

Group gathers to learn about available ag grants

By John Mason

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A better rabbit cage, a more efficient mechanical pruner, pumpkins as a grazing crop for sheep, and a collard green trap for diamondback moths are among the farmer/grower projects funded by the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program in New York state in 2001.

David Holm, program manager for SARE, addressed a luncheon gathering of about 60 local people interested in agriculture Friday at the First Reformed Church in Hudson.

One of those present, Anna Dawson, was awarded \$13,839 by the program last year to try starting up an organic convenience foods business. This was the highest grant in the state under the "farmer/grower" category.

Dawson, who owns and runs the community-supported kitchen "Fresh Beginnings," in Kinderhook, will experiment with selling vacuum-packed and frozen organic vegetables for stir-frying and microwaving. Among the foods will be fruits such as apples, strawberries and rhubarb, and vegetables such as string beans, broccoli and peppers.

"Such items as stir-fry meals and fruit desserts will come complete with sauces and mixes ready for your finishing touches," says Dawson's brochure. The grant will allow her to test whether "conve-

nience products like these are a good fit with small-scale processing; this will involve tracking sales and offering support to other growers."

Dawson is a former Ichabod Crane home economics teacher who retired after 26 years.

SARE is a grant-funding arm of the U.S. Department of Agriculture established by Congress in 1988. Its mandate is to promote agriculture that is "economically viable (profitable), ecologically sound (harmonious with the environment) and socially just (culturally acceptable)."

There are three grant programs under SARE:

■ Professional development for agri-professionals and extension members. It covers seminars, brochures, conferences and videos. Last year there were 13 applications in this area, of which six were approved. The amounts awarded ranged from \$30,000 to \$143,000, with an average of \$88,900. The deadline is early November.

■ Research and education grants, available to land grant universities, research institutions and non-profit organizations for, typically, controlled, replicated experiments. Last year, of 56 applications, 13 were approved. Their amounts ranged from \$4,320 to \$167,660, with an average award of \$112,500. The deadline is early November.



John Mason/Hudson Valley Newspapers

Anna Dawson of Kinderhook, a 2001 Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education grant recipient, presents the door prize, a basket of locally produced foods, to Rob Johanson at the Chamber of Commerce's annual agricultural brunch Friday.

And so it grows... From Fresh Beginnings to Hudson Valley Hometown Foods

by Virginia Guarino

Retirement is a term that is more and more ill suited for a generation of mature, active, and mentally fit adults who choose to exit one career only to embark upon an alternative venture.



Anna Dawson

16 - Hudson River Sampler (CC) - Feb. 2002

of mature, active, and mentally fit adults who choose to exit one career only to embark upon an alternative venture.

Anna Dawson is one such "retiree." She combines attributes of a hardworking, farm-raised country girl, the conviction and talents of a 26-year home economics teacher, and the access of today's technology to formulate a "fresh beginning." Her mission accentuates her seemingly inexhaustible vitality. By making her acquaintance,

one will witness, and no doubt covet, her drive and enthusiasm.

I met Anna at an event held annually at the Desmond Hotel in Albany, where a fabulous fest presents New York State producers of wines and foods. Numerous self-enterprising businesses reserve areas within the hotel to promote products ranging from maple syrup, gourmet chocolates, cheeses, specialty meats, jellies and salsas, to an array of wines - many from vineyards close to home. A personal wine glass, attractive exhibits, and enticing aromas tempt the palate, which is soon satisfied by serious sampling sprees.

Fresh Beginnings, new to the ever-expanding line-up in 2001, caught my attention (as did all tables offering edible treats). Anxious to share details of her extensively developed venture, Anna began to dialogue, in true teacher fashion, complete with colorful photographs and visual aids.

Our first discovered commonality is that we had been longtime classroom teachers. Secondly, we grew up in homes where garden fresh, canned, and frozen foods were the norm, thanks to hard-working family members who faithfully sowed, reaped and preserved their harvest.

Although I toiled less than my parents in the soil and kitchen, I participated enough to gain the inevitable self-satisfaction - a feeling Anna identifies with having grown up on a 160-acre farm. Anna's Czechoslovakian mother, Alzbeta Konecnik, purchased the parcel near Kinderhook in 1936, her answer to owning land in America. She

started farming by raising chickens and vegetables for the Albany Menands Market. Anna's older brother Karl Sedlak, her mom, and eventually Anna and twin sister Betty were caretakers of the farm that evolved into a dairy.

