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Something to do, someplace to love, and something to look forward to

by Julie A. Best
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McDaniel talks with Amy Bell, NRCS District Conservationist for Monroe County, about his conservation plan.

Bill McDaniel of Monroe County, Alabama, is a man with a vision, and that vision is to help minority youth become the best they can be. With a plot of land, which belongs to his 90 year old mother but is managed by the McDaniel's Family Farm Limited Liability Company, McDaniel wants to establish a place where whole families can take a plot of land and manage it as their own. On this land, they can grow fruits and vegetables which will put a little money in their pockets, but more importantly, provide them with a sense of pride for a job well done. In order to project that vision into the future, McDaniel takes a look at the past.



Plasticulture is a system of growing vegetables under plastic.

"My Daddy had a fourth grade education, and grew up right here in Monroe County. He had five children, and out of this 165-acre farm base, he put all of us through college," says McDaniel. "My Daddy taught us how to work. He helped us develop a work ethic that has been beneficial to us. Once you know how to fence up a pasture, you can have a job for life, because you will always know how to work."

During McDaniel's growing-up years, truck crops used to provide a major source of income for people in the community. He remembers it as hard work. "When my father died, the young folks came back to talk about him. He taught a lot of young men how to work. Summer work is hard and it doesn't pay a lot, but it puts working into your blood," says McDaniel. McDaniel goes on to say, "My father wasn't the only one who did this; it was like a system among the men of the community. You could go up and down the road. Everywhere you went, there was something to do."

McDaniel, with the support and cooperation of his brothers and sisters, wants to recreate that atmosphere for young folks in this rural Monroe County community. The plan is to recreate that environment by making a portion of the family farm available to folks in the community. In McDaniel's opinion, the farm is an excellent place for young folks to develop a work ethic. McDaniel knows that from personal experience.



McDaniel likes to be personally involved with the work on the farm.

After graduating from Tuskegee University, McDaniel's career took him away from his rural setting. While he was away from the farm, he never

lost sight of the experiences that farm life taught him. He continued to be concerned about the advancement of minority youth. As a volunteer, he was involved with an organization called INROADS. The goal of this international organization is to increase ethnically diverse employees in corporate management, and to help change the way these candidates gain entry into the business world. Through internship programs, INROADS has helped businesses gain greater access to diverse talent through continuous leadership development of outstanding ethnically diverse students.



Managing the drip irrigation system is a component of the plasticulture system.

From his relationship with his father, McDaniel knew the value of parental support. Based on a strong belief in the value of parental support, in 1980 McDaniel developed a program called Parent Support Group as a part of the INROADS concept. The mission of the Parent Support Group is to provide parental support for the interns who participate in INROADS program. He developed a curriculum whereby parents could further the development of their children, enhance their own personal and professional development, and establish a fund to provide financial support for interns.

After years of working in this program, McDaniel said, "I'm going to take this energy and turn it back into what I should have done years ago—along with my brothers and sisters, I'm going to do something for the rural youth of Monroe County. Minority kids in this area have lost sight of the farming lifestyle. If we can get four or five more years, the McDaniel Family is going to do some things here on the farm that will help reconnect the youth to the farm."

McDaniel had a vision, but he knew that he needed a plan to make the vision a reality. He has worked with USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to develop that plan. “NRCS is my technical contact,” says McDaniel. “Folks like me depend on NRCS to tell us about the programs that are available. Relationships are important, and I appreciate the personal relationship that I have with the folks in the NRCS office. NRCS knows my goals and the staff there point me to the programs that can help accomplish those goals.”



Watermelon is a crop that grows well using the plasticulture system.

Two years ago, McDaniel implemented a truck-cropping system called plasticulture. The system was installed as a demonstration project with the Ala-Tom Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Council. RC&D is a program administered by NRCS. The program helps communities identify projects that would improve the standard of living for its residents. Plasticulture is a system of growing vegetables under plastic. “The last two years have been a learning curve,” says McDaniel. “We now have the water system installed, and we know how to establish the plasticulture beds.”

The plasticulture system is a part of McDaniel’s concept for reconnecting minority youth with the farming lifestyle. He has installed the water system and the beds on his farm, and has made plots available to youth or families who want to rent the space to grow vegetables. “It becomes theirs. It’s a whole new beginning for farmers in this area,” says McDaniel.

Farming with plasticulture requires a different mindset from traditional truck farming. “Truck farmers have gotten used to planting some things, then doing a lot of praying. With plasticulture, you have to manage the crop, which includes planting, fertilizing, and watering,” says McDaniel. Because the black plastic warms the ground, crops can be planted earlier. Drip irrigation is a part of the system, so that aspect of the project must be managed to provide adequate moisture for the plants. Because of these managed conditions, crop yields are high. “There were about twelve boys involved in the project last year and they have indicated that they want to try it again next year,” says McDaniel. Last year they grew watermelons, okra, and pole beans. They marketed the produce through a roadside market and a farmer’s market in Nashville, Tennessee, where McDaniel lives.

Since his retirement, McDaniel has spent more time on the Monroe County farm. He says, “It’s where my heart is; this is where I belong. My whole family is interested in this project. We try to involve my mother, two sisters, and two brothers in the decision-making process. I’m just the work horse. I just love doing stuff. There is so much freedom in farming. You make lots of decisions every day, and some of them may be wrong, but you get a chance to make those decisions again tomorrow.”

Will the dream become a reality? McDaniel believes that it will. “We have been working with NRCS and folks from the Alabama State Agriculture and Industries Department out of Montgomery to get something started. We have scratched the surface, and at least we

have some folks saying this is a possibility. We are establishing something with the farming community here in Monroe County,” says McDaniel.

To help the community refocus on the land, McDaniel has been hosting a memorial program for the small farmers in the area. McDaniel says, “My family and I want young folks to look back at the history of this community and to look at what this whole area of land, right here, has meant to this state. There were really highly educated folks that came from just this area, right here. Young folks need to hear those kinds of stories. They need to be reminded that acquiring land didn’t come easy 40, 50 and 60 years ago, but what that land did for those young folks was tremendous.”

There’s a saying that in order to be happy, one needs—something to do, someone to love, and something to hope for. Bill McDaniel might add one more component to that formula—someplace to love. The 165-acre farm in Monroe County, Alabama, is obviously a place that Bill McDaniel and his family love. In addition, it provides something to do and something to hope for. Not only does Mr. McDaniel appear to be happy with what’s taking place on the land, he says, “This project that we have in mind for the farm here has made my mother a happy camper.”

McDaniel says, “What we’re doing isn’t new. We’re just repeating history. We’re just capitalizing on what our daddy did. We can’t walk in Dad’s footsteps, but at least we hope we’re following in his toe prints. There is just something about working and being out in the open space that has some kind of meaning to it.”

McDaniel and his brothers and sisters have a burning desire for young folks to have that experience. They want them to know the value of work and to develop good work ethics, such as: Always be early, never late. Always be a hard worker. No matter what you’re doing, always do the best you can. Work provides people with a feeling of belonging, a place in the order of things. Bill McDaniel and his siblings have experienced that sense of belonging and contributing to society. They want to ensure that other young folks have that same opportunity.

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