

VINEYARD GAZETTE



Lily Walter on porch of the Chappaquiddick schoolhouse, which will serve as farm stand and meeting place. *Ivy Ashe*

Plotting Her Future at Slip Away Farm

Remy Tumin *Thursday, January 24, 2013 - 7:28pm*

Lily Walter took off her muck boots, hung up her Carhartt jacket and cleaned the fog off her glasses. It was a cold January day and she had just come back from picking up a friend at the Chappaquiddick ferry. Her Toyota pickup was still filled with tools and vegetables headed for composting. She put water on for tea and another log in the wood stove before turning her attention to jump-starting the tractor outside the house.

It was an ordinary morning for Ms. Walter, 27, who moved to Chappaquiddick in September to start Slip Away Farm at the historic Marshall Farm. Together with brother Christian Walter and friends Jason Nichols and Collins Heavener, the four have been making the most out of the quiet January days on

Chappy: building a greenhouse, preparing budgets and waiting for the completion of a full restoration of the old Chappaquiddick schoolhouse.

With a bustling community-supported agriculture (CSA) program set for the coming summer and a weekend farm stand, Ms. Walter envisions Slip Away becoming a community hub. The schoolhouse will play a central role acting as a farm stand, CSA pickup location and eventually a lending library of sorts with picnic tables outside.

“Chappy doesn’t really have a spot — we have a community center — but it doesn’t have a place where you can stop and say hi,” Ms. Walter said at the farm this month. “We want to provide that . . . we want people to be able to hang out, take out a book and sit outside with a cup of coffee.” The schoolhouse will get a new handicap-accessible farmer’s porch, a fresh coat of paint and a brick fireplace. Ms. Walter expects the work to be done by April in order to greet the summer season. The farm stand will run Friday, Saturday and Sunday selling Slip Away produce, Chilmark Coffee (brewed and whole beans) and Mermaid Farm dairy products, pending board of health approval.



Fifty chickens now call Chappy home. — Ivy Ashe

The Chappy schoolhouse was built in 1850, and served as the primary school for Chappy kids until the 1950s. It was originally located on Cape Pogue Bay and moved to the Marshall Farm property. Contractor and Chappaquiddick resident Dick Knight is overseeing the work on the schoolhouse.

The entire property includes over seven acres of land, owned jointly by the Martha’s Vineyard Preservation Trust and the Martha’s Vineyard Land Bank. The two organizations purchased the property in 2006 with the intent of creating affordable housing for a tenant farmer. The house dates back to 1790, and was fully restored by the trust. Ms. Walter attained the lease from the trust through an application process. She was the sole applicant at the time.

“Land is so hard to find for a farmer — it’s the number one challenge farmers face on Martha’s Vineyard,” she said. “And the other is affordable year-round housing. It’s incredible to have both.”

Ms. Walter has 50 chickens that will start laying in April. The farm will run a 40-member CSA this summer, 30 members on Chappaquiddick and 10 on the mainland to be picked up at her mother’s home in Edgartown. CSA memberships are still available.

The fields are now cleared of poison ivy vines, high grass and brambles. They are currently brown and gray reflecting the deep cold of winter. But come springtime, the rolling hills will be bursting with color. Ms. Walter and her crew will be growing on nearly three acres of land this summer.

Looking out over the future rows of vegetables from her kitchen window, Ms. Walter said she “can totally see it.”



“I couldn’t before we mowed it but now I can picture it.” She plans on planting in an L-shape to frame the house.

Three of four farmers: Jason Nichols, Lily Walter and Christian Walter. — *Ivy Ashe*

Pasture animals, an 80-member CSA, and meat chickens are all future goals for the small farm.

“We want to start out slowly and work our way up to long-term goals,” Ms. Walter said. “There’s four of us involved and I really want it to be manageable for us this first season and then expand into other areas of interest.”

Ms. Walter is no stranger to farming. A Dickinson College graduate, Ms. Walter worked at Morning Glory Farm in Edgartown for four years, two of which were spent as field manager. Mr. Walter, Mr. Nichols and Mr. Heavener are all graduates of Morning Glory Farm as well. Slip Away began as a one-acre plot at the Farm Institute on Katama last summer, making a few deliveries for CSA members to Chappaquiddick via bike. On Chappy one of the biggest challenges standing between Ms. Walter and a successful farm is 527 feet of water. Ordering thousands of pounds of supplies to Chappaquiddick can be costly, and planning “off-island” trips must take into account the ferry schedule.

