

Living Lancaster

Hanging up baton

Gunzenhauser retiring from symphony, not life

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COMMUNITY

FIELDS OF PLENTY

Despite income struggles, Homefields Care Farm offers employment to those with developmental disabilities, fresh CSA crops for public



SUZETTE CRANDALL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER PHOTOS

Brad Turner, of New Providence, and Brian Margevich, of Lancaster, weed at Homefields Care Farm.

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Linda Strauss helped found Homefields about 25 years ago because she wanted her daughter Lisa, who has a developmental disability, to live more freely.

There have been plenty of challenges along the way for the Millersville organization, now Homefields Care Farm, but nothing like what it has faced in the last couple of years.

Homefields has a threefold mission since it operates a community-supported agriculture program, offers housing for people with developmental disabilities and has a vocational program.

The biggest blow that Homefields has recently endured happened when Goodwill pulled out as the vocational provider in 2017.

And last year, while Homefields was trying to figure out how to make a transition, heavy rains hit over the summer and ruined many crops. This year, the number of shares it sells through its CSA program is down significantly.

Despite all that, Homefields has regained its foot-

ing through imaginative thinking that has led to some innovative programs. It appears to have a clear path as it moves forward.

“We were able to come in and re-create, and that’s where we were able to create the care farm,” says Elizabeth Swope, Homefields’ farm supervisor.

Founding

Homefields, which opened in 1994, was founded by Strauss and five other parents.

Strauss says her daughter would watch as her two brothers spent summers fixing up an old car, and eventually driving off in it.

Lisa asked her mom if one day she could drive.

“And I spoke with psychologists and so forth and was told, ‘Give her the [manual]; she’ll see that she can’t read the instructions, she’ll understand she can’t drive a car,’” Strauss says. “And I thought that was very harsh.”

Strauss thought back to her own childhood. Her mother had been a carnation grower and often



Farmhand Christina Waple, left, of Bainbridge, and volunteer Kayte Bridger, of Millersville, work on a container of oregano that was picked at Homefields Care Farm.

brought her along to work. She got to run around the fields and occasionally help out, enough to feel both useful and free. She loved it.

“I just thought with

enough space, Lisa could drive something. So, all these things, life came together with this concept,” Strauss says.

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EVENTS AT HOMEFIELDS

Homefields has plenty of events planned throughout the summer and fall. The farm has recently begun hosting “Talks in the Fields,” which are open to the public and encourage learning and engaging.

“This is for the community to come to the farm and learn new things, like maybe canning. Or how to pickle food. We’re coming up with a whole list of different speakers,” Linda Strauss says. “We have a whole year now filled with people who’d want to come and speak.”

Homefields is also host to annual, community-centered events, like Picnic in the Fields.

Here are some upcoming events:

- **Foraging for Wildflowers and Wild Edibles**, 1-2:30 p.m. Saturday, July 27. Come learn how to identify wild plants, through both hands-on demonstrations and learning to read field guides and keys. \$15 per person.
- **Farm Tour: Weed Management**, 10-11:00 a.m. Saturday, Aug. 3. Katie Landis will give a tour of the farm and explain how to manage weeds in an organic way. Free, but donations are encouraged.
- **Using Native Ground Covers**, 1-3:30 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 10. This workshop will teach participants how to utilize native ground covers in their home gardens to cut down on weeding. \$35 per participant.
- **Full Moon Tai Chi and Gentle Yoga**, 6:15-7:15 p.m. Friday, Aug. 16. Elizabeth Swope and Amy Finnegan lead a restorative tai chi and yoga class. Bring your own mat. \$15 per person.
- **Picnic in the Fields**, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 22. Food provided by Miller’s Smorgasbord, featuring vegetables and herbs from the farm. Music provided by Bobbi Carmitchell and Friends. There will also be lawn games and a silent auction. Tables can be reserved in advance; all proceeds go toward the farm. Adults, \$25; youth 13-17, \$10. Children under 12 eat free.
- **More info:** 717-872-2012; homefields.org.

Farm

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Homefields established a residential program on the farm, and later, a community-supported agriculture program.

“One of the prime reasons for Homefields wanting a CSA program is to end segregation, because if you have a developmental disability you often live together and travel together, and recreate together,” Strauss says. “And people who don’t know somebody with a developmental disability have prejudicial ideas, but once you get to know somebody, those prejudices dissolve.”

