

From Activism to Agriculture

By Judith Monachina, Special to the Berkshire Eagle

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Elizabeth Keen is not shy about taking risks. From Guatemala to Egremont, she has pursued unconventional occupations, and each step, she said, represented a door opened, and a walk through. Keen now runs Indian Line Farm, one of the country's first community-supported agriculture farms, or CSAs. Although it generates an income for her family, it wasn't automatic, and it wasn't always easy. "We made all sorts of mistakes," she said, about a decade after she and her husband, Alex Thorp, decided to dig into the rich soil, called hero silt loam, below Mount Washington. "We didn't have a real business plan."

In the 1980's, when the idea of community-supported agriculture was incubating in Egremont, Keen was still in high school in Texas. Farming wasn't even on her mind. Latin American history and politics was her major at Colorado College in Colorado Springs. With the help of a visiting professor, she found an internship at Amnesty International in Washington, D.C., and worked there for one year. At Amnesty, she learned about Witness for Peace, an organization formed in response to U.S. policies in Central America.

One of its projects was to help repatriate refugees who had fled violence in Guatemala for Mexico, and wanted to return home. "I filled out the application, and two months later I was on the plane," she said. Keen worked from 1992 to 1996 in Chiapas, Mexico, and northern Guatemala. She organized and escorted caravans of buses that moved Guatemalans back to their villages. It was there, leading delegations of escorts, and working with subsistence farmers, that she got her first inkling that she wanted to learn about farming. "I wanted to work on a farm," she said. "I wanted to understand issues, but I wanted to get my hands dirty. I knew I could never put myself in their shoes in terms of their socioeconomics, or their heritage." Still, she didn't know she would make farming an occupation. "I thought I would have to come to the U.S. to work at a think tank," she said.

Took a bike tour

In 1996, Keen came to New England on a bike tour to raise funds for another Latin American organization. She visited Tyringham resident Sarah Hudson, whom she had met in Guatemala on a repatriation mission. While Hudson was showing her around the Berkshires, Keen mentioned her interest in farming, and remembers that Hudson immediately drove her to Mahaiwe Harvest in Great Barrington, an offspring of Indian Line Farm. Keen became an apprentice to grower David Inglis, and there, in 1995, she met another apprentice, Alex Thorp, who later become her husband.

After the apprenticeship, Keen went to work for Robyn Van En at Indian Line Farm. Van En was organizing what would be the first national CSA conference, but never got to see it through. She died in 1997. "We were encouraged by friends and Robyn's sister and brother-in-law to look at this," said Keen of community supported farming at Indian Line. "We knew very little, but who knows when this kind of opportunity will come along."

"This door opened and we walked in, and that door opened and we walked in."

One door was an unusual way to buy the farm. Van En's son, David, sold the land unencumbered to the Community Land Trust in the Southern Berkshires, which sold a conservation restriction to the Nature Conservancy and the buildings to Keen and Thorp. They agreed to a 99- year renewable lease on the land, subject to minimum use and certain organic standards.

The arrangement has since been copied by other CSAs. The farm, though started as a CSA in the 1980's, had not been in cultivation when Keen and Thorp moved in.

With help from another farmer, who plowed as Keen and Thorp used a walk-behind rototiller, they cleaned up the land and the buildings. Their community farm started with 14 members in 1998, then 30 members the second year. Members buy shares in the farm, paying an annual rate, \$200 the first year, now \$550 in 2008. In buying shares of the farm, rather than purchasing the food as commodities, members share the farmer's risk. That shared risk is the essence of the CSA.

Started in early 1980s

The acres at Indian Line Farm are considered hallowed ground by some in the CSA world. When a small group of Berkshire residents met in Van En's kitchen in the early 1980's, and hired the first grower, they helped to give birth to the CSA movement. Van En had been inspired by projects in Switzerland, and similar arrangements, though not connected, were taking place in Japan.

Now, Keen says, CSAs include every kind of configuration. At Temple Wilton Farm in New Hampshire, for example, the other oldest CSA, which started in the same year, all members are called "farmers," whether they actually do farm work or not.

CSA numbers grew steadily while Van En, who stopped farming, herself, to go on the road and talk about CSAs, was living at Indian Line. And since Keen and Thorp first pushed that rototiller, the CSA census has continued to grow across the country.

According to one expert, somewhere between 1,500 and 1,700 such farms operate in the U.S.

"When I started five years ago, there were no (CSA) farms listed in Texas; now we have 31 listed in Texas," said Nichole Nazelrod, program director at the Robyn Van En Center at Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pa. Many are in New England, New York State, the

upper Midwest and California, Nazelrod said. Now Keen and Thorp work the farm, primarily as a CSA, but also sell some vegetables at a farmers' market, and supply three local restaurants.

Thorp, a civil engineer, bought Accord Engineering & Surveying. He works two days at the farm and the others at his firm. Keen works mornings in the fields, and manages the farm's business during afternoons. They have two young children.

Indian Line has 140 member families, and last year they had a 40- person waiting list. There are two full time summer employees; one lives on site all year.

Learning from chefs

As all farmers do, Keen said she learns a lot every year, some of it from the chefs she sells to, and she has even grown a few things at their suggestion.

Ground or husk cherries, recommended by Stagecoach Tavern chef Sarah Dibben, "are so sweet," Keen said, "not like a cherry tomato, something like a pineapple, fascinating and unique." The white currant tomato is more subtle than the "mouth bursting cherry tomato, and not too acidic."

Indian Line grows more than 20 varieties of tomato, the harvest of which has suffered because of rain. "All along this year we've been saying 'it's fine' - until last week," Keen said. "We are so behind on harvesting our tomatoes. Same thing with peppers." Eggplant is her favorite vegetable to grow. "It's amazing to see something purple coming from the ground." The hero silt loam, Keen said, is considered prime farmland by the USDA. The soil is relatively sweet, with a high pH.

On a typical Monday, the deep vegetable bins stand empty in the distribution room in an old dairy barn. Members pick up their harvests on Tuesdays and Fridays. Hundreds of just-picked tomatoes fill shallow stacked crates. Names of vegetables from Friday's harvest, scribbled on a big white board, will soon be erased and replaced with Tuesday's list—everything from fennel to cherry tomatoes. The tomatoes seem mostly ripe, but not all, Keen's son, Colin, almost 5 years old, points out, however, that they will ripen off the vine.