

## Multiple Approaches to Mentorship

Learning how to build support networks can boost the chances of farm success

When beginning farmers start farming, they often seek mentors to support them as they navigate their early farming years. Many applicants to the Savings Incentive Program cite the mentor match aspect of the program, as well as the other connections they make in SIP, as their main motivation for participating.

Having mentors and peers to call on who can help frame problems or barriers a beginning farmer has hit can be invaluable. When working with Savings Incentive Program participants, we teach them that there's no single person who can help with all their challenges, and that they need to instead build a network to support different facets of their farming journey. For example, one farmer might offer helpful advice about purchasing a piece of equipment, such as what questions to ask or where to search for it, while another farmer might be a go-to person for crop production advice.

Mark Westbrook, a graduate of the 2019 Savings Incentive Program class and owner of Solstice Farm near Waverly, Iowa, has found many ways to build his network of peers and mentors. He and his wife, Theresa, decided to take their years of hobby farming to the next level and purchased an acreage on which to establish perennial fruits and diversified livestock. When they moved to Waverly from New Mexico, they didn't know many farmers in the area. Seeking community and farming experience, Mark found Jóaia Food Farm located not too far away.

He reached out to owners Wendy Johnson and Johnny Rafkin about connecting with them to learn more about farming. "I was attracted to their vision for farming and the methods they used," Mark says. "It so happened that they had just posted for a farm helper." Mark was hired to work two days a week on the farm, learning the vocation at the same time. Reaching out to Wendy and Johnny – and then working for them – helped Mark build a community connection that he can still access today when he stumbles into a sticky situation.

Caite and Jim Palmer of Castalia, Iowa, graduated with the SIP Class of 2017. Being the fourth generation to farm on Jim's family farm, they have a strong connection to

other local farmers and the community. Caite has found that having this local network is helpful, but says sometimes you need more.

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– MARK WESTBROCK

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“I find a strong mentor for me is someone who gives me personal strength to deal with the family and mental health issues that come with farming,” Caite says, noting that farming with children can be rewarding, but can also be challenging and mentally draining. “I need someone who can help me work through how to help my daughter through losing a lamb she so deeply loved,” Caite says. These are nuances and



dimensions of farming that aren't easily found online. Having someone to talk with during such stressful situations, and who can offer emotional support, is another important facet of mentorship.

### Finding Connections at Farmers Markets

Building that network, however, can be a challenging process, and there's no single right or best approach. When Mark was getting started farming, he followed the path many direct-market beginning farmers do: He signed up for a couple of farmers market booths. This gave him the opportunity to have customers find him.

But an unexpected benefit was building relationships with other farmers. “When you are all together each week, all season long, you start to chat and connect with one another,” Mark says. He has found having a market presence to be one of the easiest ways to meet other farmers. And he adds that from these connections grew some collaborations that may have not happened otherwise. For instance, Mark explains how fellow market vendor Eric Jensen, also a beginning farmer, was increasing his off-season production in his high tunnel but needed ways to get the produce to customers. Mark agreed to promote the produce Eric had available each week to his egg customers. The collaboration was a win-win for both beginning farmers and their customers.

In addition to the farmers market, Mark has found success in meeting peers and mentors through local field days and conferences. “When at PFI events, I know I am going to meet others who have the same goals and ideals as me, which makes it easier to meet people who I can connect with,” Mark says.

### Building Networks Through Formal Programs

Caite, meanwhile, has met a number of mentors through more formalized programs, like the Women, Food and Agriculture Network's mentoring program and PFI's Savings Incentive Program. Each program has paired Caite with a mentor based on

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some criteria she was seeking. Currently, Caite is mentoring with Carrie Chestnut Mess, a dairy farmer in southeastern Wisconsin, through WFAN’s “Harvesting Our Potential” mentoring program. When accepted into this program, Caite says she had an idea of who she wanted as a mentor, being a reader of Carrie’s “Dairy Carrie” blog. This program lets participants decide whether to choose their own mentor or have WFAN make a match.

Being familiar with Carrie’s background, however, didn’t make the prospect of asking Carrie to be her mentor any easier. “It’s intimidating to ask someone to be your mentor,” Caite says. “Why would someone want to take time out of their day to help me figure out my problems?” Despite the anxiety, Caite knew the worst that could happen was for Carrie to say no. So she summoned her courage – and Carrie accepted the invitation.

The two women took time in their first meetings to set expectations and goals for the mentorship. “This has been key to feeling like it’s of value to us both,” Caite says. They both agree on how they will communicate, how often and what they want to accomplish. Caite and Carrie spent the first month honing in on what Caite wanted to gain from mentorship.

This process led to the idea of Caite starting a Facebook group where other farmers with families could share tips, or just support one another in their challenges. Thus, the Barnyard Language group was born. This has been a place for other farmers to share how they struggle with feeding their family between chores, deal with depression and so much more. (If this group sounds like a place for you, check it out on Facebook.)

For Mark, the Savings Incentive Program connected him to Peter Kerns and Natasha Hegmann of Turkey River Farm in Elkport, Iowa. Collectively, the trio approached the mentorship very casually, which worked well with their personalities and intentions. “It has been a great experience getting to know Pete and Natasha,” Mark says. “They have a similar worldview to us and their scale is not so much bigger than ours. This means we have many practices we can discuss that are relevant.”



**(Opposite):** Theresa and Mark Westbrook, pictured with their daughter, farm at Solstice Farm near Waverly, Iowa. **(Above):** Left to right: Jim, Charlotte, Caite and Henry Palmer farm near Castalia, Iowa.

Even though the mentorship through SIP is complete, these farmers still keep in touch and support each other – an example of how mentorships sometimes lead to lifelong friendships.

### **Adapting SIP to Reflect Changing Mentorship Needs**

When beginning farmers are getting started farming, they need support with particular skills and problems that will change as their farm and knowledge base grows. Because of this, what they need from their support network will change over time as well.

When PFI revised the mentorship aspect of the Saving Incentive Program in 2019, we took what we have learned from farmers about building their network and adapted the program to fit. Now, instead of focusing on matching each participant or farming couple with a single mentor, we want to help them build a strong support network with a variety of mentors and peers.

That same year (2019), we started having all SIP class members in their first year of the program attend a variety of mentor farm visits as a group. Participants tour a mentor’s farm and ask targeted questions along the way. They are able to learn from other’s questions and network with fellow classmates at these visits. We felt that having a more intimate visit with fewer people can help these beginning farmers build relationships with the mentor, and each other, while learning from other beginning farmers’

questions. Then, in year two of SIP, class members are paired one-on-one with a mentor.

As with Caite and Carrie in their mentorship, it’s ideal to have a goal for what you want from the relationship. Now in the Savings Incentive Program, we ask beginning farmers to identify a specific problem or challenge they are looking to overcome. PFI staff then work to pair them with mentors who can help work through that problem. In the end, a relationship may develop and continue, or a solution is found and mentor and mentee agree the mentorship is no longer needed. It’s all about forming a relationship and building trust. By the end of their time in SIP, these beginning farmers will leave with many possible mentors to reach out to when they need support. They will also have the skills to identify where mentorship is needed and how to seek possible mentors on their own.

Filling your toolbox with the right people can be the key to getting started with a successful and healthy farm. Mentors and peers can support your farming journey in many different ways, for many different reasons. As your farm grows, so will your network and your needs. Some people who were helpful in the beginning may not be needed as you gain more experience. Remember to be flexible and don’t be afraid to ask for help. After all, we all want each other to do well. ■