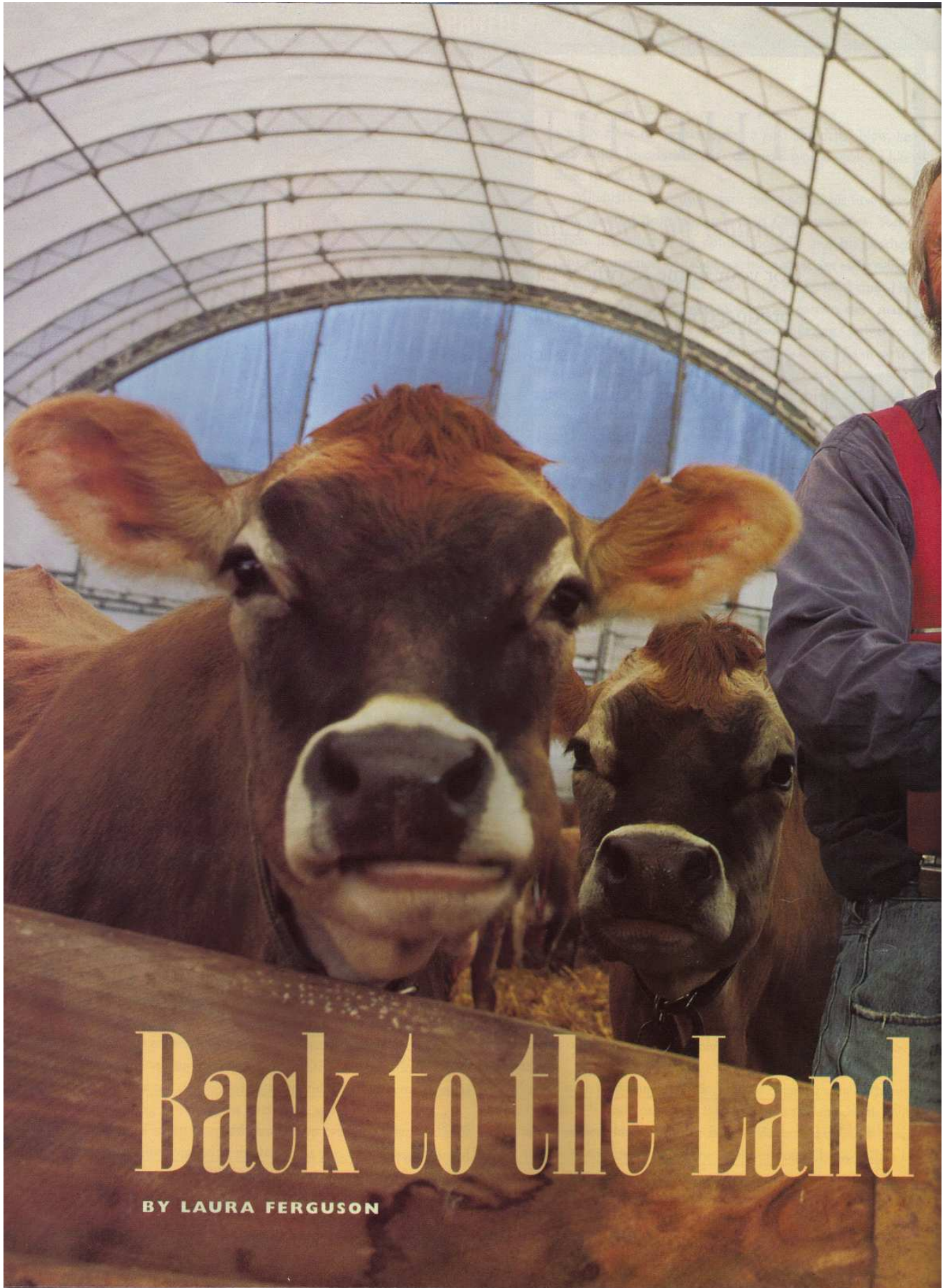
SPRING 2004

Back to the Land... Still

Profiles of
alumni as
stewards
of the earth

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A University Poised: Report from the President