Anna reached her current niche while experiencing a variety of retirement activities, most revolving around teaching, gardening and food.

She became a master gardener, worked on an organic farm, started her own garden and sold at local farmers' markets. However, in the process of learning about today's sustainable



One of their products

agriculture movement and tasting food from an organic farm that was "so good - like those my mother used to grow," a seed of ingenuity sprouted, and continues to grow. Anna realizes the call for healthy and delicious food in an age of big farms, mass-produced, commercially processed foods, struggling small farms, and deserving consumers. She decided she might be able to help small farms become more profitable if she had a "modern Grandma's kitchen." So she designed and built one with the proceeds of the sale of 130 acres of the 160 that her mother owned.

This past summer Anna worked with a \$13,800 grant from SARE Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program (www.sare.org) to develop frozen, vacuum packaged convenience meals and fruit desserts. "SARE supports

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Photo contributed

ANNA DAWSON, owner of Hudson Valley Hometown Foods, displays locally grown produce that has been processed at her state of the art establishment in Kinderhook.

projects that will not become books sitting on shelves, and it wants farmers to become profitable," Anna explained. Delighted to spread the word further through media and word-

of-mouth, Anna invited me to her farm - now the site of a few rental buildings, Anna's home, and her primary investment - the food-processing kitchen. "I put my savings into this building, and used SARE to purchase equipment and hire helpers.

Fifty years of life in Kinderhook (with several years dedicated to

education at Cornell University to attain degrees in Home Economics) and a full career in the Ichabod Crane School District has left Anna with a sense of community loyalty. "I want give back to an area that can become the breadbasket of the Hudson Valley. Columbia County has the most fertile soil and tremendous potential," Anna

proclaims. "We need visionaries; we need to change old paradigms. I see this as my calling, but I can't do it myself. So how do we raise awareness, excite people of all ages, and create understanding and involvement?"

Anna's question is actually rhetorical, since her research, experimentation, and

presentations provide a plethora of possible solutions. But aside from her ambitious agenda, she has already introduced an excellent foundation to aid small farmers and to enhance the lives and health of everyday household members.

"Food processing - that's what I'm doing. I design products and package food products," Anna states. With the excitement of a child with a new toy, Anna retrieves some of the see-through, plastic bags, tenderly hand packed, arranged with brightly colored, eye-catching and neatly organized quantities of food. Some contain every ingredient to complete an entire nutritious meal, such as a stir-fry. Others allow novices to experience the delight of producing "homemade" jams, jellies and scrumptious desserts. Step-by-step directions affixed to the package guide the chef through quick, minimal-mess and -fuss preparations. And the best feature? Anna could list

dozens of direct and indirect gains. Farmers will increase their bottom line financially by using local processors; the consumer benefits by eating high-quality food, at an affordable price, that looks and tastes great. A bonus is ample time for good old-fashioned pleasures.

Pleasures of the past include the gathering of friends and family, sharing, learning and creating tastes and aromas like those from Grandma's kitchen. But Anna prefers today's "high-tech stuff" when it comes to convenience. "I take advantage of any invention that peels, cuts, and chops!" she declares. Her additional free time is spent in other ways. "With such easy access to knowledge I have a chance to be just as successful as anyone. What a great time to be alive!"

Anna was involved in a new technique to create compost, conducts cooking classes in her kitchen, and convinces farmers to grow particular products or supply excess or broken produce that may be put to perfect use in recipes. Her valued assistant is Margaret Bortugno, a Cobleskill graduate married to a dairy farmer who loves to sample their trial products. Anna also travels to seminars and conferences, often making presentations to increase awareness and participation - continuing to turn dreams into reality.

The design on Fresh Beginnings' business card encapsulates a theme of Anna's work in progress. A bushel basket of apples sits at the bottom left, topped by a succession of several more fruits and

vegetables as they follow a up, over, and down, to the right corner. There it's a ca pot and ladle, signifying result of the garden to kit food process. Just as enterprise title states, this st just a beginning. Through An research and a desire to recog the goodness of the e Hudson Valley harvest, Anna changed the name of her busi from "Fresh Beginnings" "Hudson Valley Homet Foods."

I have no doubt the prod will become as popular enjoyable as the some realized visions of a resolved growing population that has priorities in order.

Curious? Call Anna Dawson 518-758-7342. Fax 518-8452; E-mail annadawson@berk.com. The farm is situated 362 Eichyush Rd. (off Rt. 9 Kinderhook, NY 12106.