

My Part-Time Life: A horse farm & a farmers market

Last year, I left my full-time job and stitched together a series of five part-time gigs that keep me mentally and physically stimulated, and far, far away from Microsoft Teams. One of my jobs is taking care of horses for McSoley Equestrian on Morning Star Farm and another is managing the Pawtuxet Village Farmers Market. When *Motif* needed a piece on RI farms and farmers markets, I knew just where to turn.

These interviews have been edited for length and clarity.

Cara McSoley

Owner McSoley Equestrian & Manager/Head Trainer of Morning Star Farm

When did you start riding?

When I was five I started playing violin but I also really wanted to ride, so my parents said, "If you practice your violin for 100 days in a row, then we'll get you a riding lesson." 100 days is a long time for a five-year-old and at one point I got really sick and had to stay in bed and was like, "Bring me my violin!" So I think by the time I started riding I was cussing six.

That's dedication.

It's perseverance. Everything we do is driven by passion. You have to love it.

You have a degree in communications, why'd you make the switch to horse lady?

After college, my goal was to take the burden of my horse off my parents. I got a job and found a farm to rough board, and one day a woman who worked at a different facility saw me riding and asked me to check out her horse. I ended up moving my horse and working there part-time, while also working this e-commerce job.

I was offered a promotion at the e-commerce job and the director's position at the equestrian center. I went back and forth: *Do I want to have enough money to fuel this habit? Or, do I want to make this passion my career?*

On the morning I decided to give notice to the equestrian center, I got a call and learned my horse had a terrible accident. He kicked his legs through the bars in his stall and pulled the whole iron-frame down. He lost a ton of blood. It was going to be a long rehabilitation and in my mind I was like *I was going to quit this*. I knew I couldn't put my horse's care into someone else's hands. I hold my horse care to such a high standard and I knew then that was something I could offer others.

I'm glad you chose horse lady.

Well, it was e-commerce for Medicare. I had people calling me like, "I can't install this bed rail!" And I was like, "I'm 22!"

I've learned so many lessons on the farm that apply to the everyday. What are some of your favorite lessons?

One of my favorite concepts when it comes to horses is passive leadership. When we observe horse dynamics, we see bossy mares pinning their ears and chasing horses away from the hay pile. And we also see the quiet, confident, relaxed, stoicism of a horse that allows others to eat from the same pile. One thing I tell my students is: Be someone that someone else wants to follow. Don't be a leader because you *can* chase someone away. Be someone who helps people grow and thrive.

How do you get up after taking a fall that — even if it's not physically traumatizing — is mentally jarring?

When you get back on with no mounting block and a busted ego, you have to replace your nerves with positive experiences. It's so mental. You have to stay calm, even when you haven't taken a fall, but you're going through a lot.

Let's talk about the pandemic. People want to be with the horses and have that alternate reality at the farm where life is how it should be, but there's a lot going on. People are sick, people's family members are sick, and that weighs on you. Mental and emotional neutrality is super important.

What would you say to someone who's interested in riding but may feel intimidated?

If you truly want to ride, you're going to spend more time on the ground than in the saddle. A big element of horsemanship is understanding you're not going to be galloping through fields all the time, there's a lot more depth to it.

Another of my sayings is: Replace nerves with knowledge. If you're intimidated, remember: Horses are prey and you're predator. There are ways we can communicate with them and build understanding, and that knowledge will take the nerves out. Horses are captivating. They really are awesome creatures.

McSoley Equestrian/Morning Star Farm offers riding lessons for all levels and summer horsemanship camps for ages 6-13. Summer camps run Jun 27-Jul 1, Jul 11-15, Jul 25-29, and Aug 8-12. Pony rides for the whole family will take place on Jun 11, Jul 16, and Aug 20. For more information, email cara.mcsoley@gmail.com.

Grace Feisthamel

Food Access Operations Manager at Farm Fresh RI

How many farms are in RI?

There are a surprising number. I wish I had a number for you, but it's a really hard number to track. RI has some of the most extensive farmland in the country. There are farmers who've been farming for generations and there's a strong, growing group of younger farmers. And by younger I don't necessarily mean age, but people new to farming and farming very intentionally for food justice.

What's meant by food justice?

I think of food justice as people's access to food, which is a consistent access to food as well as access to culturally appropriate food that people want to eat. Eating is a basic part of being human, and people

should always have access to what they want to eat in a way that's consistent and reliable. Increasing ways to access food and creating connections with people who grow food is an important part of that.

What type of foods are available at Farm Fresh farmers markets?

The seasonality of the local food that's offered follows the natural rhythm of what grows in RI. In the summer, there's a lot more produce. In the winter there's not a lot of produce, but we'll still have farmers, as well as value-added products.

We sell everything from mushrooms to meat to fish to cheese, prepared foods, donuts, pastries, sometimes there's someone who sets up a table and makes balloon animals. There's a wide-range. We always try to curate what makes sense for the farmers and vendors so they feel supported, and our customers feel a sense of ownership and belonging to their local market.

Can you explain the market coins?

We run a token system called Fresh Bucks. There are three main types of tokens. One is related to credit and debit purchases. When farmers don't have the technology to accept cards, our system allows customers to swipe their card with us, receive tokens and spend the tokens with the farmers.

The two other tokens are related to food stamps. We provide a dollar-to-dollar match for every food stamp dollar spent at our markets. Bonus tokens can be used on fresh fruits, vegetables and herbs. It helps increase access to local food and creates new access to different customer groups for farmers. It's a win-win.

Is there an ebb and flow to food assistance programs depending on the administration?

The SNAP program I believe is written into the Farm Bill, so I don't think it's going anywhere. But the amount of money per household income is slightly political.

Through the CARES Act, Rhode Islanders who were already enrolled in SNAP received an increase in funding and a lot of new folks were enrolled for the first time. So that is slightly tied to the current administration. With the CARES Act, Rhode Islanders saw an increase in access to more SNAP money on their cards and we experienced that at markets, too.

Last summer we had a 99% increase in EBT sales, when compared to the previous summer. Across the state there was an increase of about 55% of EBT money spent on people's cards. The number of transactions was up 72%. And redemption numbers, which is when the customer spends tokens with the vendors and vendors return the tokens to Farm Fresh for reimbursement, those numbers were up 75%.

It was a summer of massive growth and really exciting to see people who were new to farmers markets or people who'd been shopping for years and started coming more regularly or spending more.

Congratulations, that sounds like a lot of work.

Thank you. It's been difficult on the back end to track and prepare. We actually ran out of tokens and had to order more. All good problems, all good things. But a lot to wrangle our minds around.

We also recognize there are people who aren't on SNAP but have limited access to local food. So, we partner with organizations to offer paper vouchers, which is another incentive that can be spent at

markets. It's another growing piece of farmers markets and an exciting part of increasing access to local food for people who may otherwise have limited access.

Can you describe your perfect market day?

I enjoy coming to a market and listening to live music, and scheduled events, like bike day. Themed events are fun, they encourage people to come and stay a while. At some markets we have spots for community groups, like libraries or organizations who want to share information about the work they do. That's another really important piece of farmers markets, it helps create ownership and identity for the different communities where markets are held.