



#FridaysOnTheFarm: Veterans Growing Jobs, Food and Futures in West Virginia

From the kitchen table to the boardroom table, the USDA brings people together across the nation for: healthier food, natural resources and people; a stronger agricultural industry; and economic growth, jobs and innovation.

Each Friday, meet those farmers, producers and landowners through our [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) stories. Visit local farms, ranches, forests and resource areas where USDA customers and partners *do right and feed everyone*.

This Friday, meet Jason Tartt and Sylvester “Sky” Edwards, two military veterans who are dedicated to reviving agriculture in McDowell County, West Virginia, and bringing new life to the area through farmer training, economic development and healthy, local food for their community.

McDowell County, West Virginia

For a remote, mountainous area in West Virginia, McDowell County has gotten a lot of attention lately.

Celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain just filmed a segment of his television show there, and West Virginia native [Elaine McMillion Sheldon](#), filmed her Peabody Award winning documentary “Hollow” there (her recent documentary short “Heroin(e),” also based in West Virginia, was nominated for an Academy Award last year).

McDowell is the state’s poorest county with one of the lowest life expectancies in the United States. With a history of coal’s rise and decline, the people of McDowell County have suffered from job and population loss and health issues due to drug addiction and limited access to healthy food.

Yet, Jason and Sky see a different picture – one of potential. They are rolling up their sleeves and bringing new life to the area by creating jobs through farmer training and economic development, and growing healthy food for local schools and their community.

This is a lot different from the McDowell County where Jason grew up.

“It wasn’t a food desert when I was raised here. You had a garden, an apple tree, pear tree, something like that in every yard. I didn’t care if the grocery stores were stocked or not. People could survive -- and that went for everybody. But when I came back, I saw that tradition had not been passed on to future generations. It was gone.”

When asked why those skills were lost, Jason said, “I think the decline of coal mining. We took for granted that it would always be there, so there was no transition plan. We don’t promote agriculture to kids. We take farmers for granted.

Now we're in an economically depressed situation, health is bad, we've got drugs ravaging the place. And we've got to figure out how to stop the bleeding, how to bring people back to this area. And I think agriculture is a major player in making that happen."

"It is a very poor place, but it is a goldmine." - Jason Jr.

Starting McDowell County Farms

Jason and Sky have a lot in common. Both men served in the military – Jason in Bosnia and Sky in Vietnam. Both moved around a lot. Both saw something in McDowell County that inspired them. But, their paths to farming were very different.

Sky grew up farming and later studied organic farming at the Rodale Institute. After leaving his North Carolina farm to his children, he wanted to start again in someplace new, someplace that needed farmers.

"To me, it's always been a greater need in an impoverished area," he said. "And, I'm of the persuasion that instead of growing food I can send to you, I'd rather stand beside you and teach you how to grow it. And you then you can teach others. That's the ripple in the water that keeps on growing," he said.

He picked McDowell County, and reached out to Jason after some people in the community suggested he meet him.

Jason, searching for the right fit back home in McDowell, said, "I just so happened to read an article about veterans and agriculture and decided to see if I could do something."

Combining Sky's farming skills with the business and partnership-building skills Jason cultivated at the Department of Defense, McDowell Farms was formed.

The solitude of being immersed in nature helped both veterans heal.

Sky said, "Coming home (from Vietnam) at the time... The most therapeutic thing I could do was to be out there in a rural area working. I found peace and solace. I needed that. I was able to confront all of the things I had been through. I found a place I could put them and live with them."

New to farming, Jason said, "Agriculture has been good for me – the solitude, silence. The pleasure I get out of putting a seed in the ground and seeing it grow. You know, just being able to quiet your mind. It allows you to take your mind off everything else. This has been instrumental for me."

The farm includes land in several areas around the county. One is used as a training facility for youth and veterans.

“We can get veterans in here and they lose track of time. They’ll look up and say, ‘Is it 4 o’clock already? Can I come back tomorrow?’” – Sky

What They Grow

The farm grows tomatoes, cucumbers and melons for the local school.

Sky said, “We’re beta testing what products they want. This will go into the school lunches and salad bar. We grow lettuces, and at the end of the season, the high tunnel will be full of spinach, lettuce, French chard, kale -- we love kale, and grow several different types -- beets, arugula, okra, corn, a little of everything.”

The list goes on to include mushrooms, maple syrup, green beans, dried beans, berry production and fruit trees. Pastured chickens provide free-range eggs.

The hillsides are perfect for orchards. “Our focus is shifting, because, you have to incorporate the mountains. So that’s why we’re expanding to maple syrup, honey, mushrooms. You start talking about your proteins, and there are a lot of vegetables and things we can grow that provide you with everything you need,” said Jason.

They are also considering a regenerative paw paw orchard. “Paw paws can be freeze dried for 15-20 years. Combined with black walnuts, that’s just the sort of thing the tourists could take out into the woods here,” said Sky.

