

Family, Faith, and Farming

Risk Management Training Gives Farmers an Edge

By Jon Ostendorff, North Bridge Communications



Tony Jones picks green beans on his farm in St. Helena Island, SC.

SAINT HELENA ISLAND, S.C. — The day after Belinda and Tony Jones married, she helped him box up his apartment to get ready for a move to a new assignment with the U.S. Army.

They traveled the world together and raised a family in the years that followed.

Everywhere they went, they made sure to practice a little agriculture. It was mail-order chickens for the kids to raise once. Planting their own garden in Europe another time. No matter where they were assigned, the Jones' managed to find some place to plant something.

Family, faith and farming runs deep for Belinda and Tony Jones. Both came from families that valued growing and raising food.

"I always enjoyed that so I was really blessed to marry someone who has a similar background and who loves to garden and plant things," Belinda Jones says. "So, we decided that, together, we would continue and build on that for our children."

And build they have.

When it was time to retire from the Army, the family came home to South Carolina and took over 12.4 acres that was owned by Tony's family on what was once the McTureus Plantation.

They created Morning Glory Homestead. The farm recently marked its first year of commercial operation.

Tony Jones does most of the planting. Belinda Jones handles the marketing with a Facebook page, Instagram, a blog and a website.

Their oldest daughter is away at college but they still have two children at home. Daughter Sarah helps her mom with starting seeds and son Peter helps his father with maintenance and repair of equipment. Both help with harvesting for deliveries.



Morning Glory Homestead is a true community asset. Visitors are encouraged.

The Joneses see their mission as sustainable agriculture that protects the environment and engages the community.

Youth are invited to camp on the farm property as often as possible. The tents go up and the camp tables come out, transforming the lawn in front of the farmhouse into a campground where kids experience the outdoors, learn about farm chores and study Bible devotions under the leadership of trained adult volunteers.

A close connection to the community and to customers is something Tony Jones enjoys.

"I love to see things you've planted come to fruition," he says. "I love to see the smiles and the

accolades you get from people that have eaten your product and really enjoyed it."

Risky Business

Tony Jones picks up a blue 5-gallon bucket that alternates as a seat and harvest container as he heads down the rows of cherry tomatoes.

The rich soil and subtropical climate of low-country South Carolina make for great planting conditions.

Water can be a challenge here. Soon, Morning Glory Homestead will be irrigated thanks to a grant.

The Joneses are also working with a forester to clear some of the trees and expand the acres they can farm.

The tomatoes are looking great on this June evening.

As Tony Jones gets closer to the rows of string bean, deer tracks are visible.

Many of the tops of the bean stalks are chewed off.

"They deer really did it to us," he says as he picks the beans that are left and drops them into the bucket.

Deer aside, which also decimated a part of the corn crop, the farm has been successful in its first full commercial year, he says.

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— Belinda Jones

Belinda and Tony Jones



A local chef requested a special crop of merit corn. The restaurant will pretty much take all the vegetables they can grow.

They are growing three varieties of Crowder peas along with new potatoes, sweet potatoes, watermelon, cantaloupe, cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and squash, grapes and fruit trees. They also have honey bees and chickens.

It's busy on the farm but the Joneses are taking time away from the field to learn as much as they can about the business of agriculture as the operation grows.

"In order to survive you have to get the latest techniques such as marketing, how to market your produce, how to go about doing that. And looking at the risk management," Tony Jones says.

Belinda Jones says attending workshops is useful because the critical information is presented in one place.

"If we did not attend the workshops and conferences like this we would have to research that on our own and might overlook it or skip it or not think it was important. But when you hear it from professionals who have a lot of knowledge in that field, it really hits home," Belinda Jones says.

The day after Tony and Belinda saved what beans they could from the deer, they headed off to nearby Orangeburg for a class on marketing and risk management.

The training is a partnership between USDA's Risk Management Agency, National Crop Insurance Services, 1890 land-grant universities and the local agriculture extension educators attached to those universities.

The 1890 land-grant universities are a network of historically black colleges and universities.

The training program brings risk management and marketing education to economically disadvantaged communities nationwide.

NCIS, which represents the private insurance industry that delivers federally supported crop insurance, is the lead agency. The industry, under the public-private partnership, offers educational services to small, beginning, and limited-resource farmers.

Dr. Laurence Crane, NCIS Vice President of Program Outreach and Risk Management Education, developed the training. He came to NCIS from North Dakota State University.

The goal is to change behavior through continued support instead of offering one-time classes that sometimes don't have a big impact.

