

**Jean Yeager:** Today we're talking with Bob Bower about the Angelic Organic Farm. Bob, why don't you tell us about our Angelic Organics, where it is located.

**Bob Bower:** Okay. Angelic Organics is located in North Central Illinois in a town of Caledonia about a half hour north of Rockford, Illinois and about an hour south of Madison, Wisconsin.

**Jean Yeager:** Okay. And you're not longer with Angelic Organics. How long has it been since you've separated from them?

**Bob Bower:** Well, I started working at Angelic Organics in 1995 and I worked there until 2010. So I have not been there for about six years.

**Jean Yeager:** And when did the community change process, or the succession process, begin?

**Bob Bower:** There were certain events in the history of Angelic Organics. One was, about approximately 40 acres of land adjacent to the farm came up. A neighbor came and approached Angelic Organics and wanted to know if John Peterson was interested in purchasing it for Angelic Organics. And that was about 1997 or so, 1998. And so there— through the complex approach of the shareholders of the CSA, the land was eventually purchased. And I think that purchase was concluded in 1999.

That kind of started the process. And also there was another event in the history of Angelic Organics at a comparable time, maybe it was a little bit — I'm not sure it was before or after — but the founding of the Angelic Organics Learning Center. The Learning Center had its own reason to exist but it also had a supplemental reason, and that was to support the farm in the educational interest of all of the people that would approach

the farm.

And so the Angelic Organics Learning Center was formed. And I think it actually— it came out of a core group. And maybe that's really where in 1996, 1997, noticing not having any really coordinated activity with the shareholders, the forming of the core group, which was a predecessor to the Angelic Organics Learning Center. But also, Farmer John [Peterson] — and I was just at the farm for a couple years at that time — was interested in how can we galvanize the support of shareholders.

And having come upon the Roxbury CSA core group, and having attended a CSA conference in the Northeast, and being aware of how successful the Roxbury was in working and getting the support of the shareholders. That kind of inspired us at Angelic Organics to try to also work with that.

And we had had many individual shareholders that had been really concerned and connected, and valued the farm a lot. And we actually kind of brought them together and formed — John was the leader in that — and formed the core group and really kind of tried to shift or deepen the relationship.

**Jean Yeager:** When did the impulse to make a transition, or succession, or a transformation, or a change happen later? That would've been in 2000, 2002 or something?

**Bob Bower:** Yeah. Well, so when the Learning Center came in, it actually kind of— the core group, one of the main core group members, Tom Spaulding, became the executive director of the Angelic Organics Learning Center. And so then the need for the core group in that role kind of faded away.

And what it was, one of the things that we wanted the core group to do was help support us with the relationship to the shareholders and the educating people about how important it is to support a farm. And so that shifted right around 1999, around, shortly after I think, the land purchase.

And then there was a board of the Angelic Organics Learning Center and that's where some of the questions— because it still was separate, there was separate non-profit that was formed the Angelic Organics Learning Center, a legal 501c3, and with no official standing in relationship to Angelic Organics, but it was on the premise of Angelic Organics. They were located on Angelic Organics.

And so eventually members of the Angelic Organics Learning Center Board wanted to know more specifically, "Well, what is our ongoing capacity as a non-profit? What if something happened to Angelic Organics or to Farmer John? What's the plan there?" And so that kind of is where the where the question began. And that would be early 2000's.

**Jean Yeager:** And who was involved in carrying that question? Was it the whole board? Or were there a few members or individuals pick that up?

**Bob Bower:** Well, Farmer John really appreciated the Angelic Organics Learning Center Board, but he also he wanted to have full autonomy and authority because he's the one that invested, and owned, and had to consider where he would get retirement income from, and from what I understand, he's still working there. There's been some recent developments that I've heard of in this regard.

So he wanted to maintain the authority and autonomy, but it was the board that really kinda was trying to push the issue there. Of course, I had

been there for many years, and after I had been there for ten years and the Farmer John came out, he's traveled with the— So I was running the farm so I was comfortable with what was required to do to manage Angelic Organics. And so in some regards, I was kind of a de facto potential successor.

And so that's maybe where he was, like, comfortable with not maybe not getting too official with it. And I will have to admit myself, I was not wanting to get too official with it either because I was I knew what a challenge farming was. And it's a complex thing.

Somebody I heard this morning said, "Farming's not rocket science; it's more complicated," which I appreciated. And so the financial demands back in 1996 or '95, I remember Farmer John and I had conversations where we said, "If it doesn't get easier next year, we should stop doing this."

Now there was always a reason to keep going, and so we kept going. But I don't know if it ever really got much easier. And it's a great amount of work. And that was really— you know, did I want to entwine myself and mesh myself deeper into Angelic Organics? There was turning point for me in 2007 when my partner, Laura Krogman died in a car accident and she was working at the farm too. And that really kind of, like, shifted my— my — it gave me clarity for really what I wanted to have out of my life. And I kind of became of aware that I did not want to have that.

**Jean Yeager:** Has the planning that the board of the Learning Center, the comfort that they were seeking about a plan for the future, did that materialize?

