

Profile: Outstanding at His Stand

Profile of a Tom Williams, the manager for a large farm's Farmers' Market Stand in New York City. (Names of people and places have been changed.)

The path to ABC Farm for those who go to work there is seldom a straight one. Detours, intentions, mistakes, destiny, design, and karma—or fate, providence, coincidence, or whatever subscribed to—blend and blur and get lost and found, and somehow, plunk!! the perfect person for a position pops up, and the beginning of a great relationship is forged.

Such is the story of Tom Williams, the Farmers' Market co-manager, who ended up in Our Town after pulling up his Southern roots and criss-crossing the country from Seattle to Secaucus.

Facile with numbers and at ease with the sciences, Tom began his college career pursuing a degree in agricultural engineering at the University of Michigan. What he hoped would lead to studies in alternative energy, resources management, and a way to use technology to help the earth was, to his disappointment, more an investigation of chemicals and pesticides. Not able to endorse this thinking or methodology but still wanting to employ his aptitudes with mathematics and sciences, he switched to civil engineering, with a concentration on structural analysis. Through this means, he felt he could continue working figures and doing calculations, which he enjoyed, and put them to practice for public works and projects.

Immediately upon graduating, Tom joined a small engineering firm on the northwest side of Detroit. While the job itself was invigorating, the work environment felt stifling to Tom, so when the company went through a reorganization after he was there for about nine months, he took the opportunity to leave and join the ranks of a large, well-known and long-established engineering corporation in downtown Chicago. The culture at this second business felt much more comfortable to Tom, and he quickly rose to meet the challenges presented to him. The first sizable project he worked on was a bridge on the Dan Ryan Expressway. For those unfamiliar with the Windy City, this is a major and impressive stretch of thoroughfare on one of the chief commuter and pass-through arteries of it. No starting off with a rural bridge in a tiny outskirt, no sir! Dive right in! During his six years with this company, Tom's focus was on bridges: inspecting them, drawing

up plans for their rehabilitation, and serving as job supervisor for work done on them. At times, he managed jobs far from his base, which required him to spend weeks away from home, returning to his recently-purchased condominium only on weekends. For a young man with no ties, this was exciting for a while and tucked some practical experiences under his belt.

There's an old saw that life's situations often run in seven-year cycles, so when Tom's mother presaged his changing courses to end this engineering stint, she was right on the mark. Despite the stimulating work, Tom felt his "spirit dying" and began feeling stuck. The travel bug that had been suppressed for quite some time rose and came to the fore, so Tom sold his condo, traded in his suit and tie for jeans and t-shirts, and bought an old van for a trip around the country.

Heading west on Route 90 and following his instinct—"traveling with a candle rather than a flashlight"—he struck out. For the first time in years, Tom experienced a sense of inner and personal freedom and the opportunity to follow his own muse. Throughout his journeys, he always felt "I ended up at the right place at the right time." Being alone, it was easy for him to connect with people and be flexible in his schedule and relationships. And, just as he seemed to land in propitious places, so was it with the folks he encountered. He shared with and learned from the people that were like-minded in many different ways. It was a greatly invaluable and enjoyable part of the journey.

From Washington's coastal cities, he meandered down to and through California, then turned east to spend some time in Sedona, a town whose name and mystique had always beckoned him. Although he considered settling down in Arizona, the timing to do so didn't seem to mesh with other things going on in his life. The van eventually journeyed north and east back to Detroit, the impetus being the wedding of Tom's sister.

Not too long after returning to his home turf, the urge to explore more of the United States took hold again, but this time it was the east coast that summoned his curiosity. An apprenticeship at a non-profit center in the Adirondacks became available, and Tom signed on to move to western New York. During the three-month interval between the acceptance and the start date for the position, Tom headed to a housing co-op in St. Paul, Minnesota, which he had heard about and investigated on his earlier trip to the Pacific. Landing in St. Paul brought him to a cross-roads of decisions: accept an engineering job he was

offered there; work for Spring Farm, a cooperative natural foods distributor; or spin his wheels while waiting for the apprenticeship spot to begin. Although the first was tempting, it took only a little soul-searching for Tom to understand acceptance of it would be merely for the money... and this had little appeal to him.

The choice was made to stay in St. Paul and work for Spring Farm. Although he started at entry level, it satisfied and merged Tom's long-founded interests in farming and food. In a short order of time, Tom became a buying club coordinator, traveling throughout the region to meet with members of buying clubs, setting up conferences, and organizing gatherings. Because he was working directly with consumers and individuals, not retailers and businesses, there was a lot of fulfillment in his days. After two years at Spring Farm, Tom had a sense that he was "done," despite the tremendous growth he had helped the co-op experience during his term there. (As things turned out, not long after Tom moved on, the co-op was bought by United Natural Foods, now the biggest natural foods distributor in the country and a major supplier to the ABC Farm Store.)

