



Voices From Our Network

Continuous Living Cover Farmers

- Singing Hills Dairy -



Green Lands
Blue Waters

In southeastern Minnesota, Lizzy Bryant is apprenticing with her aunt, a long-time farmer and cheesemaker, to take over stewardship of the land and the business, as part of her plan for the next iteration of the farm to be an agricultural retreat for Black Minnesotans.

Lizzy Bryant, Singing Hills Dairy, Nerstrand, Minnesota

Singing Hills Goat Dairy is at a moment of transition. Lynne Reeck has stewarded the land for 26 years and operated the goat cheese business since 2008. This year, Reeck's niece, Lizzy Bryant, is apprenticing with her in preparation to take over the business and stewardship of the land. Bryant intends to create an agricultural and artistic retreat space for Black Minnesotans at the farm, both to expand Black land access and knowledge and to provide a majority-Black refuge in an overwhelmingly white state. She is running a GoFundMe campaign so that a broad community can help her to take over the land without debt.



Lizzy Bryant spoke with us about her relationship with the land, supporting Black farmers, and the challenges and opportunities of generational farm transfer. We have condensed and edited her words for length and clarity.

Growing up Black in rural Minnesota



I grew up in small-town Minnesota, spending time on my grandma's farm near St. Cloud. I worked informally there, and a detassling job in high school was the first time I filled out a W4. I've realized what a privilege it is to have grown up in proximity to farming. So many Black folks and other people of color who are drawn to farming don't even have the level of access to explore it that I did. Part of what I want to create is one more accessible path for these folks.

It was really difficult for me growing up in small-town Minnesota as a Black person, as a woman, as a queer person. I left as soon as I could, and spent eight of the last ten years on the East Coast. I gravitated towards Black-majority spaces, because I wanted to blend in unremarkably and embody my culture without being surveilled.

I came back last July, for a job and family, and for some unnamed force that was pulling at me. In January, I started pursuing the idea of a safe space where Black people can practice agriculture or cultivate their livelihoods. Seven percent of Minnesotans are Black, but they comprise just .03 percent of the state's farmers, while 84 percent are white but make up more than 99 percent of farmers. When George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis in May, it brought a greater urgency to the project – and in supporting mutual aid networks as part of the uprising, I met other people pursuing similar ideas. It's part of a larger impulse happening now.

Generational transfer

My aunt has been on the land for almost three decades and founded Singing Hills Dairy 12 years ago. She's a one-woman show. At one time, she had a herd of 70 goats; she was milking 30, and making and selling cheese. She and my other aunt sell at farmers markets on the weekends. Lynne is going to be 66. The farm and business are an amazing feat of her brilliance and endurance – and the life is hard on her.

She thought 2019 was going to be the last year. She needs to get out. But there's a pressure because like for many small

farmers, there's not a cushion of wealth. A lot is owed and tied up in the bank. So Lynne is continuing to work and hold onto the space so we can facilitate this transfer, as well as training me in all she's learned about the land, cheesemaking, and animal husbandry.

It's a challenge and it's an exciting moment. There's an incredible energy among Black emerging farmers and farmers of color, while at the same time, there is opportunity opening up as baby-boomer farmers are about to retire, many with children who don't want to take over the farm. The bridge is equitable land access. This is the moment to harness all these calls for reparations, for equitable redistribution, for addressing how our food systems are weak and flimsy – all these issues that have been so exposed this year.



Land stewardship

When my aunt came to the land, it had been used for intensive rowcrop production and the soil was depleted. She responded by leaving it undisturbed and letting it regenerate. She experimented with renting part of her pasture to beef cattle, but found that they were too heavy. She chose goats because – besides loving goats, with their curiosity and curiosity about humans – they have a gentle tread on the land, and that works well here. She raised hogs too, feeding them whey, and selling pastured pork at the farmers market.

Lynne has studied systems like filtration ponds for graywater from the cheesemaking. We've been talking about plants that we could put in where a creek enters the property, to enhance filtration of that water. We hope now to establish some of these ideas that she has thought about but has never had the capacity or resources to implement.

In the longer term, I want to plant more trees. Cherries, apples, and hazelnuts have all grown successfully here, and I'd like to grow a real orchard, for the soil and increased biodiversity, as well as for food security and economic potential.

Overall, I'm forming a relationship with these 25 acres. Like when we have genuine connections with people, we don't want to harm them and we want them to be well – I feel like it's the same concept with the land. I want to move forward with farming practices following in my aunt's footsteps, and in the tradition of the people who were here for 10,000 years not disrupting the land in the ways that we have in the last 200 years.

How to leverage privilege



As a Black person who is not independently wealthy, it feels important to leverage the privilege that I do have, which is a privilege that comes from displacement. The reason why I have proximity to farming – why my grandma had a farm, why my aunty grew up on a farm – goes back to Indigenous people being displaced so the land could be given to white settlers. So I'm striving to leverage that privilege in a way that seeks justice, both for Black people and Black farmers who have been historically barred from land access or who have been displaced – and also for the Indigenous people who were displaced from this very land that we're on.

Those histories are interconnected, and they founded the history of extraction in the US. The history of slavery and the history of Indigenous displacement and genocide are the bed on which our capitalist extractive system is made. I try to hold this with everything I do, from how I'm going to produce a wheel of cheese to figuring out what it looks like in action to create a place for Black people to be surrounded by nature in a rural environment and agricultural space in this state, to just exist without fear and without threat of violence.

Siena Chrisman interviewing Lizzy Bryant with Singing Hills Dairy

www.greenlandsbluewaters.org

Photo credits Yasmin Yassin (except goat close up, Lynne Reeck)