Back to the Land

BY LAURA FERGUSON



RICHARD HOWARD

When we first decided to seek alumni stories about “back to the land . . . still,” we expected to hear from graduates of the 1960s and 1970s, years marked by rejection of the “establishment” for alternative lifestyles. We were surprised when the response was much wider. We heard stories from those who have stuck by a principled way of life for more than three decades, but they are a diverse bunch: a rancher, a dairy farmer, a beekeeper. We heard from alumni like Jennifer Sturmer, A83, raising hydroponic tomatoes, and Lloyd Zuckerberg, A84, working hard to preserve open space. And then we heard from recent graduates, and it was hard not to be moved by their aspirations as educators and reformers.

In the end, we decided to run all their stories. Together, they broadened our premise well beyond its preconceptions of farming to the notion of stewardship and activism. The idea of “still” can now reflect what’s more true: the vigor of ideas that gather new meaning with each generation.

Their commendable stories also share a common root with the idea of sustainability. Julian Agyeman, assistant professor in Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning, describes sustainable development as “improving the quality of human life now and into the future in a just and equitable manner, while living within the limits of supporting ecosystems.” The work of these and other alumni is increasingly urgent, he said; recently, more than 50 percent of the world was officially classified as “urban.”

“Now you will find people who are as likely to be working in boardrooms as in fields; we want people to *drop in* rather than *drop out*, as they often did in the ‘70s” he said. “The ideas surrounding quality of life are broader now—they are part of an emerging set of principles that will guide this new millennium. And in the end, we can all share in that aim. It really doesn’t matter where you live—it’s how.”

For Jack Lazor, shown with his Jersey cows at Butterworks Farm in Westfield, Vermont, organic farming has been a lifelong calling.



JOSH LIPTON

Merri Swid Morgan, J66

Living off the land in rural West Virginia reflects a version of the American dream

THE “BACK TO THE LAND” movement was “the lunatic fringe” of society when Merri Swid Morgan, then in graduate school at Harvard, joined a commune. “The idea was to spend a year learning the basics of farming and then move to a really remote place,” she says. “We shared the house with an old farmer who taught us how to milk a cow, make butter and cottage cheese, kill and clean a chicken—it was a lifestyle change that I wanted.”

Morgan has stayed true to her calling. For nearly three decades she has lived in rural West Virginia, where she grows nearly all of her own organic produce, bakes most of her own bread, and enjoys her neighbors’ farm-fresh eggs and “wonderful unpasteurized Jersey milk and cream.” She makes a spare living writing a gardening column, teaching writing and gardening, and selling overflow garden produce to a few select customers. She lives in a trailer, but looks forward to converting an old granary into a wood-heated home. Living this close to the essentials of food and shelter, she says, reflects her version of the American dream. “Being able to raise a vegetable garden and buy good, locally raised meat, to have pure water gravity fed from the mountain, to feel a sense of

Jennifer Sturmer, J83

Hydroponic agriculture yields tomatoes ripe with flavor while making efficient use of precious resources

community—that has more value to me than making a lot of money.”

A native of New Jersey, Morgan cultivated a love for nature during idyllic summer vacations in rural upstate New York. In 1972 she was drawn to West Virginia, where \$11,000 bought 120 acres and a log house with no electricity or indoor plumbing. In 1984, she left West Virginia to accept a teaching post at SUNY Cortland. Eight years later she was back. “I was so homesick that I gave up the best job I ever had,” says Morgan, who resettled on a 35-acre steep, wooded area in the state’s southeastern corner.

Looking back, she says her impulse for rural living sprang from wanting “something much realer” than society offered. “I am so grateful for this beautiful place,” she says. “Yet however much I value the beauty and rural lifestyle, it is the community of friends and neighbors that really graces my life. Thirty years ago, West Virginians whose roots go back to the 1700s welcomed us newcomers with open hearts, and the other young people who, like me, moved into this area, have become family. No one else I have ever met has been blessed with the richness I have found in these West Virginia hills.”