The program features three workshops, each about a month a part. The same farmers attend all three workshops. County-level extension agents



invite farmers to participate.

The workshops teach through a mix of group discussion, training, and homework.

The extensions agents follow up with farmers to help them if needed and ensure the training is being applied in the real world.

It's not only good education for farmers, but also valuable for extension agents who often have backgrounds in plant and animal science but not risk management and market development.

In the past seven years, Crane has led trainings across most of the South, the Great Plains and parts of the Northeast. He's trained about 1,000 farmers.

"What I enjoy about it, as much as anything, is helping people," he says. "It is satisfying. I'm a teacher at heart."

Making It Fun

Farmers start to trickle into the C&M Learning Center off Cherry Hill Road in the outskirts of Orangeburg early on a Saturday morning.

Organizers worried the nice weather might keep farmers in their fields instead of the classroom.

But seats fill up fast.

Dr. Laurence Crane, of NCIS, kicks off the program with welcoming remarks and reviews the homework assignment from the previous workshop. After leading a discussion about what

was learned he introduces Dr. Albert Essel of Lincoln University.

Dr. Essel is the one the farmers have come to hear. His style is captivating. He is from Ghana. His African accent combines with the timing and delivery of a stand-up comedian for a true performance that blends learning with fun.

Essel sprinkles real-world anecdotes, typically about terrible farming decisions, into his lecture to keep the audience engaged.

On this day, he tells the story of a man who planted acres and acres of seedless watermelon in an effort to capitalize on the interest in that variety. But he failed to research the market or identify a buyer prior to planting the crop. When it came time to harvest, he asked Essel who would buy the watermelons. By then, the market was saturated with seedless melons.

So, Essel explained to the class, the farmer fed his crop to the hogs.

The story got a great laugh but the seriousness

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— Dr. Albert Essel

of the point was also driven home.

Farmers, Essel explained, never want to feed a crop meant for buyers to the hogs. Farmers enjoy raising a good crop and selling it to buyers who value it.

That's the business of farming.

But to do it well, Essel says, farmers must research their market, understand what the buyer wants, and grow crops to suit the needs of customers at a reasonable price.

Many of the farmers in the class are sole proprietors with small operations who sell directly to customers.

Essel encourages them to listen and engage with customers. He makes the case that good customer service is just as important as growing a successful crop.

It's a long day of sitting at a desk and taking notes. The class is like a mini business school and keeping the audience engaged with complex topics can be challenging.

But it ends with lots of laughter.

"Some of the presentations are pretty long and we are talking about topics that are not quite easy to absorb, and they are a little bit dry sometimes, and so to keep people awake, and keep them engaged, I make it entertaining," Essel says. "It teaches them business can be fun. They can loosen up and learn and at the same time have fun."

Growing Success

Essel certainly succeeded this time.

The class had a range of students, from long-time farmers to those just getting started. They all seemed to take something valuable away from the training.

Mason Farmer, of Estill, S.C., was one of the younger students.

“No matter what kind of business you are doing, whether agriculture or any other kind, if you don’t know what your customer wants, then you don’t really have a business. You can’t just assume what the customer wants. You have to go and ask,” he says.

Vonnie Rochester isn’t a farmer but she is chairman of the board for a food company that recently located in South Carolina. She also has plans for a new company that will work with local farmers.

Rochester attended the classes and says she found them beneficial in teaching farmers how to run their farms like businesses and focus on growth to meet customer demand.

“Learning how to pool resources, plan, and document procedures on their farms can help the smaller farmers to increase market share and even participate in that 90 percent value added to their crops and livestock.”



Back at Morning Glory Homestead, Tony and Belinda Jones are taking what they have learned and putting it into practice.

Belinda’s marketing efforts on social media keep the farm’s products in front of potential customers and help gauge interest.

Tony not only supervises the planting, but he sells directly to customers in the Beaufort/Saint Helena Island area and along his route to his other job in Charleston, S.C.

That gives him a chance to listen to customer feedback.

The Joneses are ready for growth. They feel they have a good idea of what their customers want thanks in large part to the training classes.

“For our first year, I think we’ve done pretty good,” Tony Jones says. “It comes with a risk but there are the positives. When you can get everything clicking all at the same time, you will be able to get a little profit from it.”

Watch a video (www.bit.ly/2vgwE82) about Morning Glory Homestead and, for more information, visit www.morninggloryhomestead.com.



Dr. Albert Essel, Lincoln University

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