

# COMMUNITY CONSERVATION: STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES THROUGH LAND CONSERVATION

## VERMONT LAND TRUST

### Giving from Our Hearts

A protected farm in Vermont helps keep children from going hungry in the summer when they don't get food at school.



Adam Farris, Christine Bourque and their two daughters. Photo courtesy of the family

Imagine summer as a kid on the islands in Lake Champlain. Freedom from school. Biking through lush green farms and ripening orchards. The lakewater beckoning. But for too many children in Vermont summer is a time of hunger. When school is out, what happens to those who rely on free or reduced-cost school breakfasts and lunches?

Kaight Althoff, a mother of five who lives in South Hero, on Grand Isle, learned that 25,000 children in Vermont are at risk for hunger in the

summer—and she couldn't live with that. She brought the problem to her pastor. She brought it to her friends. And they decided to start feeding kids.

One of Kaight's friends was Christine Bourque, a local farmer whom Kaight had met through her community-supported agriculture (CSA) program. Christine agreed: If kids were hungry, they were going to feed them.

"Instead of wondering about what we were going to do, we just started doing it," Christine says. "We started providing food that we would put on our own tables." That meant farm-grown carrots, cucumbers, lettuce and tomatoes. It meant fresh milk, local eggs and Cabot cheese. It meant fresh

bananas and local berries. It meant whole wheat bread, peanut butter and jams without high fructose corn syrup.

Some of that food came from local stores and some of it came from local farms, including Blue Heron Farm, where Christine and her husband, Adam Farris, raise organic vegetables, eggs, milk, meats and wool. They started the farm in 2004 on leased land. They also started a family there, with two daughters. From the beginning, social justice has been part of the farm's mission. Christine says, "I believe we're tasked as human beings to take care of our brothers and sisters, regardless of where they are in life." So the farm provides reduced-cost CSA shares and donates

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A food pantry box with food from local stores and local farms, including Blue Heron Farm. Photo courtesy Christine Bourque



Customer at the road side farm stand at Blue Heron Farm. Photo courtesy Rob Aldrich

to the food pantry. Early in the season, they give away plant starts so families can grow their own gardens.

When Kaight brought up summer hunger, Christine says, “It made obvious sense to Adam and me that we should get totally involved and give them whatever we could in vegetables. Because it all evens out. If you share what you have, life will provide. We just gave freely. We were giving from our hearts, not any other reason. We had food, and we could grow it.”

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Kaight also stood up in her church, the Congregational Church of South Hero, and told the congregation that kids in their community were going hungry. “I said, ‘Here’s my idea. We buy some food, we box it up, we give it away,’” she recalls. “That day I walked

away from church with over a thousand dollars in donations.”

Kaight’s friend, Melissa Hood, suggested, “Let’s give them books, too.” That’s how Food for Thought got started in 2008. Now, volunteers from the church distribute free food and books—selected to match the interests and reading level of each child—at two locations in the islands every week. This summer they provided for 108 children.

They source as much of the food as possible from local farms—both donated and purchased. Kaight says, “Our farmers charge us fair prices. We don’t expect to get everything for free. We want to support our economy.”

The kids get most excited about the books, Kaight says, while the moms get most excited about the produce. “We wanted to be sure we were

offering fresh produce because it’s the first thing that people cut out of their budgets,” she says. “As a mom, when I grocery shop, that’s certainly one of the areas where I can pull in our budget if I need to.”

One time a mother picked up a box of food, including a gallon of milk, and got teary-eyed. “I asked her what was wrong,” Kaight says, “and she said that her kids hadn’t had fresh milk in six months. She’d been buying powdered milk because she could stretch it and it was cheaper. So she was really thankful to have a gallon of regular milk.” This in a state that produces 2.3 billion pounds of milk annually.

## WHY SHOULD WE PROTECT YOUR FARM?

Ultimately, stories like that mom’s helped Christine and Adam become

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Sheep and a calf on Blue Heron Farm. Photo © Peter Forbes 2016



Volunteers planting onion sets at Blue Heron Farms.  
Photo © Peter Forbes 2016

owners of Blue Heron Farm:

When they were first looking for farmland, South Hero Land Trust linked them with Roy and Ev Newton, who gave them access to 16 acres. Later, they rented a mobile home on 14 acres next door. When that property came up for sale, they went back to the land trust and asked if there were some way to keep the land in farming.

The answer was maybe. South Hero Land Trust and the accredited Vermont Land Trust worked out a plan that would allow Christine and Adam to buy both parcels—30 acres together—and conserve it. Vermont Land Trust quickly bought the property, which was on the market, to hold it. Christine and Adam would be able to buy both parcels and grow their farm if they could sell their development rights to offset the cost.

The land trusts raised funds from the community to protect the land. But some of the money would need to come from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board—and that could be a tough sell. The property had good, fertile soils, but it was small.

“I had to go before all of these businesspeople who are presidents of banks and insurance companies and convince them to protect this 30 acres,” Christine says.

One board member asked her directly, “Why should we conserve your 30-acre farm when we could conserve 500 acres in the Northeast Kingdom?”

“Well, I’ll tell you why,” Christine answered.

She had brought with her a portfolio of over 50 letters, drawings, and photos from people sharing their stories about Blue Heron Farm. One

mother sent pictures of herself and her young son every year since he was born, picking beans and cherry tomatoes at the farm. Low-income CSA members expressed how thankful they were to get organic food, which they had thought was just for rich people. Grandmothers shared what it meant to be able to put food on their tables. The letters of support came from lots of different folks in the community, even from second home owners.

“I think it was the first time the board ever saw something like that,” Christine says. “We had just started this farm a few years ago, and already we’d gotten all of this support.”

The board said yes.

“They saw the meaning of our place here,” Christine says. “It’s a small acreage but it’s doing a lot of good.”

## FIND MORE

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