



*Helping People...*

*...Help the Land.*



## Bridging the Gap: Urban Ag Opportunities for People with Autism



*Jan (R) discusses high tunnel operations with NRCS DC Deb Knepp (L)*



*Jan (L) and Nate Karam (R), work on their aquaponics system*



*Pilarski tends to one of her kale plants*

The growing season in Indiana is supposed to be over. The calendar has flipped to December, corn and soybean harvests have been completed for more than a month and now farmers will spend the winter preparing for the next planting season.

But for Jan Pilarski and her staff at Green Bridge Growers in Mishawaka, this mid-December morning will be used for planting.

The beehives have been closed for the winter and the two and a half acres of growing space at the back of the farm have been harvested for the season. The lifeblood of the farm, though, are the two high tunnels that stand side-by-side behind the farmhouse that has been converted into the farm's base of operations.

A light dusting of snow clings to the ground refusing to melt after falling two days earlier even as the temperatures climb just above freezing. Winter sunlight reflects off the sides and roofs of the high tunnels making them glow and warming the inside. Bundled against the cold in a faded work coat and a blue knit sweater, Pilarski's work boots leave footprints in the snow as she walks through the small farm she has built from scratch over the past five years.

As she grabs the handle and lifts the door to the high tunnel, it is like Pilarski is entering a portal to another place far away from the near freezing temperatures and snow-covered ground that mark an Indiana winter. Warm, humid air escapes as she quickly enters and closes the door behind her to trap the heat inside. A thermometer hanging on the back-wall hovers near 60 degrees, a stark difference from the reality outside these walls. And in defiance of the season and weather, inside the high tunnel rows of kale are in the early stages of growing with more seedlings soon to join them.

The plants will be ready to harvest in early March and after they've finished their lifespan tomatoes will take their place. Next door, lettuce growing in an aquaponics system fills the high tunnel. The two houses have combined to turn Green Bridge Growers from an idea into a viable operation that can grow crops through all four seasons.

"The high tunnel has paid for itself at least a couple times over with the sales



of our kale,” Pilarski said. “The nice thing about it is that when you grow kale and some other winter crops, like spinach, in the cold, the sugars really come into the leaves of the kale or the spinach. So, it’s just incredibly tasty.”

Green Bridge Growers was born out of a desire to make an impact. Pilarski’s son Chris is on the autism spectrum and after graduating from college he couldn’t find a footing in the agricultural industry despite a passion for the work. So, Pilarski set out to create a space where her son and others with autism could gain hands on experience in farming.

“We were really feeling that people on the autism spectrum have so many talents and gifts,” she said. “It struck us also that, that kind of aptitude, the interest in getting to the bottom of a problem and problem solving, the ability to follow through on routine and scheduling, those are all the things needed for farming.”

They originally started with a demonstration high tunnel in 2013 on the property of a South Bend, Indiana not-for-profit called Hannah and Friends, which works with people who have special needs. There, Pilarski and her budding operation were able to try different growing methods including their first attempt at aquaponics, while beginning what would be a two-year search for a permanent location.

They eventually settled on a plot of land in Mishawaka, which had previously been used to grow ornamental grass, and set about turning it into what Pilarski calls a “peri-urban” farm because of their location just on the outskirts of town.

She came equipped with a Master Gardener certificate and some farming experience from watching her father while growing up, but as a new farmer she knew she needed help. For the business side of things, she was able to attend bootcamps at local colleges, but they couldn’t teach her about setting up a new agricultural operation. For that, she turned to Purdue Extension to learn more about how to set up her operation. Very early on she also contacted the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for help implementing conservation practices that would allow her small urban farm to flourish such as building a high tunnel. The NRCS

has funding available to help beginning farmers and also programs designed for urban farmers like Pilarski and Green Bridge Growers and she quickly worked to gain access.

They moved into their permanent location in 2015 and that same year she submitted her first application to the NRCS’ Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which provides technical and financial assistance to farmers to put conservation on the ground. Her application was approved that first year and Green Bridge Growers received financial assistance to build one of the high tunnels they still use. They then raised the money for the second high tunnel through crowdfunding and were able to hit the ground running.

“Green Bridge Growers would not be where we are today without NRCS,” Pilarski said. “As beginning farmers, we appreciate their guidance in helping us scale our operations and introduce sustainable conservation practices to our farm. Their expertise helped us successfully manage four-season growing with the construction of our high tunnels, and they supported us every step of the way in the research and design decisions we encountered during the application process.”

The relationship with the NRCS has continued in the five years since that first EQIP and Green Bridge Growers was recently approved for a second enrollment in the program. The new funds will be used to plant a pollinator habitat as well as build a second high tunnel, with construction and planting scheduled to begin in the spring.

With the help of the NRCS and the local county staff, Pilarski has been able to make the impact she set out to make. The farm employs seven people, including five who are on the autism spectrum. They’ve also been able to provide more fresh produce to the community whether it is someone buying directly from the farm, a restaurant using what they grow or people purchasing their kale, tomatoes, lettuce and other crops from local grocery stores.

“There was definitely a passion that I’ve discovered while working here and I’ve been loving every second of it,” said Nate Karam, who has worked on the farm for a year and a half. “It doesn’t feel like work.”