

SKYWOMAN STORIES

Catskills Agrarian Alliance

September 27, 2022

Resources

- Catskills Agrarian Alliance website: <https://www.catskillsagrarianalliance.org/>
- Forage: Payment processor for EBT: <https://www.joinforage.com/>

Catskills Agrarian Alliance comprises of...

- [Star Route Farm](#) - an agroecological mutual aid farm
- [The 607 CSA](#) - a 600 person CSA (retail), wholesale distribution, trucking
 - Network of 40 farm/food businesses across 40 plus locations with three logistics companies involved
 - Sliding scale for CSA
 - Previously it was one cost for weekly or every biweekly. This year they piloted a 3-tier system this year and got some mixed results.
- A collective of mutual aid organizations - of and supporting their communities
- A land access project (and investigation) - with AFT and AT, land-linking
- Farm to Institution work - grants, bids, NY Thursdays
- An incubation experiment - how do we make farming a viable project for the next generation? How do we run production farms and still have the capacity to care for others and ourselves?
- A board of directors, farm advisory board and mutual aid advisory board - even in the past when they were just an LLC they were always guided by the participants and the farmers involved in decision making so they're trying to formalize that governance structure - **all very new, only just had first board meeting last month**

Values

- Living Wages
- Reciprocal Ownership - CAA does not own their land
- Inclusion & Empowerment - ensure farms are growing and distributing culturally relevant food; create opportunities to get involved as decision-makers, farmers, advocates, value-chain facilitators, and technical assistance consultants; self-identifying members of the above communities are leaders within CAA

History

- 607 came into being to support the idea of Star Route - local farm gang to rough up Cisco trucks
- Walter & Tianna cared about soil health & nutritious food - worked 50% restaurants & 50% CSA, Tianna always had interest in farmland access/preservation
- Amanda entered the scene when COVID hit and they scaled tremendously, started mutual aid work, and partnered w/ Nuetra Mesa & other mutual aid groups

- They received funding to support a growing admin team (CSA was killing Tianna) so now they have a team but the funding was shorter lived than expected - they scaled to an irresponsible level and now need to
- Big land project started up, they all agreed they wanted to keep it going so they're transitioning to c3 to support the work and reshape the narrative

Impact to Date

- Working w/ 40 small scale farms, feed 700 households each week through the CSA in Catskills region & NYC
- Deep connectoin & community building w/ 22 mutual aid organizations, each serving hundred of families weekly w/ mission towards food justice & sovereignty
- 4 ton sof produce, dairy, eggs, meat, baked goods, grain, legumes, & value-added goods distributed via CSA weekly - impacting communities historically lacking acces to nutritious food
- Collaboration w/ 27 k-12 schools in the area to distirbuted 30,000 lbs. Of local food during the 2022-2023 school year
- Partnerships w/ SCMO & BT BOCES school districts, local food from 607 CSA partner farms will be available to 42,000 students
- Partnering w/ Business & Hospitality Mgmt @ SUNY Delhi NY to develop local tomato sauce w/ produce from the Amish community to replace all non-local tomato sauce in 12 school districts in 2023
- Connection & capacity building services to further land access opportunities for queer, trans, black, indigenous,, people of color faving systematic barriers to access ag land

CAA Team & Project Ownership

- Amanda: farm partner with Tianna. In 2020 worked to transition the farm to a mutual aid model. Inspired to reprioritize who they are as farmers. Felt impossible to keep pretending that they weren't embedded in white supremacy. Trying to connect, support and feed communities of color.
- Ira: connected to the CSA through Star Route where he was the coordinator of group in Bushwick receiving farm products at the time. The value he saw was in the cultural relevance, nutrition & good taste of the products. Star Route asked what would be most helpful that they can grow for the community in the upcoming year. Ira was able to connect a Williamsburg collective & other organizations to the CSA to source farm products. Developed community events w/ revenue going back to support mutual aid groups. Ira is working to tap into existing systems of solidarity to share what the farm is working on & build partnerships.
- **Farm Stand Project** (Ira) - the project was developed not with the intent of offering immediate food relief options, but to share with community members who don't have access to farm products. He's able to speak to where the products come from, who's growing them, and the significance of these products vs what large agribusiness offer or other local food businesses ("nutritionally baring garbage"). Hosting weekly community fairs w/ local vendors (Mexican & Bangladeshi communities).
- Hannah is working on **Farm to Institution** projects (see more below)

