Future Harvest participation on quick rise

By JONATHAN CRIBBS
Associate Editor

CORDOVA, Md. (June 13, 2017) — Lauren Giordano is a freelance communications designer educated at the Pratt Institute in New York and raised on Long Island. Her husband — also a Pratt graduate — is creative director at the Brookings Institution in Washington. They have no agricultural background.

But a growing aversion to city living and a deepening interest in food led them to Talbot County where they raise 14 laying hens and plan to grow vegetables on about an eighth of an acre.

"I always thought I wanted to live in a city," said Giordano, 37. "But the shine wore off."

They’re good examples of the sort of people who have helped a program dedicated to new farmers at Future Harvest CASA nearly triple in just a year.

The organization’s Beginner Farmer Training Program had 25 farmers last year. This year, they received 110 applications after expanding the program and breaking it into three tiers for farmers with varying experience. They accepted 70, said Sarah Sohn, the program’s director.

More than 60 applications were for the program’s first tier directed at farmers with no experience.

“There’s an obvious hunger for learning more about farming,” she said. “They don’t mostly — at Level 1 — know what they want to do. That’s why we really emphasize going out into the field. There’s a real emphasis on pure learning. We want them to see real examples.”

In addition to Future Harvest’s program, Giordano also received USDA certification and training in poultry and rabbit processing. Through the beginner farming program, she’s participated in a 10-week seminar series, visited operations across the region and learned about nutrient management and wastewater plans, among other things. The entire program is free and allows student farmers to participate in all sorts of field events and agricultural workshops across the Chesapeake Bay region.

“We’re so new at everything, it’s just kind of a trial process,” she said. “I wanted to be sure I knew what direction I wanted to go in so I could make the best use of that time.”

For now, they’re eating their own eggs and selling them to friends and farmers’ markets.

The program is held together through a network of regional agricultural partnerships, including the University of Maryland Extension, and grant and foundation money. Future Harvest and six partners recently received a three-year grant of about $600,000 from the USDA’s Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program created to combat both the rising average age of the American farmer and the shrinking number of them.

That helped grow the program some, Sohn said.

“We’re a little bit more staffed up than we were in the past. Some of that was just our ability to do better outreach,” she said. “But I think predominantly it had to do with the extension of the levels.”

Level 2 requires a year of farming experience, and trainees are paired with an experienced farmer for a full season of shoulder-to-shoulder training. Farmers must commit to at least one full day of training per week from April to November and must own or manage a farm or be on the verge of starting one. Level 3 is for intermediate farmers with three to five seasons of experience. They’re paired with a farming consultant to advise their own operations.

“Those two new levels allow us to take in people we had been turning away in the past,” Sohn said. “It also allows us to have more targeted training.”

Future Harvest also works with partners to customize or tailor the educational experience for smaller farming communities. They partnered, for instance, with the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Commission to create a four-session program for farmers in that region, including speakers who could touch specifically on agricultural issues in that region.

“If there are ways that we can support little pockets of farming communities — sustainable farming — in areas where we don’t necessarily have full staffing, that’s exciting for me,” Sohn said.

Future Harvest has also expanded its Eastern Shore offerings by hiring a new Delmarva project manager, Niamh Shortt.

It’s looking for more experienced farmers interested in teaching, Sohn said. Trainers and consultants will be paid a stipend.

“One thing that is really exciting to me about having a large class is having such a diversity of people,” she said. “We have lots of second-career farmers who either maybe inherited farmland or purchased it, and we have really young people who are just out of college. We have something that can meet the needs of all
Giordano said the program’s only reinforced her appreciation for local, sustainable agriculture. She said she plans to apply to Future Harvest’s Level 2 program.

“You get a much clearer idea of the actual cost of food,” she said. “We’re kind of so removed from the food system that we don’t know how much goes into raising quality food.”