

ETHOS FARM

Medicine for the Earth, the Community,
and the World

Article by Alice Roche Cody

Photography by Kelly Joyce
and Photos Courtesy of Ethos Farm

Above - Ron Weiss, MD, in the "Doctor's Market" at Ethos Farm.



Ethos Farm in Long Valley was hopping. At the Doctor's Farm Market, patrons perused the artfully displayed organic fruits and vegetables, from the ever-so-flavorful strawberries to the robust peppery arugula and the tart, crunchy radishes. Nearby, a blond boy with a toy truck in one hand and his mom's in the other, checked out a large digger parked near the barn. Another couple enjoyed a healthy snack at a shaded table. Over in the fields, inside the greenhouse, a farmer tended trellised tomato plants.

Tucked in the valley of Schooley's Mountain, this 342-acre picturesque farm is a place for healing: for patients who visit the onsite medical practice and pick up their prescribed produce; for neighbors who purchase hearty greens; for the earth, through farming practices that enrich the soil. Employees, so passionate about their heartfelt mission, that growers and medical staff alike tear up when describing their efforts. Everyone here joins together to save the world, one leafy bite at a time.

It all started with Ron Weiss, MD, dual board-certified in internal and lifestyle medicine, who purchased the farm in 2011. He transplanted himself from his bustling urban medical center in West New York, NJ, where his clinic did everything from delivering 30 babies a year to coding strangers dropped off from the nearby bus stop. When the financial strain from falling insurance reimbursements forced him to close his otherwise thriving practice, the Garden State native knew it was time to reinvent himself.

"I decided after seeing the burden of chronic diseases in Hudson County, that it began with food and we should change our food system in order to change people's health," he said. "So, I figured, let's go get a farm."

Ethos Farm Project (EFP) was born, a nonprofit farm-based healthcare system that follows the Hippocratic ethos: Let food be thy medicine. Farmers here harvest USDA organic, non-GMO fruits and vegetables through regenerative agricultural methods that build healthy soil. Working in tandem with EFP is Ethos Primary Care, where plants are seen as healing medicine. Instead of prescribing pills and surgeries, a team of physicians, nurses and health coaches help patients change their eating habits.

Everything happens at the West Mill Road farm, which has its own rich history. Originally the 18th century Leonard Neighbour farmstead, the land was broken into parcels in 1951 by Philip C. Scott. Since then, the fields and forest faced three developmental threats. Ultimately, Long Valley residents paid \$12 million to place the grounds in the New Jersey Farmland Preservation Program, requiring it be used for agriculture.

Today, Ethos Farm is a National Historic Landmark, and EFP has worked to reclaim the conventionally farmed acreage. Field by field, cover crops, such as oats and red clover, were planted to improve the biodiversity of the soil. Two years ago, EFP restored the last 100-acres with native warm season grasses that once flourished with the Lenape. These grasses draw carbon dioxide out of the air and bury it underground as carbon. In fact, scientists from

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Field Manager Nick Hodgson

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Learn more at ethosfarmproject.org/farmdays

Ethos Farm Project is a 501c3, non-profit, founded to address the interconnected nature of agriculture, human health, planetary health, and our relationship with nature

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Rodale Institute and Rutgers took soil samples, and once funding is secured, researchers will study how grasslands can reverse climate change by reducing carbon emission levels.

“Health begins with the soil,” said Dr. Weiss. “It comes out of renewed and regenerative soil and flows to people through whole plant foods, which have been evidence-based as the most effective way to reverse and prevent chronic diseases. When a patient is dedicated, in general, they can reverse almost all the diseases taught today to medical school students that cannot be cured, including type II diabetes, obesity, coronary disease, cardiovascular disease, kidney disease, asthma, dementia and Alzheimer’s. Cancer can be prevented.” An assistant professor of clinical medicine at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School, his alma mater, Dr. Weiss offers senior medical students a one-month rotation at the farm, where students see patients and learn firsthand how a regenerative food system can heal people and the earth.

As for successful patient outcomes, the proof is in the produce. Take the Denmans, a Roxbury couple in their late 30s. Leigh, a former Temple football player, clocked in at 6’6” and 560 pounds and took meds for high blood pressure and cholesterol. His wife, Magdalena, reluctantly joined him for Dr. Weiss’ detox program. They said good-bye to pizza, bacon, eggs, hot dogs, burgers and ice cream. Her initial blood work revealed prediabetes and non-alcoholic fatty liver disease. A specialist she consulted prescribed medication and warned her liver condition wouldn’t improve for one



Pictured right - Farm Manager, Nora Pugliese (Courtesy Ethos Farm).

to 10 years. Instead, she followed Dr. Weiss' recommendation of kale, beets, berries, water and exercise. Her liver functioned normally within three months. What's more, her blood pressure decreased and signs of prediabetes disappeared.