Challenges/Lessons Learned

- SNAP benefits have exposed many roadblocks for an organization of their size without a centralized location to accept SNAP.
- Challenge in asking local farmers to scale up their product supply dependent on the CAA CSA because it's difficult to make promises & establish long term contracts when everything is so up in the air. Difficult to navigate what is responsible for the community & partners.
- Grant funding is delayed and even though your grant application gets accepted it can be month or years before you receive the money and sometimes not until after the project is completed.
- Hard to find support for operations because paying people isn't sexy
- Decision-making, agency, autonomy, flow of communication all still in the works
- Don't turn anybody away & unusually accommodating for a CSA which is wonderful to provide full customization but fosters the craziness in communication. Work to be done on setting boundaries!
- After a challenging couple of years, a lot of burnout, the team is all still working together, they still like each other, and the organization still exists. That's something to celebrate, right?
- After receiving funding, CAA scaled in proportion to this funding so despite the financial support they are still overextended and exhausted.
- How has management operated with so many people and different ventures? You mentioned equal pay across the board, and seem like a strong team, curious how you got there?
 - Decision making & autonomy are challenging. Responsibility w/out agency is a problem. Burnout is real when the funding is there, but when anyone is running on fumes it's really stressful to be poor. Member on pack & drive team had an outburst of rage that alienated the entire team & quit speaks to the long-term effects of burnout & over commitment.
 - Software company didn't meet their expectations & developed a really complex system.. Leading to problems the CSA team couldn't solve in real time, creating a feeling of powerlessness that is a real hit to team morale.
 - Creating a safe space for the team to collectively discuss where the team needs to go and how to get there is the best way through.

Fundraising

- CAA was launched on a piece of property that was granted to the team from their neighbor. The core team had no money and frankly, exploited labor by underpaying employees well below livable wages. This meant everyone was running on fumes even as they continued to scale the operation - and more growth meant more expenses. During COVID the team leaned on their compelling story, of providing community services by feeding people and aggregating farms, to make a pitch to wealthy local investors and were able to access \$500k

- Catskills Agrarian Alliance is also their mutual aid program by selling merch, hosting dinner parties and accepting donations through go fund me. Half of the investor funding was used to pay living wages to the team and the other half was used to purchase food that was then distributed to members of the community (\$250k).
- At the beginning they were building mutually agreed upon budgets with each mutual aid organization so they could use the funds to buy whatever they wanted wholesale from the CSA farms. Now that CAA is running out of money a lot of those groups are raising money and have substantial fundraising so now they're helping CAA out by buying the food so it's really mutual aid because everyone gives what they can when they can and then it all comes around eventually.
- The hard truth is that CAA hit a really tough place where they needed to find financial support ASAP or they would have to throw in the towel because nobody had savings to lean on for security.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

- Could you do a timeline of what the cooperative looked like year by year; e.g. how many farms/businesses were involved in the first year, the second year... the eighth year, etc., and how did you go about onboarding them (did they reach out to you, did you go out to them, both)?
 - (go back to the recording and add notes from their answer)
 - First year, 10 farms and grew 30-50% each year since 2015. In the first year their gross income was about \$50,000 and has grown each year, last year it was about \$1M.
 - It netted out around 17 farms because that's where they were comfortable but over COVID it really blew up to around 40 farms and 800 members. They've since scaled back a bit and leveled at 330 shares a week (some biweekly shares) so about 700 members total for the past 3 years, comfortable capacity for trucks, storage etc. Trying to do a better job at that scale for now, maybe eventually they'll do a brick and mortar for multiple days.
- Do you run into food safety hassles with any official people with your aggregation and stuff? With funding the CAA team is hoping to streamline their systems. Rather than expanding into new projects, they desire to scale back and do a better job packing, transporting and marketing the food they sell now.
- How did you guys start the process of getting such a range of farmers collaborating? Did you have challenges to build trust among the group?
 - Farmers approach the CSA themselves w/ products they need a market for. CAA is still developing a formalized vetting process for trust & compliance w/ food safety but it's mostly through relationships w/ local farmers who reach out.
 - Locations, logistics etc. are all relationship based. Transitioning from everything being a Tianna project to it being a food system project where it can operate on its own as a well-oiled machine.
 - Currently, a benefactor in NYC is allowing the CSA to use their space which is another example of a food hub space they could never afford if not for the

