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June 24, 2016

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Athens farmers embark on year-long Farmers Union Leadership Program

ATHENS — Tenzin and Stacey Botsford have had their share of adventures in life — even a decade of traveling the globe as river guides — but this summer they are embarking on a new adventure as they represent Wisconsin Farmers Union in the Farmers Union Enterprises (FUE) Leadership Program.

Organized by the five FUE states of Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin, the program offers participants a chance to hone leadership skills and network with farmers from the five-state region. Activities enhance knowledge of cooperatives and the role of Farmers Union.

In the next year, the Botsfords will attend several gatherings, including Farmers Union conventions at the state and national level. They'll also take part in the 2017 National Farmers Union Fly-In to Washington, D.C., where they will experience the lobbying process.

Tenzin and Stacey grew up in Wausau but during their college years traveled the world, working as professional river guides in places like Costa Rica, New Zealand and Africa. It was during their years of riding the river that the two began to consider a future in farming.

“We were traveling in rural landscapes and saw that the happiest people lived close to the land and were engaged in their communities,” Tenzin said. “The farmers we met all seemed very grounded — regardless of their economic status, they seemed balanced.”

To gain some experience, Tenzin and Stacey worked at several farms while living in Oregon, including an organic produce farm and a diversified meat and dairy farm. During their time in the Northwest, Tenzin also worked in river surveying, a job in which he saw first-hand the impact different farming practices can have on water quality.

“We were really fortunate in that time to be able to work on other farms,” Tenzin said. “We learned fast and we learned hard, but on someone else’s dime and with established farmers’ input.”

Though they were tempted to put down roots in Oregon, the two felt a pull back to the Midwest and their families.

“We knew that wherever we were going to farm, we wanted there to be a strong local food atmosphere,” Tenzin said. They found that in the small Marathon County community of Athens, where they established Red Door Family Farm. The farm name is a nod to their love for travel — in many cultures, a red door is a welcoming symbol.

With 10-month-old Iris and 3-year-old Leona already tagging along on the farm, the Botsfords are well on their way to instilling a passion for the land into the second generation at Red Door Family Farm.



The farm is in its second season as a CSA and fresh market vegetable grower. Stacey and Tenzin are currently growing crops on about 8 acres, using several hoopouses to extend the growing season. They are offering 80 shares this season, with plans to grow to 100. Farm members get to know their food, their farmers and their neighbors.

The Botsfords also have long-term storage for winter crops and experience with growing specialty green mixes and high quality tomatoes. They market at the Wausau Farmers Market and also raise chickens and ducks, with plans for about 400 and 50 this year, respectively.

“For the CSA, I don’t think we’ll grow much beyond one hundred shares,” Tenzin said. “Our focus after we reach that point will be on adding diversity to the farm in ways that make sense.”

Creating community

The community focus is what drew Stacey and Tenzin to the CSA model. “I like being connected to the people we’re selling the food to,” Stacey said. “I think it really changes people’s outlooks on what farms can be.”

“It’s rewarding to be able to hand the food right to the people who are going to enjoy it,” Tenzin agreed.

It was that sense of community that also drew the first generation farmers to Farmers Union in 2014. When his neighbor urged him to attend a WFU State Convention, Tenzin recalled being skeptical about the need to ‘join’ a farm organization.

“I really didn’t know what to expect,” he said, “but I was struck by the diversity of farmers there and how good they were at finding common values and rallying around them.”

He noted that being part of a well-respected farm organization with deep historical roots gives him more of a voice than he could have on his own. “The people making policies don’t have any idea what’s important to me if I’m not part of Farmers Union,” he said. “I mean, I could write a letter to my representative, but how many farmers actually find time to? I know as part of Farmers Union that while I’m out in the field, I have an organization at work for me.”

Being a Farmers Union member also helps the Botsfords appreciate other styles of farming. “It gives us a more comprehensive sense of what people are doing in agriculture,” Tenzin said. “It makes us more well-rounded farmers while also giving us a chance to participate.”

The Botsfords met with farmers from throughout the five-state FUE region during the 2016-2017 FUE Leadership Program’s first gathering June 17-19 at Bluefin Bay resort in Tofte, Minn. Their next event will be attending the North Dakota Farmers Union State Convention Dec. 9-10 in Bismarck.

Photo outline: *Athens area farmers Stacey and Tenzin Botsford, pictured with 10-month-old Iris and Leona,3, will represent WFU in the 2016-2017 Farmers Union Enterprises Leadership Program.*

Wisconsin Farmers Union, a member-driven organization, is committed to enhancing the quality of life for family farmers, rural communities, and all people through educational opportunities, cooperative endeavors, and civic engagement. For more information visit www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com.

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