Five months in, Leigh has shed 70 pounds, he's off all BP pills, decreased the cholesterol meds, his knees feel better and he has more energy. "We didn't know how bad we felt until we felt good," he said, his wife adding, "Our doctor prescribed fruits and vegetables, and I see the results."

Back at the Doctor's Farm Market, inside a rustic converted garage, customers flocked Farm Manager, Nora Pugliese, for gardening tips. One loyal fan left with overflowing bountiful bags and said, "Thank you, Nora, you're wonderful!"


Ms. Pugliese felt heartened by her loyal customer base. "This work is deeply meaningful to me," she said. "It's an exercise in science, faith and patience. It's relatable to the medical practice. You don't take a pill and you don't spray soil with chemicals. We use cover crops and compost. We have patience and faith that nature will heal. People are becoming aware that the way food is farmed is in direct relationship to their health and the health of the planet."

Just then a strong breeze blew in, toppling the potted tomatoes and peppers. "My plants!" she gasped, lunging to right them. Moments later, a mini-bus pulled in and a multi-generational family - parents, kids, grandparents - piled out to pick strawberries. "Looks like a party just arrived!" said Ms. Pugliese, waving her welcome.

Over by the lettuce table, Jessi Stensland re-stocked heads, her fingers stained green from pruning plants. As one of three paid apprentice farmers, she helps start seeds, prep land, create beds, plant, cultivate and harvest. In her second season, she returned to her home state to learn small-scale organic farming. "I wanted to learn how to grow food in the wild, as down-to-earth as possible," she said, through tears. "There's no commute. I live on the farm and sleep under a sycamore tree. I'm finding people with similar values. It's hardy work that feeds the soul."


Now that Ms. Pugliese finished chatting with her regulars, she's ready to tour the crops and discuss healthy soil. "You need the microbiology of soil - it's a dance that makes nutrients available and brings them to the plants," she said. "If you destroy microbiology with fungicides and pesticides, you kill good pathogens, too. There's no choice but to keep adding chemicals and minerals. We take the opposite approach. We know there's health there, and we support and allow that system to do its natural work."

Out in the fields, various covered structures - a greenhouse, high tops and caterpillar tunnels - protect the crops. "It's the result of climate change," she said. "It's difficult to grow in open fields, with the fluctuation in temperatures. Tomorrow will be 20 degrees cooler than today." This afternoon, whirling fans in the greenhouse cooled things down. With the enclosures, farmers control water intake and can create warmer environments, extending the growing season longer into fall.



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Staff at Ethos Farm (Courtesy of Ethos Farm)



EFP employs succession planting, Ms. Pugliese explained, where crops are turned over quickly and restarted from seeds grown in the greenhouse, with most batches replanted two to three times a season. Tomatoes and cucumbers grow on trellises so that the plants put their energy into developing fruit instead of growing branches. Within the caterpillar enclosures, the zucchini was already cleared, and squash grew along the edge. Carrots and celery also flourished. For the kale, netting covers the leaves as a barrier method to keep out flea beetles and cabbage moth.

On two parcels of land in the distance, EFP started its second season conducting sustainable farming research with North Jersey Resource Conservation and Development Program. “On one patch, farmers roller crimped or broke stems of the rye cover crop before planting pumpkin seeds, creating a weed-suppressing mulch that will decompose and add organic matter to the soil,” said Ms. Pugliese. “For the control, workers simply mowed the fields before sowing the seeds. Researchers will study the differences in yields and soil health.” And down near the road, EFP invited a local conventional farmer back another season to grow organically - buckwheat for weed suppression and soil-building and then winter wheat in the fall for harvesting next spring.

Soon the late afternoon breeze picked up, signaling the end of the market day. Field Manager Nick Hodgson backed up a flatbed to load left-overs. His stewardship mission includes teaching the viability of small-scale farming, particularly to the two newcomers on his team. He hopes to start a formal training program. “A lot of farmers are scared off because financially, it’s a hard way to make a living,” he said. “I want to train and inspire the next generation of farmers. If farmers can’t make a living, we can’t continue to heal.”

And that would affect everyone’s future. In the Rockefeller Institute’s Food Systems Vision Prize for 2050, EFP received semi-finalist status for its long-term plan to feed New Jersey residents. In the meantime, EFP started initial inroads to begin a young farmer program with Newark high school students.

It’s through all these efforts that Dr. Weiss has found his life’s purpose. “It helps me to play a role in the greater world that I never dreamed I’d do as a physician,” he said, his eyes watering. “I always thought that what I’d do as a physician would be immediately for the person in front of me on the exam table. But when I practice medicine like this, it’s for the earth. It’s for the community. It’s for everyone in the world.”

The Doctor’s Farm Market at Ethos Farm is open seasonally on Fridays and Saturday from 9 a.m. - 3 p.m. For more information about the Doctor’s Farm Market and the Ethos Farm Project, including employment and volunteer opportunities, visit www.ethosfarmproject.org.