relationship - this makes it not replicable nor scalable if it not for the personal relationships that exist. The hope is to build a food system project that other regional folks can model.

- Are there systems to share equipment/resources across farm businesses?
 - Not through the CAA organization. The National Young Farmers chapter may be an avenue for sharing resources but for now it's a place for social events for farmers to talk shop and through events and collaborations, it is becoming more of a community overtime. Unofficially very collaborative.
- Granular question about the 607 CSA and Fellow Farmer Site: do you only offer veggie/fruit/microgreen shares? Is there a quick answer to why you don't offer add-on/case lot veggies/fruit weekly?
 - The offerings are up to the farmers and whatever makes sense for them. They offer a lot of different shares and folks can get items by signing up for shares or ordering one time.
 - Completely different view for wholesale customer for a restaurant/institution
 - Usually everyone buys veggie shares and then adds something a la carte
- With inflection point (covid). Where were things in January in 2019. How many farms? How much revenue? When covid surge hit (drowning in demand), what were the details of how you handled that? How did you onboard enough farms to reach demand? Did farms reach out to the alliance?
 - Started w/ 20 farms & 3-400 members which felt manageable at the time. Amanda stepped in & became Walter's farm partner & Tianna was glued to logistics (computer work). Farms reached out to CSA themselves bc they lost their markets amidst COVID. Used Local Line in Spring for weekly ordering (locally delivery only - need 10 pallets to justify cost of box truck transportation), boxed it individually (no communal coolers), got fleet of drivers willing to drive, which wound up being a lucrative food business on top of their normal 607 CSA customers.
 - BUT, when reality hit and the 2 models had to be merged in June it became a real mess. Amy jumped on w/ Executive Director non-profit experience and they needed support in data management (Benedict).
 - How'd they do it? A Strong team. Using the funding really well. It was relatively seamless thanks to the personalities involved. Today the team is getting push back from funders on scaling irresponsibly but this isn't new work, they can get it done, they just need to honor labor & step away from humility & demand money to respect the work they're doing and each other.

Institutional Partnerships

- Hannah: **Farm to Institution work:** Building connections between farms in the CSA and local institutions. She started w/ K-12 & some colleges. Motive: market piece but many schools are already connecting procurement to food literacy & gardening - what it means to be part of a food system & planting their own food. There is a statewide policy in place incentivizing the purchase of NY-grown food which create more talk & motivation around building procurement pieces in schools at the least.

- 3 buckets of work:
 - **Distributing food** - working w/ organization that accept slightly higher bids which allows them farmers to sell their product @ the price they need to set.
 - Overwhelming process w/ large amounts of paperwork.
 - Due diligence around publicly posting the questions asked so everyone has access to the answers. Weren't awarded *all* products but happy to start small the first year. Delivering a few items/month.
 - Replaced all oats w/ local oats. Sourcing romaine lettuce, potatoes, squash, onions, carrots - value added: honey, maple syrup, tomato sauce
 - **Establishing CSA pick up sites @ schools & colleges** - allows family, staff & faculties to pick up CSA shares in an accessible way. Samples of this happening in Springfield, Massachusetts
 - **Special projects** - received grant to partner w/ 11 school districts, non profit & local culinary school - over 24 months the schools will be purchasing 11,000 lbs of tomatoes and 7-8,000 lbs produce will be funneled into culinary schools for independent studies to develop a local tomato sauce recipe that meets school requirements. Culinary school is processing the tomatoes, storing them in cold storage, & the CSA picks up the final products & distributes the sauce each month.
 - Exposure for students on what it could look like to be part of a local food system
 - Allows CSA to understand the *true* cost of what it means to produce a value-added product locally to develop long-term ideas for what processing could look like in the future
 - Future ideas for growing into hospitals & jail/prison
 - Schools aren't always able to meet the minimum requirements for local food hubs so the sliding scale works for smaller sized schools & local organization
 - Tianna decides which farm's items goes towards which product need based on the farms scale and ability to meet demand etc.
- How did you approach your first school district? CAA started by approaching a school district that had a dedicated **farm to school (FTS) coordinator** who Tianna worked with in the past - she started by asking if they would be interested in being a CSA site and that grew into a wholesale conversation. Because that school is part of a group of 11 school districts who work with one FTS coordinator and purchase as a group, CAA could easily connect to the other locations. Finding the champions in each school has been key.
- CAA determines which items to provide to institutions by reading through their upcoming lunch menus and assessing if there are any items that can be sourced locally through the CAA wholesale network. If there is not a specific match for a food product, CAA also provides recommendations on alternative products based on what is seasonally appropriate for their region.

