



New American Farm Conference

Advancing the Frontiers
of Sustainable Agriculture
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Become More Inclusive, Diverse, Says 'New Voices' Essay Winner

KANSAS CITY, MO – To support SARE's mission of advancing sustainable practices and innovations to the whole of American agriculture, SARE conducted the 2008 New Voices Contest, seeking written, audio or video submissions that articulated the new perspectives and illustrate an inspirational and pioneering visions for the advancement of sustainable agriculture over the next 20 years.

Contest winner Shoshanah Inwood of Columbus, Ohio, successfully addressed her vision of how truly sustainable production and marketing systems can improve profitability, stewardship of land and water and quality of life for farmers, ranchers and their communities. Other finalists included two entrants from the Western region, Mike Emers of Alaska and Jessica McAleese of Idaho, along with Arion Thibournery of Iowa.

Essay winner Inwood co-founded Silver Tale Organic Farm in Lucas, Ohio. She left farming to pursue a Ph.D. in rural sociology at Ohio State University but has kept the soil in her blood by dedicating her graduate education to understanding issues facing sustainable development in rural America. Her dissertation work examining farm succession at the rural-urban interface was funded by SARE.

Inwood has collaborated on projects with local farmers, Innovative Farmers of Ohio, the Ohio Department of Agriculture and the Central-Ohio Chef Grower Network. She has also served on the Ohio Ecological Food and Farming Association board for four years.



Shoshanna Inwood

The following is the full text of her winning essay, titled Farming Diversity:

Can a girl from Brooklyn, NY, have anything to say about the future of agriculture? My journey into sustainable agriculture started with an apprenticeship at Malabar Farm in Lucas, Ohio, and Louie Bromfield's orations about soil building. To learn the realities of making a living off the land, a friend and I started an organic vegetable farm. I developed a new appreciation for the food on my plate as I became a producer who worked an off-farm job, worried about pests, learned to appreciate the meaning of community in the neighbors who helped us plant and harvest, and drove 80 miles to deliver vegetables to our CSA, restaurant accounts and farmer's market. From these experiences I've come to believe that the way a country feeds itself speaks to our values, humanity and the legacy we leave for the next generation.

Building ecologically based agricultural systems that account for soil, water and social systems and promoting healthy farms and communities has become even more urgent in an era of climate change and energy uncertainty. Many of the answers to key questions relating to sustainability are found in the social structure and cultural attitudes found in society rather than pure technical solutions. To create fundamental change we must build new bridges in the farming community, find strength in the diversity of American farmers and consumers and utilize food as a platform for expanding farm policy debates.

Sustainable agriculture is not black and white, to achieve our goals we have to challenge ourselves to move beyond the ideal types of "good" and "bad" farmers and work in the grey, to welcome farmers who fall along a spectrum of production and marketing practices. We need to make the distinction between the political and economic contexts that lead to the technology treadmill, and the morality of individual farmers as stewards of the land. By understanding the real world constraints producers face, we reconcile why farmers refuse to invest in grazing system, fail to implement stream set backs, and overuse fertilizers and pesticides.

A key to building alternatives is to meet farmers where they are, in the grey area, by expanding farmer-to-farmer learning and on-farm experimentation to farmers we have overlooked. A barrier for farmers interested in adopting alternative practices has been a lack of funding to help offset the risk of transition. To overcome this hurdle, SARE could partner with local communities through leverage grant programs, where community foundations provide matching funds to implement innovative research-based practices on individual farms. We also need programs that move beyond conference power-point presentations and offer farmers a support team able to provide individualized technical, financial, and psychological support that allows farm families to develop systems appropriate for their farm scale, soil, climate, and goals.

We need to be more creative in socializing new farmers and multi-generation farms transitioning into alternative agriculture. How do we create more meaningful internship programs that meet the needs of traditional farm families looking for alternatives? One answer is to expand farmer mentoring programs to fund opportunities for younger farmers to live and work with a skilled farmer mentor to guide them through production and accounting practices. These experiences should include the whole farm family so that parents, spouses, and children feel a part of the process.

A lesson we learn from ecology is the strength of diversity in biological and social systems. When fields and communities include a diversity of crops, farm sizes and types, and our organizations embrace a wide range of voices, we become stronger, more resilient and better able to adapt to a changing world. The building blocks for a new agriculture are found among the wide range of 'New American Farmers' who represent diverse perspectives from multi-generation, first generation, female, minority, immigrant and limited resource farmers. By embracing the diversity of marketing interests among producers we can establish equitable and innovate distribution systems that create economic development through direct, wholesale, and value adding opportunities. Additionally, farmers can diversify to meet the needs of immigrant communities and ethnic groups, each with a unique food culture. Small scale independently owned ethnic grocery stores and restaurants are ideal for growers who promote their products based on proximity, quality, and freshness.

As the American farm population shrinks, explaining to our urban neighbors and elected officials why rural and agricultural issues are important becomes increasingly challenging. We could build coalitions that show common interests and develop messages that connect non-farmers to agriculture by aiming for their stomachs. One male friend said "*if you could get guys to take a cooking class on how to impress a date, you'd have a window to start discussing the food system.*" Food is part of our social foundation, and a potent mechanism for connecting producers, eaters and decision-makers. Food is a springboard for addressing: land use policy, the rural-urban interface, environmental regulation, trade agreements and alternative energy.

While the most powerful forms of change come from the bottom up, policies that promote sustainable agriculture are vital. The farm bill and immigration debates have opened a discussion about the connections between farming, health, nutrition and the environment; and have exposed the invisible faces in the food system, the underpaid who work the fields and the poor who cannot afford the more expensive products that provide farmers a living wage. Starting with food as a focal point, we push the conversation further and build a movement that creates healthy farms and prosperous communities.

In the ten years I've been a part of the sustainable agriculture movement I've learned that farmers, consumers and policy makers have much more in common than they think especially when food is the topic of discussion. Ecologically based agriculture is a grey area, but it's one where we can challenge ourselves to continuously move the sustainability bar. We move forward when we build an agriculture rooted in our shared values of family, community, health and prosperity. I look forward to watching our sustainable agriculture community become more inclusive, diverse and grow in the years to come.