Dorothy, Jason’s wife, makes value-added items from the land, such as soaps and lotions using local herbs. “I started getting into herbs because of my health,” she said. “The body can heal itself, you just need to give it the right nutrients to heal.”

USDA and Other Partnerships

Partnerships are the lifeblood of McDowell County Farms. One partner is the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service.

“NRCS helped us with high tunnels, drip irrigation, all of it,” said Sky.

“We have a project for high tunnels in the county,” said Gary Redden, the local NRCS conservationist.

“And we’re hoping we can involve others who want to start farming. These guys are the reason we targeted this area. We saw what they were trying do down here, and this was a way to enhance it.”

Jason added, “These are the things you’d want from your government. We can’t grow food year round here, but if we want to be competitive in the market, we’re going to have to figure out how to do that.

High tunnels make it possible for me to carry my business further into the year. If you want to support local business it's a no brainer."

The high tunnels have also helped other natural resources. "Runoff and erosion were terrible. Because I started with the high tunnel I've had to address that. Putting the high tunnels up and working the ground here, conservation comes with it," said Jason.

Though organic practices are used, Jason said they'd like to get certified as they expand beyond local markets. NRCS has a conservation activity plan that can help farmers transition to organic, and the Farm Service Agency helps offset the costs for organic certification.

Growing Food and Futures

Jason and Sky want to put agriculture on the map in McDowell by teaching others. But bringing farming back to the area hasn't been easy. Learning as they go, the farmers have made adjustments to their approach and business plan.

"One of the things veterans said is that everyone is trying to get veterans into ag but no one is telling these guys how to sell the product, or make a sustainable model," said Jason.

"So finally we decided to go at it a different way. We started [SEEDH](#), Southeast Economic and Educational Development Hub Cooperative Corporation. We talked about what our market is, who would buy, what would sell and how to synergize agriculture with the tourism industry that's growing here."

"We don't tell folks what to farm. We give them exposure to what's here -- beekeeping, maple syrup production, growing in the high tunnel. Once they decide, then we put things in place so they can move forward," said Jason.

"It's become a lot of community activism. I'm a team builder. That's one of my strengths."

Jason has brought in landscape architects, business and market professionals and students from Virginia Tech, Bluefield College and West Virginia University to advise new farmers setting up their businesses.

Jason's son (also named Jason) started a mushroom business, and recently led on-farm classes on mushroom production, inoculating logs with Shitake.

"The biggest export we have right now is the kids." - Jason Jr.

"I'm nineteen. When my father brought me back here, at first, I wasn't sure what we were going to do. But, I started to see the end goal. And seeing some of the kids who are suffering with parents on drugs, I asked, what are they going to do? They are probably going to leave.



The biggest export we have right now is the kids. But, they don't have to leave in order to build a career and build a life. So, that's my mission -- to teach the kids. This is home. And we don't want them to leave. It is a very poor place, but it is a goldmine."

Jason Jr. is also the head of [American Youth Agripreneur Association](#), which teaches students about different facets of the agribusiness sector, primarily harvesting in Appalachia. They also learn to write business plans, marketing, developing value-added products, working in high tunnels and much more.

Asked about his son's ability to inspire others, Jason said, "A lot of young people look at him and say, 'I think there may be a chance for me here.'"

They are also in the process of starting a farm store with local products. "We went to North Carolina and there are a lot of folks in farm communities that go to places with locally sourced products. We don't have that here. So, we bought a building in Kimbell.

It needs a lot of work, but we're going to start a small farm store there. And, as kids and their parents go through the training program, they can bring their products to the farm store and we'll sell it for them. We've got a lot of irons in the fire. But it's necessary at this point. If it's going to move, we have to push it," said Jason.

Healthy Food in the Local School

Helping people understand what healthy food is and why it's important is a priority.

"Diabetes, heart disease, you name it, we're at or near the top of the list for those things," said Jason.

The farmers are working with schools and youth organizations, and hope that farming can be of special help to some of the area's troubled youth. Jason Jr. is partnering with a local school to grow vegetables in a high tunnel right on the property.

They also partner with West Virginia University Extension Service's "Kids Koupon" program, which brings farmers markets to schools along with nutritionists and dieticians.

The Future

With the efforts of these farmers and their community, the future for McDowell County looks bright.

"This is home. It's a beautiful place. And a lot of beautiful things have happened to my life here because of the people that had something to do with my upbringing," said Jason.

Sky reflects, "And so, people ask, when do you stop giving. You know what, my reservoir's refilled every day. I get tired like everybody else. But tomorrow morning when I get up, I'm grateful to be alive. And, I don't mean



that because I'm 68 years old. I mean that because I've lived through Vietnam and I put a lot of young men in bags. But I'm still here. So I have a lot to be thankful for."

"We can go through life and we can take and take and take and take. And somewhere we're going to get to the end of the line, and there's nothing else to take. Or we can go through life slowly, and we'll get to the end, but we're giving as we go."

NRCS works at the local level, helping communities and individual farmers achieve their conservation goals.

For more information on how NRCS helps farmers with high tunnels and other conservation practices, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov.

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