“After the age of 21,” she says, “people with a developmental disability have few options. It’s like falling into an abyss.”

Goodwill exits

The farm has two residences for people with developmental disabilities. There are currently six residents, all of whom work through vocational programs in the county. Lisa Strauss continues to live at Homefields.

Goodwill became the vocational provider for Homefields in 2000. Strauss says the partnership worked great for 17 years.

Because of changes in laws regarding vocation-



SUZETTE CRANDALL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Linda Strauss, a founder of Homefields Care Farm, talks about the Millersville organization’s program.

al providers that went into effect this month, Goodwill exited two years ago.

In response, Homefields decided to create its own vocational program. This allows the organization to directly employ their farmhands and pay them hourly, in addition to having outside groups come in to work the farm.

Clients of the Lancaster County Occupational Development Center have been working there every Thursday. They’ve done most of the seeding and have worked in the greenhouses, and will later help with the harvesting.

Participants in various summer camps also have occasionally come to the farm, and Millersville University students are involved as well; they’ve

built two “insect hotels” on the property that are still in use.

Homefields currently employs three farmhands: Christina Waple, Brian Margevich and Brad Turner.

The farmhands work alongside Swope, farm manager Katie Landis and volunteers several days a week during the warmer months of the year.

“It’s in my blood,” Waple says. “My ancestors came from the farm. My grandma had a garden and she would grow eggplants, peas.”

Margevich’s favorite part of working at the farm is getting to be outside, and he especially enjoys pulling weeds. Turner loves getting to work with the produce.

The CSA shares sold by Homefields current-

ly pay the wages of the farmhands. Those who buy a share receive freshly picked produce every week.

Shareholders can also pick their own flowers, herbs and berries. Mulberries, cilantro, basil and sunflowers are currently ready for the taking.

Drop in shareholders

This year, however, the number of shareholders is down significantly, from the usual 200 to 117. Strauss hypothesizes that the dip is due to more CSAs opening in Lancaster County in the last decade, along with more grocery stores opening in the county.

“And we also now have Wegmans and Whole Foods, so a lot of grocery stores now have organic produce,” she says. “If you come (to Homefields), though, you get things often that you don’t find at your grocery store. These are often unusual vegetables, and people like that adventure.”

Without the money coming from shareholders, it won’t be possible to pay all the farmhands.

Strauss is exploring the possibility of having donors to Homefields “sponsor” a farmhand. This would take the pressure off of the farm to pay the farmhands’ wages.

This isn’t the only financial struggle Homefields has recently faced. Last year, the farm behind them on Walnut Hill Road came up for sale at auction. Many developers were bidding on the property, but the owners of Homefields were worried what might happen if the property was developed. So Homefields bought the property.

“That’s lots more than usual. We’re paying that off,” Strauss says. “But now that we have that farm, we have fields planted back there.”

That field has begun to be planted, and is also used for parking at Homefields events.

Heavy rains

This time last year, Homefields was under several inches of water due to massive rains.

“We actually had a canoe going through, it was that deep,” Strauss says. “It was the worst summer in memory for rain, so we were impacted tremendously last year.”

The farm has recovered and the crops are all looking good for this season.

“Everything’s wonderful at the moment, except for our worrying about income, money, being able to sustain what we’re doing,” Strauss says.

However, there have been a lot of upsides along with the changes. As its own vocational

provider, Homefields can now accept volunteers to work on the farm, where they could not with Goodwill.

They have several regular volunteers, such as Matt Dilley, who was responsible for rerouting much of the rainwater this season.

“I had the opportunity last year to start volunteering, and it worked out pretty good with my retirement,” Dilley says. “I was doing some substitute teaching and I said, ‘I’d rather do this. I’d rather be outside. I like being outside.’”

One of Dilley’s recent projects was, with the help of Landis, creating netting to protect the blueberry plants.

Landis loves working at Homefields largely because of the people.

“It’s a really wonderful happy place with a really good sense of community,” Landis says. “Shareholders are all super happy to be a part of the farm, everyone who works here is super happy to be here.”

Despite the financial and environmental challenges, it’s always the people who are at the heart of Homefields.

“Our mission is about people and community, and the way to support that mission is through the sale of produce,” Strauss says. “It’s not produce first, it’s people first.”