

By Julie Tallard Johnson

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“We are in a constant state of construction,” says Shedden Farley, director of the Linda and Gene Farley Center for Peace, Justice & Sustainability. Standing in the doorway of the center, Shedden the son of its founders, smiles. “But,” he adds, “We have infinity to finish.”

Located at 2299 Spring Rose Road, the center consists of 43 acres of farm and wooded land just a few minutes from downtown Mount Horeb.

The main house, once his parent’s home, is an open space without walls or separate rooms. Along the side are tables, meeting spaces and various offices for staff. Large windows without covering open out to the wild and farmed landscape.

“My parents designed this space 35 years ago to live in and to hold gatherings,” Farley says. His parents were both physicians and “active progressives.”

Shedden built his parents’ home when he was 22 years old. He refers to himself as the main “fix-it guy” there, today. His intention is to continue his parents’ legacy and maintain the main building’s integrity. The Farley Center is a nonprofit organization “dedicated to promoting ecological sustainability, social justice and peace.”

“My parents weren’t farmers,” Farley says. “But understood that value of food as an avenue of social justice.”

“There is a food desert in our country, where there’s not access to good, fresh food for certain segment of the population,” states Farley.

“Like my father, I’m not a farmer,” he says standing in front of two large hoop houses. One is full of seasonal vegetable growth. This one is farmed by Juan Gonzalez who immigrated to the United States from Mexico. The other is presently weeds and last year’s growth and is farmed by Shedden himself.

A recent heavy rain created a tear in the plastic and needs repair before use.

“The intention is to share the hoop houses and land with those farmers who need it,” he says.

The center invites beginner-farmers of any experience level to host and farm a plot.

“Those who farm here move from an incubator farm to a collaborative farm experience. There are 10 individual

farm businesses here in 2019,” he says. The farmers are from the United States, Canada, Tibet, Thailand, Mexico, Russia, Vietnam and Morocco. The farmers here sell to the markets and restaurants, mostly in Madison, along with donating a portion of their harvests to food pantries.

A plot close to the road is in June growth with a variety of vegetables and a couple apple trees. A small wired fence creates a see-through boarder around the plot. Twenty-three years later the original Hmong family, is independently farming this plot for their extended family and community. “They are pretty much on their own,” says

Farley. They were there at the start and have been farming long before Shedden started. “They speak Hmong and I actually don’t know their names. We wave to each other and the family donates some vegetables to the Farley Center. This is their place as much as mine,” Farley says.

“This is about food justice,” Farley says. “This way of farming is an act of social justice to an underserved population.”

Food justice can be understood as part of social justice, he continues: “Everyone deserves the right to have access to good and organic food.”

Food justice is generally understood as a way to get food to the people, especially those who might be identified living in marginalized settings and who lack access to quality food. Each farmer at the Farley Center is different in what and to whom they distribute their food. But they all rely on partnerships in their communities, through markets and family networks. Most share their food with other families within their communities.

You can contact the farm manager to join next year’s CSA program. Email Juan Gonzalez at the center at info@farleycenter.org for additional information.

You will see farmers from Farley Center at Mount Horeb’s Thursday Market each season.

“We also collaborate with groups in Madison where we can be of help,” says Farley. “We are wanting to do more, and are open to people reaching out to us to farm or to help distribute food.”

For more on the Farm Incubator program and Land Link Program contact Seth Riley at farm@farleycenter.org or call 608-845-8724

Shedden Farley says his parents understood the value of food as an avenue to social justice.” Photo by Lydia Bear

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The Food Pantry Gardens

There social justice platform encourages quality fresh food being distributed to Madison and Madison area food pantries. From the website: They hope to have food pantry stewards in coming years, as the project develops and gains wider interest and collaboration.

In 2015, Farley Center Volunteer Ron Schell and Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens Volunteer Tom Parslow applied for a City of Madison Seed Grant. Together, we received a small grant to establish native and perennial fruit and vegetable gardens. The initial goal is to harvest 8,000 servings of raspberries, serviceberries, strawberries, currants and asparagus. These berries and asparagus will be distributed to food pantries in packaging that educates consumers—primarily low-income and minority families—about the benefits of these foods.

This year was the worst planting for 25 years because of rain.

“The first people climate change is going to affect negatively is farmers,” says Farley. He intends to keep the legacy of his parents’ dream strong while letting its impact develop “as the land will outlive us, even if we were to destroy her.”

There are no sleeping quarters at the center. Shedden and his partner live in Madison. His partner, Caroline Tu Farley is the program director, who works out of their home in Madison.

No one but the dead sleeps at the center.

Green Burials

“Green burial is a beautiful way to say goodbye,” says Farley, whose mother died in 2009.

“Science didn’t want her body for research, so plan B was to bury her here at the farm,” he says. He and his father went through the steps and got the needed permission to have a green burial on the property for his mother. “We got permission to bury two people but needed a permit to have a cemetery.”

“My father was never a small thinker,” he recalls. Shedden was living in Colorado at the time of his mother’s death. He was a general contractor. So next on his father’s to-do list was to get busy getting licensed for a green cemetery site, which took two years for the non-profit status along with the certificate for a cemetery.

“It was a long process that one no one regrets. Green burials are a beautiful way to say goodbye because so many of us are involved,” Farley says. His father died in 2013. Shedden and Caroline returned in 2014 to “build on what was already happening here.”

For those interested in Green Burials there are site visits, and informational workshops offered in collaboration with the Farley Center.

Programs and Activities at the Center

The Farley Center offers a variety of programs and is interested in pursuing social justice and green initiatives with others from the Madison area, including Mount Horeb. They have worked with the juvenile justice division, for example, where youth built Leopold benches and the Farley Center sold them.

There are many activities at the center for the general public to participate in. These include an October Fall Festival with a Cider press and open house, which took place earlier this month. Coming in December is Farley Center Holiday Gathering on December 21 from 1-3 p.m. 1:00 to 3:00 pm.

Beekeepers and Beekeeper Pilot Program

The first of the bees at the Farley Center were installed in 2016 in independent locations on the land by volunteer Patrick Norby, who designed and implemented this program. The original intentions were to offer pollination for the crops, offer another avenue of education for their visitors and to provide a thriving habitat for bees. There is a beekeeping and an incubator program for those who are interested in learning how to become a beekeeper.

“Bees are in decline and need our help,” Farley says. They started out with three people learning the trade of beekeeping and now have seven new people, with a total of 14 actively involved in the program. Norby continues to lead the program and is presently assisted by Matt Kersten.

Land Ethics and the Farley Center

“There is a land ethic to live by,” says Farley.

A kiosk is being built to state land ethic rules for visitors to read and agree to upon arrival.

“People will break the rules because that’s what people do,” he says.

Everything at the Center needs approval before it is planted or considered.

Invasive species are always a concern. “The Jumping Worms are dangerous, something I learned as I arrived here,” says Farley. Wild parsnip is also problematic, he says. “All I know is I don’t want buckhorn and honeysuckle to take over. And we have to be diligent about the garlic mustard,” Farley says.

He is learning as he goes, as he invites others to do the same. Spring through summer he is out uprooting and mowing down invasive species. When he arrived here to take over the center he didn’t know what to do, or even what was considered an invasive plant. He has spent many hours doing research and consulting with experts and the land.

“We get butterflies here now in nice, large migrations,” says Farley. “And this is because I now know to mow around the Milkweed.”