The East! It was still calling him, the desire not suppressed by the twenty-four month interruption in Minnesota. To not pursue this would be "letting myself down," so an eastern version of the former journey westward was undertaken, this time with a list of intentional communities to check out. Groups from Indiana to Pennsylvania were visited and stayed at for varying lengths of time, until Tom ended up at Red Apple Farm in Litchfield County, Connecticut. A strong feeling to be there, coupled with a great cooking experience while in California years prior, led Tom to his decision to volunteer in the center's kitchen. After a few months there, Tom was in charge of running the center's kitchen and preparing meals for 80 or so people each weekend. The position tapped his engineering and artistic abilities in a very viscerally satisfying way. When not cooking and running the Red Apple's kitchen, Tom helped paint the house and did maintenance around the place. (Yes, he's a pretty versatile guy to have around!)

At this point Tom was in nearby Smithfield, just down the highway a piece, and his arrival at ABC Farm was only one step away. This last distance was bridged by a friend who, inter-

ested in biodynamic farming, set up a tour of the ABC for both of them. (Tom's only previous exposure to ABC was in sighting one of its yogurt containers at work in St. Paul.) Seeing how everything there works together—the farm, the ABC Camp, the apprentice program—really excited him and stirred something inside. Further, on a level both corporeal and "spiritual," the introduction to the Farm's Store was a valuable find! What a treasure! No longer did he have to travel the farther distances to Greenville or Centerville to find the produce and organic fare so important to him. Here was a great store that would let him stock his kitchen, and he became earnest in wanting to support it.

When time came to renew his one-year commitment to Red Apple, Tom decided not to do so. On one of his trips to ABC, he spoke with people in its store and on the farm about available positions..... and..... as they say, "the rest is history!" Five years of history, to be more exact!

Tom's first role at ABC Farm was with the Farmers' Market, driving down to and working at New York City's Square Market, a large farmers' market, for the then-manager. To fill in and get more hours, he also helped out in other departments, joining the ranks of those valuable co-worker who are cross-trained and can work in multiple capacities. Meanwhile, his partner, Amy Sherman, whom he had met during his days at Red Apple, also signed on at ABC Farm after an enjoyable stint at a farm down the road. She, too, began her time there cobbling together assorted jobs, including milking the cows, working in the garden, and doing some of the Farmers' Market runs with Tom. When the opening for a Farmers' Market manager came up, they applied jointly for it. Without question, the Farm was delighted to have them take on this crucial responsibility.

Just what does the Farmers' Market manager do? It's a complicated job, but in brief: Every Tuesday and Saturday throughout the year, the Farmers' Market drives its refrigerated box truck (24-feet long) to the New York City Farmers' Market.

First, a word on the Square Market: its goal is to promote regional agriculture and to offer a continuing supply of fresh, local produce for New Yorkers. By doing so, it supports farmers and preserves farmland for the future. This is

right in line with ABC's mission, which has been a participant there since 1983.

And how does a market day unfurl for Tom and Amy? It begins, actually, the afternoon beforehand, when they load up as much of the truck as they can, hauling large coolers and crates of goods from various venues on the farm. An early turning-in is not far behind, as market mornings begin with an alarm clock going off at 2:00 a.m. (no, that's not a typo!). By 3:15 a.m. or so, the remaining goods to go to the City are on-board, and the truck pulls out of the parking lot. Barring unforeseen traffic and bad driving conditions, they get to New York City around 6:00 a.m., where they and their City staff set up the stand.

This temporary stall—complete with tents for protection, bread cases, produce bins, bulk granola dispensers, a cheese display, and coolers—is erected, and then the truck, which is filled with products made or grown at ABC, is unloaded and the goods displayed. This requires both physical strength and a keen sense of organization and spatial relationships (the given area is tight, so it has to be used to maximum advantage). Equally important is a creative eye, because if the breads, produce, cheeses, meats, and other fare are displayed attractively and tempt the passerby to stop in, sales are dramatically enhanced.

Once the market stand is ready to open at 8:00, some of the staff take a break for breakfast, while the rest tend to the early-morning shoppers. The hours at the stand are hectic and jam-packed and demand energy, quick-thinking, and stamina. Time out to re-collect is essential for the workers. Amy takes a short break in the late morning, then another in the afternoon. Since she does the preponderance of the driving both to and from the market, it is imperative that she gets an opportunity to rest. Later in the afternoon, Tom takes his break from selling and talking with customers. Often he takes advantage of this respite from the flurry of activity to take a walk around the Square Market, shopping at other stands, talking with farmers, and getting a feeling for the pulse of the place.