FOR ALMOST 20 YEARS Jennifer Lawson Sturmer, A83, has been growing tons of tomatoes on a mere 1.75 acres. As owner of Hummingbird Farms, she demonstrates the remarkable efficiency of hydroponic gardening—intensive crop production where soil is replaced by an inert growing medium, rockwool, and a nutrient solution for irrigation. “The name of the game is yield per square foot,” says Sturmer, who oversees 12 employees working in her greenhouses in Ridgely, Maryland.

Hummingbird Farms takes its name from Hummingbird Cay, a privately owned island in the Bahamas where Sturmer, a biology major, spent two spring breaks with other Tufts students, Dr. Norton Nickerson, and Dr. George Ellmore in field observation, research, and seminars. Later, as graduation approached, the owner of the cay got back in touch: Would she consider building and running a hydroponic tomato greenhouse in Maryland? “It sounded like conducting a huge experiment that really counted,” says Sturmer, who was preparing to join the Peace Corps. “I couldn’t resist the opportunity to start my own business.”

Today, Sturmer grows about 17,000 plants twice each year for two crops of off-season production, October to January and March to July, delivering up to 11 tons a week to about 50 supermarkets and gourmet stores. She and her husband, Rick, a business partner, have evolved a strategy that helps them stand up against the competition.

Since for most consumers the most important quality is taste and size, they grow plenty of beefsteak tomatoes, first choice for sandwiches and side dishes. But they also have expanded into other varieties, like heirloom, cherry, and red, yellow, and orange clusters, to name a few. “We diversified and that niche served us well,” says Sturmer. “And our typical customer looks for us because we are picking the tomatoes red, ripe with flavor. We have that edge.”

As a kind of pioneer in the field, Sturmer anticipates that hydroponic agriculture will continue to thrive. “Hydroponics will be useful as land and water resources become more precious,” she says. “And using hydroponics with integrated pest management as we do—using predator insects and organic soaps and oils to control pests and diseases—can be a very environmentally friendly way to grow nutritious, good-tasting food intensively.”






Kenny Williams, A71

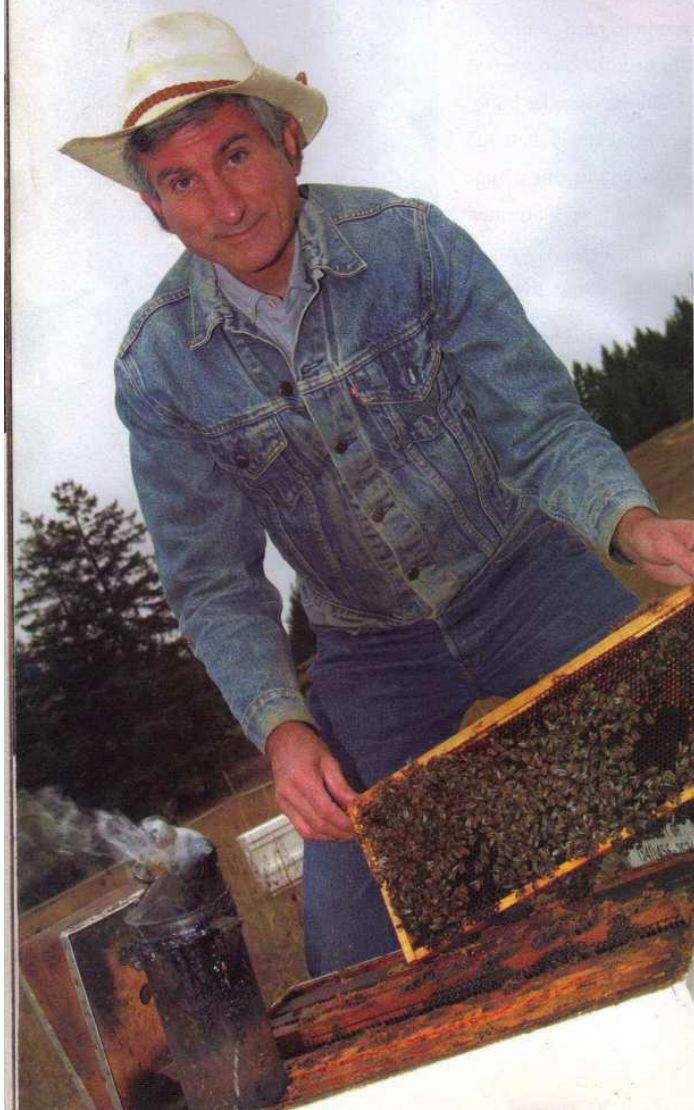
Beekeeping brings untold benefits to agriculture as it contributes to "Earth's natural bounty"

