

## Eye on Agriculture

### Fusion Farming: Blending old, new at Just A Few Acres Farm

By Sue Henninger  
Tompkins Weekly

LANSING – Pete Larson grew up in Lansing, on the land that he and his wife, Hilarie Larson, now farm full-time. Though he left home to attend college and become an architect, Pete always dreamed of being a “gentleman farmer” and making a living off the 45-acres that have been in his family for seven generations.

Eventually he, Hilarie, and their children, Cora (14), Grace (11), and Henry (8), moved into the old family farmhouse on Van Ostrand Road. Pete’s great-grandmother, who managed the farm for decades, has been a source of inspiration to the Larson’s.

“We model a lot of our farming practices on what she did,” Pete explained. “She was frugal and always kept a low overhead.”

With this in mind, the couple chose a fairly uncommon business approach to making Just A Few Acres the success it is today. For one, they have no debt – no mortgage, no machinery or vehicle loans, and no credit cards. They explained that, because they had savings, they were able to grow the farm with cash as well as their passion. The first year



Photo by Sue Henninger / Tompkins Weekly

The Larson family – Henry (8), Pete, Grace (11), Hilarie and Cora (14) – at their Just A Few Acres Farm in Lansing.

on the farm, they used these savings to pay for things they needed: Feed for the animals, wood to build with, insurance, and taxes.

Profits from their business were deposited in a separate “farm only” account, rather than taken as personal income. Up until now, that account has been used for all farm-related expenses. In the next stage of their

plan – years five through seven of farm ownership – the Larson’s will begin a gradual transition to self-sufficiency, where they draw more from the farm income for living expenses each year. In fact, this year they’ll be drawing their first paychecks from the farm.

With this method of financial management, the pair has needed

to find ways to minimize expenses on the farm. Startup farmers often accrue debt by purchasing modern, brand-new farming equipment.

“Newer isn’t always better!” Pete asserted. “Just because something is older doesn’t mean it’s not valuable or useful.”

He buys a lot of his equipment at auctions, uses it for a year to see how it performs, and then restores it. He’s able to fix the older machinery himself, unlike some of the newer John Deere models which often require the farmer to hire outside help, resulting in an additional expense and time lost farming. Pete readily admitted that the internet makes things easier.

“There’s so much knowledge on there in terms of fixing things,” he noted.

Both Pete and Hilarie are proud of their ability to do almost everything on the grass-based farm themselves. This can be time consuming as a diet of intensive grazing requires some animals to be moved daily, both to get fresh food and to provide a good layer of manure to fertilize the land. It can also be challenging.

“Driving a tractor is different

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## Golden

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after-school, over a 30-week period. We're also exploring the option of establishing ourselves as an intermediary. Because we have strong working relationships with teachers and families, we hope to use our position in the community to refer students and families to other resources and opportunities that already exist in Ithaca to help students succeed in and out of the classroom. Ideally, every student who needs additional academic support will have access to that support and no child will "fall through the cracks."

**TW:** What is something people do not know about your organization?

**KH:** Some people don't realize we've been around for over a decade. We were founded in 2005 by retired ICSD elementary school teacher, Marty Kaminsky, serving just four students at two schools. We have since expanded to reach over 70 students in every elementary and middle school in the district.

**TW:** How can people best support your mission?

**KH:** Sponsor a Student: Donations are used to directly sponsor students by providing our tutors a modest stipend. We always encourage community members to engage their social

circles – colleagues, church communities, neighbors – in our fundraising process by working together to sponsor a student. It's really a matter of providing scholarships. The generosity of our friends and neighbors ultimately provides scholarships for students to participate in our program and receive one-on-one tutoring and mentorship from experienced educators. The easiest way to give is at [gotutors.org/support-go](http://gotutors.org/support-go) or by sending a check in the mail. We believe this grassroots fundraising sends a strong message to students in our community – we're here for you, we support you and we want to invest in your success in the classroom and beyond.

**Spread the Word:** Another way to support our mission is by telling others about the work we do. We haven't seen this model before – pairing students with retired educators – so there's a lot of untapped potential for this kind of intergenerational program. Helping us grow community awareness is invaluable.