Depending upon the weather and the time of year, the booth closes shop sometime between 6:00 and 7:30 p.m. The tents and cases are broken down, left over foods are packed up (some go to food kitchens both in that area and

locally here), and the crew disperses, usually in the 7:30 to 8:30 hour. On the drive back to Our Town, Tom does as much paperwork as possible, completing inventory sheets and sales records. It is usually after midnight when the two of them get back to the quiet of ABC. Perishable goods are returned to freezers or coolers, and whatever tasks that require attention before heading home are taken care of. Nearly twenty-four hours after the sounding of the wake-up bell, it is time to "call it a day."

While these twice-weekly trips to New York City are, in themselves, demanding, they do not alone comprise the managers' responsibilities. Tom and Amy work closely with the other ABC Farm department managers—those in the bakery and dairy and on the farm—to determine what goods will be ordered and taken down for sale; to discuss the possibility of introducing new products; to confer about customers' requests and needs; and to address concerns that arise. Further, since the regulating body of New York City's Square Market has strict guidelines regarding what a vendor can and can't sell, it is vital that our managers adhere to these rules. (For example, the Square Market requires that all products a farm or farmer sells must be grown or produced on that respective farm. Ingredients used in a product must come from within a specified distance from New York City.)

It takes financial analysis, intuition, and experience—and perhaps a bit of meteorological background, since market sales are related to market-day weather—to determine in advance the amounts of products to order for each market. Request too small a quantity, and there's the risk of running out, thus losing sales; order too large a quantity, and there's the danger of having it go unsold.

On non-market days, Tom and Amy must also attend to all the recordkeeping and the preparation and follow-up that precede and proceed, respectively, the market trips. In addition to collaborating with the other managers, this includes making sure the staff schedule is in order so that all shifts are covered; taking care of the equipment and truck and ensuring it is in working order; making signs for products; noting sales trends; and all the myriad details they keep track of. Further, both of them sit on the ABC Farm's managing council, the body that sets policies for ABC Farm and oversees the running of it. Tom, using facilitation skills

he learned while working and living in co-ops in St. Paul, serves as the body's chair and helps keep the meetings running smoothly and efficiently.

Tom and Amy work seamlessly in co-managing this integral part of the organization, complementing each other in the many and sundry components of the diverse and complicated department. Amy, who still works on the farm (sharing oversight of the greenhouse) ensures there is a strong and vibrant connection between the Farmers' Market and farming. Her imaginative eye and familiarity with produce strongly suggested that she oversee the vegetable aspects of the Farmers' Market. Her knowledge and experience in this realm have led to a marked increase in produce sales, a tremendous boon to the farm. Her direct link to the farm's gardener and her supervisory capacity in the greenhouse lead to informed decisions about what crops to grow. Tom's analytical aptitude is employed in the financial, business, and paperwork components of the department. Tom and Amy both have terrific communication skills, which are crucial since they are constantly interacting with customers and overseeing a substantial staff.

Anyone who talks with Tom about the Farmers' Market and ABC Farm will instantly sense his enthusiasm for both. With sparkling eyes and a quick, bright smile, his energy and zeal are instantly transferred to whomever he's speaking with. If asked what he likes best about his job, the reply is, "Everything." Further elaborating, he adds, "The mission and diversity [of ABC], the challenges, and the wide assortment of goods to sell—and all of it [is] certified organic and/ or biodynamic."

If there's anything that managing the Farmers' Market department is not, that would be boring! Every day begets its own set of challenges, and no two trips to New York City bring an identical mixture of the always-changing factors. The weather, the staff, the assortment of products, where and how the particular day falls in the calendar, and the clientele who shop at the stand combine for a unique and singular experience on any given run. (And there's always the chance for celebrity sightings or having nationally-renowned chefs stop by to pick up some turnips or cheese!) As Tom summed it up, "It's always different—every market run produces new stories."

A large part of the position's appeal for Tom is the extensive amount of time spent with people. Connecting with others has been and is an important part of Tom's life—these human interactions are fuel that keep him running, sparks for his unceasing passion for life. As a representative of ABC and the purveyor of wholesome foods, Tom feels his desire to serve others is fulfilled, and he takes great joy in adding a bit of pleasure to others' days, be it through education, introduction to a new vegetable, or simply a kind word and a smile. Strong customer service is of paramount importance to Tom as a manager, and he takes on those who he knows share this commitment. He "hires only people who care; they [the staff] have to really want to be there."

On the professional level, both Tom and Amy have found it gratifying to learn and develop their own selling and management styles. Under their guidance, the Farmers' Market has grown considerably in terms of not just its annual sales, but also in its breadth of products offered, staffing, infrastructure, and overall presence. The two are ready to point out that they "inherited a sound base" from the prior managers, both of whom grew and developed the department under their respective tenures. With solid footing and some of the structural decisions already made, the department was ripe for Tom and Amy to make improvements to and put their own stamp on it.

Should you find yourself in New York City, perhaps you will take the time to visit Tom and Amy at the Square Market. Stop by and say hello!

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