The practicalities and logistics of living on a small island come with its perks, too.

“We go days without leaving,” Ms. Walter said happily. “Most people who live on Chappaquiddick have to go over to Martha’s Vineyard to work. But our work is right outside our back door. We don’t have to go anywhere.”

Ms. Walter has been meticulous about her business planning from the beginning.

“I knew going into it that was going to be my weak point,” she said. “I am not a numbers and math person at all, but I knew I wanted to run the farm as a small business.”

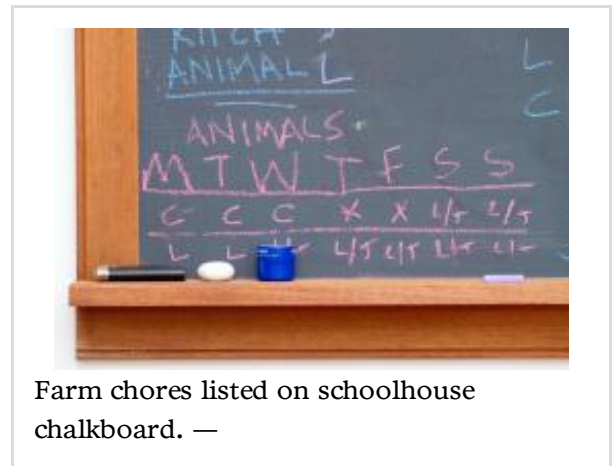
Ms. Walter attended several farm workshops on and off-Island and was introduced to farm mentors who have helped her to create a budget.

“We created one for this past season and I was pretty much dead on,” she said. “I’m now working through creating one for next season, too. I do a season-long budget and I do a cash flow budget so I can break it down per month and know how much cash I have on hand every single month.”

It’s easy for daily tasks to become all-consuming and forget about the bigger picture, Ms. Walter said, like building their new greenhouse or tending to the schoolhouse renovations. Making longterm goals is the key to success, she’s found.

“It’s such a narrow profit margin for farming,” Ms. Walter said. “It’s another side of farming sometimes farmers don’t do, but it’s so important to stop and say, what are your goals? You’re forced to examine every single aspect of your business plan and say this is what I want to look like in five years.”

The response from the Chappaquiddick community and beyond has been “so positive,” Ms. Walter said.



Farm chores listed on schoolhouse chalkboard. —

“It’s incredible.”

“People are excited. That ferry line, people sit there for hours in the summertime, so to be able to go down the street and pick up a dozen eggs — people are really, really excited to have that opportunity.”

Chappy residents have also been quick to offer their services or lend tools, including a wood splitter, a mower, even a tractor.

“I think it’s the mentality here . . . because we’re cut off from the big Island and there’s still that system of bartering on Chappy that might not exist in the same way on Martha’s Vineyard,” she said.

Chappaquiddick holds a special place for Ms. Walter and her family. Wasque was a favorite beach growing up and Chappy was a regular part of their weekend routine.



Greenhouse is currently under construction. — Ivy Ashe

Originally from Atlanta, Ga., Ms. Walter and her family moved to the Vineyard in 2002 when her father, John Walter, became editor and publisher of the Vineyard Gazette for a year and a half. He died unexpectedly in 2008.

Hundreds of friends, family members and Islanders came to a memorial at Wasque on a “magical blue day,” Ms. Walter recalled.

“We were blown away,” she said. “It was this day of people coming together to celebrate who John Walter was.”

While seated in her new kitchen, ball jar glasses drying in the rack, egg cartons stacked high, the chalkboard filled with chore duties and the wood stove roaring, Ms. Walter paused.

“He is here,” she said.

“My farm name comes from a song my mom quoted in the newspaper after his memorial. He loved Bob Dylan, and she quoted this song Shooting Star in an advertisement she took out as a thank you to all of our friends and family. I came across Shooting Star one day and saw the lyric slip away, and said, that’s it.”

Ms. Walter said she liked the idea of the name harkening back to the idea of Chappy being a retreat for her family, and more literally a boat slip away from Edgartown.

“Chappy has always been special to us, and to now be able to start this venture here it feels like I’m in the right place at the right time.”

For more information on Slip Away Farm or to sign up for a share visit their Facebook page or email slipawayfarm@gmail.com.

This article has been edited to reflect that Lily Walter attended Dickinson College, not Bucknell University

as was originally stated.