When Kenny Williams, A71, went to Oregon's Reed College for a master's degree in education, he never thought much about honeybees. But one day, a former student dropped by and mentioned he had seen some beehives. "And he said he thought of me," recalls Williams. "For some reason, what he said struck a chord." His curiosity piqued, Williams checked out books on the subject from the library, which led to an apprenticeship. Within a few years he was loading his own hives onto a 1955 Studebaker truck to pollinate farmers' local crops.

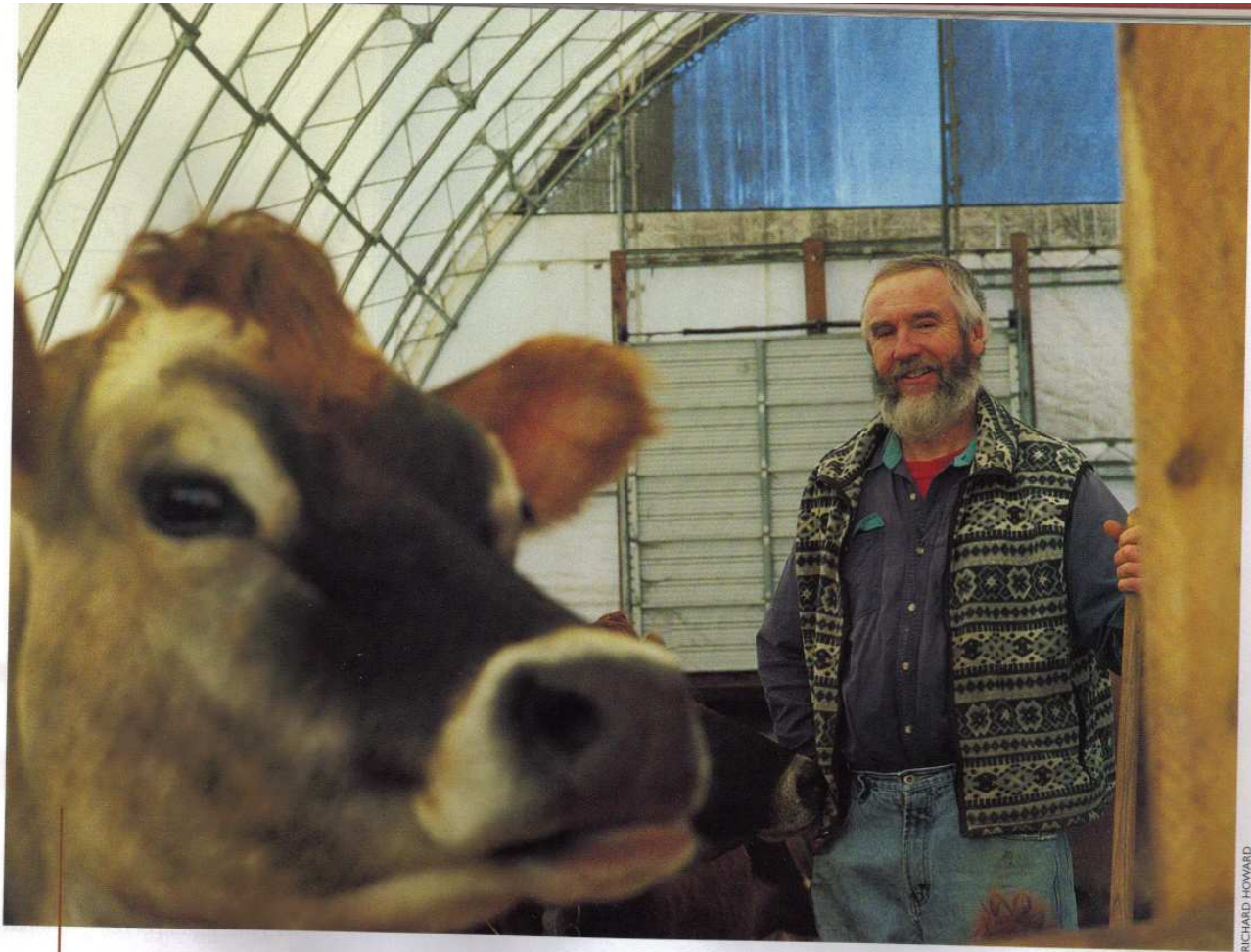
Williams's gamble on beekeeping paid off. Today he operates his own 600-hive enterprise, Wild Harvest Honey, out of Blodgett, Oregon. Each summer, he trucks his hives throughout the Willamette Valley to help farmers to pollinate their crops, and, every February, to northern California to pollinate some of the 450,000 acres of almond orchards there. He also distributes hives in numerous locations in the Coast Range west of the Willamette Valley, where his bees can produce up to 20 tons of golden blackberry blossom honey annually. Williams sells to natural food co-ops, restaurants, and a brewery; he ships the rest to a Midwest packer.

