

Listening When the Land Speaks

Ian Aley

Madison, WI

1ST PLACE WINNER

My name is Ian Aley. I grew up in Madison, and I moved back in 2012 after 8 years away. I visited the Farley Center about a month after arriving home. Spring came early that year, and I remember the sense of welcome and gentle kindness that Gene extended to me and my mom as we walked down the driveway on a warm February day.

In the nine growing seasons that I have farmed at the Farley Center since that time, I have observed countless ways that the radical generosity Gene and Linda extended to all continues to set the culture within our community. I see the way that Juan named his business, Los Abuelos Farley Farm, in honor of elders near and far, and the ways that he offers mentorship and kindness to new growers. I see the ways that Reyna, Namgyal, Yee, Jenny, Chandy, and many others bring steaming pots of tamales, momos, and soups to share at farmer meetings. I see artists offering works inspired by the land. I hear Shedd's laughter from afar as he chats with visitors and volunteers. I trace this all back to how Linda and Gene resisted the concept of private property when they extended welcome onto the land that is now the Farley Center to a broad and diverse community; this act started a feedback loop of generosity that we feel today.

A corresponding generosity arises in the plant communities with whom we get to share life at the Farley Center. The first solid food that our daughter showed interest in eating was steamed nettles that my partner and I harvested from beside the pack shed. Nettles offer their early leaves as a gift; in return, we can offer gratitude, presence, and respect. I have been struck that this is the case not only for wild foods but also cultivated ones. There is something both ordinary and miraculous about the way that seeds germinate and trees flower. We may think that we are in control, but we are not; rather, we are in a relationship, a dance of reciprocity. As a community we have agreed to practice organic agriculture and, as an organization, the Farley Center extends the gift of long land tenure to growers. These are conscious, counter-cultural decisions that support Farley farmers as they care for the land in ways that are restorative rather than extractive, relational rather than transactional.

In the early days of the Farley Center, Gene and others conceptualized the Natural Path Sanctuary (NPS) not only as a program that furthers the mission of the organization, but also as a stable funding stream to support a core staff as they facilitate the farm program and other activities. While the Farley Center welcomes donations, grants, and other opportunities, the revenue generated from NPS means our community does not need to be in fight or flight mode, scrambling to reinvent ourselves as we chase after the next source of funds. We are able to slow down, listen to the land and our community, allowing the Farley Center to both offer peace, justice, and sustainability programming and embody those values.

Today, we celebrate the history of the Farley Center and dedicate land that has long been a neighbor and with whom we will now get to build a deeper relationship. The history of the Farley Center is relatively short, but in our conversations as a community, I hear intentions to care for the land for the next hundred years and beyond, so that we might share the gifts we enjoy today with future generations.

About twenty-five years ago, Gene and Linda planted the apple trees that line the driveway and welcome every visitor who makes their way down the hill onto the Farley Center land. Trees often take five, ten, or more years of care before they begin to fruit; after that point, they may offer food for many decades. Each fall we gather to celebrate the abundance of the growing season, working side-by-side to harvest apples from the trees that Linda and Gene planted and feed them into a hundred-year-old cider press, almost inevitably operated by the youngest people in the group, with a little support from members of the older generation to build momentum in the fly wheel. So much in contemporary society compels immediacy and profit. Trees offer a reminder that time exists on many scales and that relationships blossom in the presence of trust and patience. We are now planting a new succession of perennial plants that will hopefully offer reason to gather and celebrate for years to come.

I have never felt so connected to a place as the Farley Center. My partner and I celebrated our wedding under the canopy of the burr oak elder, surrounded by the love of friends and family. Last fall, across the gravel driveway, we had a bonfire and visited with friends just before we welcomed our daughter into the world. We look forward to days together as a family observing the changing of the seasons as expressed in fruit and foliage. The Farley Center land and community brings rhythm, meaning, sustenance, joy, and grounding to my life. For this, I am grateful beyond what words can express.

As we enter this new chapter of the history of the Farley Center, may we continue to...
pause and listen when the land speaks,
resist oppressive structures,
receive abundance with gratitude and reciprocity, and
extend welcome to all.