**Get Involved:** We also encourage people to get involved. Whether you're interested in helping organize a fundraising campaign, serving as a volunteer or intern, applying to be a tutor, or simply sharing this article with friends and family, there are plenty of ways to get involved with GO. Visit [gotutors.org/contact](http://gotutors.org/contact) to start the conversation.

## Letter

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underserved areas. Rural communities like ours particularly struggle with a lack of accessible care. The idea that other providers could absorb Planned Parenthood's patients has been resoundingly dismissed by experts. In fact, Georges Benjamin, the executive director of the American Public Health Association, has called the idea "ludicrous." More than six in 10 women who obtained care at a publicly funded center providing

contraceptive services in 2006–2010 considered Planned Parenthood their usual source of medical care. Many of our patients would not be receiving any health care at all if it wasn't for our health centers.

As a medical assistant at Planned Parenthood, I want to make it very clear: Planned Parenthood saves lives and makes our communities better. We provide high-quality, nonjudgmental care to patients who don't have access to other providers, or don't feel comfortable

going anywhere else. We are the chosen provider of our patients and we provide fearless advocacy and education to our communities, and politics should not stand in the way of that.

Our leaders in Congress have the responsibility to keep Americans safe and healthy. Without a doubt, cutting access for Planned Parenthood patients on Medicaid will put people's lives at stake. Our elected leaders must reject this dangerous bill that would cut millions of patients

off from their trusted, irreplaceable health care provider and life-saving care. I choose to work at Planned Parenthood because I want to fight for the people in my community, and I ask that our representatives in Congress choose to fight for them as well.

**Emma Miller**  
Medical Associate,  
Planned Parenthood of the  
Southern Finger Lakes  
Ithaca

## Farming

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than driving a car!" Hilarie, a nurse in her previous life, observed.

Acquiring new skills has allowed them to divide up responsibilities, especially during the summer when they often work dawn to dusk each day. The Larson's have no employees but Pete's dad, who lives next door, lends a hand when needed.

The advantages of farming far outweigh any financial sacrifices

they've had to make. Pete doesn't even mind working seven days a week.

"I love going out the back door to work!" he noted. "And going to markets and handing people a high-quality product I've raised."

The farm is home to Dexter cows (heritage Irish beef), turkeys, pigs, and chickens (for meat and eggs) which are sold at several local farmer's markets as well as through the Larson's CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). Loyal

customers can make or break a business, and Pete said they are fortunate to have many repeat buyers.

The Larson's agree that one of the biggest changes in agriculture has been in the government regulations for farmers who sell meat. They have found internet resources, particularly Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County's website useful in navigating these. Their red meats are processed at the Owasco Meat Company in Moravia and their poultry is butchered on the farm. When their processing room needed to be inspected to get liability insurance for this, Pete noted that they must have made a good impression because the inspector bought two chickens before he left.

The couple observed that there seem to be two types of farmers in the Tompkins County area, the newer, progressive culture of the farmer's markets and CSAs, and the long-established farmers who farm in more time-honored ways, often on a larger scale. The Larson's find themselves somewhere between.

"I can talk to both crowds and see both points of view," Pete said.

Though his family has farmed in Lansing for more than 100 years, he and Hilarie tend to be flexible

and open-minded in their farming practices, making choices they believe will provide the best cost-benefit ratio for the family and Just a Few Acres.

Pete is a member of the Tompkins CCE's Agricultural Advisory Committee. This is important to him, he said, because agriculture is at a crossroads, particularly in the Lansing area. He sees the south end of the town expanding and developing while the north end, where the Larson's farm is located, continues to support farm families who have been there for years. He's also on the Town of Lansing's Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan Committee, which has been working on a comprehensive plan to define the future of farming in the town. They're in the process of creating a new zoning map that contains an "agriculture" classification to protect its agricultural heritage.

Though time is a scarce commodity on Just a Few Acres, Pete is strongly committed to land stewardship.

"We see development creeping up our road. I care about preserving farmland," he emphasized. "Small family farms are still viable today. They're not a thing of the past."

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