- The tomato sauce project is funded by a NY State [Farm to School](#) Grant. The team is exploring [USDA Local Agriculture Market Program \(LAMP\)](#) grants as options for next phases as well.
- Longer term processing/value added production ideas that could come from the sauce project: Using culinary schools to support long-term processing for K-12. CAA team was immediately humbled by the process of this initial project. In the future they'd love to look into transitioning abandoned jails into processing facilities.
- Across the 40 farms you source from, is there an internal bid process when opportunities such as the 11,000 pounds of tomatoes come around?
 - 3 farms working with CSA and a bunch of smaller farms and they're all working at their capacity. With larger projects the CAA is relying on the Amish community because there are not many veggie farms where they are. CAA is working with everyone that they can and Tianna personally decides which farms are relevant to which projects based on their scale.
 - Year one is about getting their feet on ground and understanding the process.
 - Next phase of work thinking about how to pull in other farmers or multiple farmers to meet a school's bid.
 - Difficult to ask farmers to scale based on projects where the world is promised but then things don't follow through. They are in a precarious situation. So they want to continue doing work but it's scary and hard to figure out how they can be responsible to the community.
- Q - Jacob: Have you come across any challenges with the bid system connected to institutions? What crops have you had success with distributing to the schools? I've met with the Syracuse School Public District Procurement Manager about having our farm distribute the produce but we're still not a scale large enough to hit the quantity they desire.
 - Found that they are an appropriate scale for their community and they're able to meet quantity demands by working with a network of food hubs.

Farm Training Project

- Q: I think you mentioned a farm training program. I'm wondering about that aspect if its completely stand alone or within a farm business or specific farm? Or if you can talk more about that?
 - Being more thoughtful about multi-year land access projects - folks from this project are self incubating on the farm so they can develop a project that they can develop and transfer to a stand alone farm project.
 - Realization: overly ambitious to do a futile land access project in addition to production farm & the groups full-time jobs. Never fleshed out incubation plan nor template for next year but all main lessons learned are around **separating the incubation from the production so neither suffer as a result.**
 - Upset & disappointment from the team on how the collaboration didn't work out bc Star Route provided the space, work, & training but the partner didn't meet their end of the relationship. This left the CAA team really discouraged to farm with anyone in the future.

- CAA's goal is to continue building community together and understand that not everyone needs to be a production partner, they can still hold other valuable roles in the community of food systems.
- Lesson learned: need a more thorough hiring process to vet growers.

Non-Farming Skills

What non-farming skills does your org need to better sustain or even push your work to the next level?

- Giving a voice and seat on the board to folks working on the ground w/ the local food organizations is critical to the scalability of a project. People who are on the receiving end are able to access the food through autonomous food relief organizations but they don't have a transparent understanding of all of the players and efforts that go into making that food accessible, how it's produced by whom, etc.. Nor do they have a voice to express their needs directly to the farms or suppliers.
- Designers to support w/ social media & marketing.
- More financial management experts on the board.
- Skills for building pitch decks & writing grant proposals to receive funding.
- Translators
- Therapist