As president of the Oregon State Beekeepers Association, and with more than two decades of beekeeping experience under his belt, Williams is ready with talking points about the benefits of honeybees. Billions of dollars' worth of food require honeybee pollination, he notes; few people realize, for instance, that each year some 400,000 hives come into California from out of state, including 40,000 from Oregon, to assist in the pollination of 450,000 acres of almond orchards. Without this industry, quality would be lower and yields of a variety of crops would drop by 20 to 50 percent, he says. "I believe it was Albert Einstein who said that, essentially, human life would be eliminated within five years if honeybees disappeared. The natural increase in plant life provided by the systematic pollination of honeybees is enormous."

And from that perspective, Williams says he enjoys earning a living while doing something essential, simple, and good. "It's what Thoreau called honest labor," he says, "while contributing to Earth's natural bounty." 



DENNIS WOLVERTON



RICHARD HOWARD

Jack Lazor, A73

Organic farming and self-sufficiency define a thriving yogurt enterprise

Jack Lazor, A73, says his “back-to-the-land desires” began as early as his freshman year at Tufts. A self-created major in agricultural history helped legitimize his farming fantasies, along with summer work on a living historical farm at Old Sturbridge Village. “Three days after graduation, I began working on a dairy farm in Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom,” he says. “After a summer of haying and milking cows, I knew that this was the life for me.”

Lazor has since carved out a niche for himself as one of New England’s most successful organic dairy farmers. At his 300-acre Butterworks Farm in Westfield, Vermont, he and his wife, Anne, produce “North America’s purest and best-tasting organic yogurt.” Some 7,000 quarts a week are distributed up and down the East Coast to

natural food stores and co-ops, and his luscious high-butterfat cream is prized by the likes of exclusive Boston restaurants. And while Lazor says “we’re the little guys,” compared to other brand-name yogurts, “wholeness” is the farm’s signature. He grows all the food for his family and his Jersey cows—including alfalfa, wheat, corn, barley, oats, soy, dry beans, and sunflowers—on “living soils enriched by compost,” soils teeming with microbial life.

“We went from a homesteading situation where we focused on being self-sufficient to a commercial farming enterprise where we are still self-sufficient,” says Lazor. “You can actually taste the essence and well-being of our farm in the milk that goes into our dairy products.”

The resurgence of interest in organic products certainly has been good for sales. But Lazor stressed that over the past two decades, he has defied the conventional business model of seeking greater and greater profits, and focused instead on growing slowly. For him, farming is all about paying attention to process, to the very cycle of life itself. “We have always believed in giving back more to the earth than we take. Each year as we harvest our crops, we enrich the soil with organic compost. Success for us is stewarding land that we have made rich in humus. We nourish the soil so that it can nourish us.”

For more information, visit www.butterworksfarm.com. 