**Bob Bower:** Well, I think since I've left, it has. There's a new association

between Angelic Organics and Angelic Organics Learning Center, and I can't recall what's it called, but that probably would be able to be found on their web pages. And that new association actually was able to before that, land, the land that it was talking about, was purchased and held by shareholders and rented to the farm.

But this new association actually raised funds to purchase that land and make it part of this association. So let's call, say it's called the Angelic Organics Association; I think it might be. And so that really solidified the land base. That was 40 acres, Angelic Organics had only owned 23 acres, and it had rented some other land from related parties, but still didn't have the surety.

And so that event, which happened I think in 2014 or 2015, really solidified the community there. And from what I understand, Farmer John now has a solid manager, somebody who's worked there even before me, and I believe it's Jesus Briano or "Primo" as he's called. And he's from Mexico originally and did get his citizenship, and now his wife's there and the whole family's there. And so he may — I don't the exact succession plan — but I know his role there in managing the operation has increased.

And it seems like it's working really well. He's kind of maybe coming into a good space. And I think John's getting that in Angelic Organics Association and maybe perhaps other funders — because it's really hard to find — what do you offer somebody who's gonna succeed it? What do they what assurance do they have?

And then what assurance or what support does Farmer John have for retirement? Which is an important consideration for many farms, and especially if you're farming vegetables for a long time. You may not have been making a great amount of money and you gotta be concerned about

what your retirement income is gonna be like.

**Jean Yeager:** It sounds like the relationship between Farmer John and the 'management' of the farm, to use that word, and the community of the association has gotten much more clear.

**Bob Bower:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I think— and I think—

**Jean Yeager:** Is that one of the things that you would say is a very important element?

**Bob Bower:** Yes. I do think that's an important element. And, the thing is is, John was born in 1949 so he's almost 70 years old. So he's past the age actually of normal retirement. And I know he sometimes has health issues so he's not able to work the same. But through these things — through just the necessity of having to have a plan — clarity's come out.

And I do think that the association is really there — perhaps by purchasing or helping to purchase the rest of the farms. So I don't — I only know about those 40 acres — but perhaps the rest of the farm and maybe there's additional land. There have been several times before where other neighboring pieces of land came up and we were working towards trying— we even made an offer on an adjacent piece of land, that was rejected, and eventually they accepted a lesser offer, like, a year or two later because the John's relationship to the greater community was — as you could see in the film — was difficult.

And people didn't really know what to make of an organic farmer, or somebody who's as different as he was. And so he did have— that film did kind of accurately represent, for the most part, how he was received in the communities. And that— that was one of the thing that he didn't have. The shareholder base that's been the most supportive has been in the

city of Chicago, an hour and a half away.

And not— there are other farmers that are around there, and they don't need to become CSA members, and they're already connected to the land. And there's fewer farmers too, and there used to be a lot more dairy farmers, and that's something— and John used to be dairy farmer. And so anyway, so the Chicago community I think has really come to support. And there've been people I know that had been shareholders since before I was there or the same year as I've been in. And so that would be now 22 years that they've been associated with the farm. And they really do want the farm to kinda be there for the whole community.

**Jean Yeager:** It sounds like this is a real lesson in vision and perseverance. Is there any other single word you might suggest to people that are entertaining making some kind of community farm relationship and transition?

**Bob Bower:** Well, that word, 'perseverance' certainly does speak to it. And it's kind of a will too. Farmers do— will have a certain will capacity. And I do agree that John Peterson does or did have that when I was around. And so for communities in general, I actually do think that that succession question is not a question to neglect.

And, the way to really succeed is to really find out what does your current farmer need, what type of support to they need, and what support would the successor farmer need, not so that they have it easy, but so that they can succeed? 'Cause it is— in my experience, I'm also on the Yggdrasil Land Foundation board and they went through some transition with some of their farms in East Troy, Wisconsin.

And there's new farmers coming in. There wasn't— and it's gonna work

out, but we are, by having over a thousand acres that have come into the responsibility, the ownership of Yggdrasil, we too are needing to kind of, like, have plans or to know what that is.

And it— one thing that we've seen is there's not an abundance of qualified farmers out there. And so it's really kind of, like, making it attractive to young people, and having them be supported. So they don't need to have handouts, but they do need to, kind of like, be met with what they need.

And so that's— it's not one word, it's more than one word, but it's kind of that type of understanding. And that's where my hope is that there's a— I guess the one word I would say is 'sustainability.' Sustainability for the human being, for the farmer. Ruth Zinnecker once said to me about Laura, who I described that had died, is that she felt Laura was selfless and self-maintaining.

If the farmer is not strong in self-maintenance, that's maybe not the end of the world. But the community needs to make sure that that farmer's gonna be able to maintain and sustain a good life, a good livelihood. And it's a very rewarding occupation, farming. It's so rich, it's so true, it's so genuine, it's so authentic, and ethical— if you're farming in the methods such as organic and especially biodynamics. It's responsible and it meets the earth in a really special way.

And so that reward is there for the farmer. But the economic — and some of these modern-day issues that have come into farming — that's where the community really needs to step up and help out.

**Jean Yeager:** Thank you, Bob. Appreciate it.

**Bob Bower:** You're welcome.