

Balance

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Growing Markets

Run by women passionate about giving small businesses and local farmers a venue, area farmers markets continue to thrive

Profile: NEVER GIVE UP

Local writer Michele Corriel celebrates publication of two books this season after years of hard work

GROWING MARKETS

Run by women passionate about community and giving small businesses and local farmers a venue, area farmers markets continue to thrive

BY NANCY KESSLER

PHOTOGRAPHY
BY THOMAS LEE



Annie Conley is the director of the farmers market in Livingston.



Kristi Wetsch runs the farmers market held at the Gallatin County Fairgrounds in Bozeman.



Lynn Peterson-Maher, left, assists Salal Huber-McGee, director of the Bogert Park Farmers Market.

FRESH-PICKED LETTUCE, GARLIC AND CARROTS, JUICY peaches and cherries, organic eggs and lamb, homemade huckleberry pie: all these savory flavors and more are available at your nearby farmers market.

But local foods, handmade crafts and meals made fresh don't decide to sell themselves. Such markets must be organized, and our region of Montana is fortunate to have a half dozen weekly markets, all run by women. And just like each market has its own philosophy, each woman brings her own perspective to the job.

Kristi Wetsch, 51, is market manager of Gallatin County's largest and longest-running market. Now held at the fairgrounds every Saturday morning from 9 a.m. to noon, the Gallatin Valley Farmers Market was established in 1971 by a group of locals who wanted to bring fresh produce to town. Eventually, the founders decided to turn the operation over to a local non-profit, Career Transitions.

"All the money generated from booth fees goes to job search, computer literacy, basic literacy and GED programs," Wetsch said. "All the money goes back into our community through our clients. We also assist small businesses in getting started — Career Transitions really believes in entrepreneurs — and we helped quite a few through our farmers market."

Some of the familiar startups that have met with success include Hey Cupcake, Senorita's Salsa, On the Rise, Elle's Belles and more. "Our philosophy is to not only show the community local talent, but to provide wholesome food grown in our valley," said Wetsch. "It's good for kids to know produce doesn't grow on a shelf. I'm really proud of the gifted and talented people we have here."

A native of Glendive, Wetsch was raised in Bozeman and had a first career as a special education and elementary teacher. She joined Career Transitions in 1996 as the literacy coordinator, computer instructor and market manager, and enjoys the combined tasks.

"My love for the farmers market comes from my mom, who grew up on a homestead, and I loved hearing her stories," Wetsch said. "Then, I spent every

summer there, branding and harvesting, shucking corn and snapping beans, and asking 'How do you cook that?' So we decided to start cooking demonstrations, working with extension and the food bank, and MSU cookbooks, teaching folks to make affordable, simple and healthy meals."

As many as 6,000 customers wind their way through the market each week. Only vendors of homemade food, handmade crafts and locally grown produce are permitted, along with a handful of non-profit organizations, which promotes economic well-being and support for home-based businesses. Musical entertainment is provided by children who are raising money to purchase an instrument or attend music camp.

The market also encourages lower income customers to buy healthy food. Options include vouchers for the Senior Nutrition Program and Women, Infants and Children (WIC), as well as accepting food stamps for specific products. "These are people who ordinarily would not come to the farmers market," said Wetsch. "I'm just thrilled to see them here."

Asked why she has been willing to start work every summer Saturday at

6:30 a.m. for 14 years, Wetsch said, "There's something about being there with the people and the talent that takes me back in time to when people gathered as a community. It's wholesome, and it's fun to watch the dynamics, meet up with friends. It's a nice way to give back to the community."

Wetsch credits the growth of the Gallatin Valley Market, from 60 vendors when she took over to more than 220 today, to a late '90s trend. "It seemed nationwide people wanted fresh food, locally produced," she said. "They were tired of e-coli and unsanitary food. The market grew so much we had to move from Bogert Park (the original location) for safety reasons."

But without a farmers market and with park department budget cuts, Bogert Park "was deteriorating," said nearby resident Salal Huber-McGee, 37. A former vendor at the Gallatin Valley Market herself, she knew many others who didn't want to lose the close-to-town venue.

"I started the Friends of Bogert Park as a way to raise money to fund restoration projects," Huber-McGee said. "I went to the City Commission and asked to start another market at Bogert. I thought Bozeman had grown enough that it

Produce waits for customers at the Bogert Park Farmers Market in Bozeman.



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could support two farmers markets.”

Huber-McGee’s hunch paid off. Starting with only 20 vendors eight years ago, the Tuesday evening market now is capped at 100 vendors, with 200 more on a waiting list. About 10 to 15 of the reserved spaces become available each week, so many wait-listed sellers get to market each season as well. And all the booth fees go to upgrading park facilities, such as the newly remodeled bathrooms, handicapped accessible sidewalks and tennis court makeover.

Besides local foods and crafts, Bogert Farmers Market accepts non-profit vendors selling goods from other countries such as the Uganda Orphans Fund, Montana Connection for Afghan Women and Copper Canyon Crafts from Mexico. “Not everybody here gets to travel and experience life in other lands,” Huber-McGee said. “These different groups are supporting our larger world community.”

A native of Vermont and 10-year resident of Bozeman, Huber-McGee and her husband own Integrity Builders, a construction and fine woodworking business and are raising two daughters. She also runs her own property management and holiday decorating firm, Montana Details, and still finds time to volunteer as market director.

Lynn Peterson-Maher, 48, is the volunteer assistant director at the Bogert Market, a Montana Details employee and volunteer with the Bozeman High

“What’s important about the farmers market is that it encompasses every aspect of sustainability. It showcases what is wonderful about this community, and brings fresh, vibrant, healthy food to the marketplace. It amazes me that the community is just hungry for this.”

— ANNIE CONLEY, Director of the farmers market in Livingston

School Marching Band. She worked as a nurse in her home state of Wisconsin, but pursued her creative streak making and selling jewelry at the market following her move to Bozeman eight years ago.

Now neither woman has time to sell their art, but both enjoy their roles in promoting the market. They see people trying out new business ideas, and are pleased it is beginning to work like a business incubator, with vendors using each others’ products in their own efforts.

“Our vendors are like a family,” said Huber-McGee. “For lots of people this is their livelihood, or a second income. It’s really great to offer people this opportunity,

and for us to support Bogert Park. The way I grew up, we always had a garden and ate right out of it. Not everybody has that, so this is an opportunity to give to the community, share skills and educate our neighbors.”

“It’s fun and interesting and stressful,” laughed Peterson-Maher. Even though the selling begins at 5 p.m., both women are on the job by 8:30 a.m. on market day, setting up signs around town, moving tables and answering calls. At 2:30 p.m. they set up the Friends of Bogert Park table and at 3 p.m. they begin filling the space cancellations.

When vendors begin arriving at 3:30 p.m., Peterson-Maher is in charge of parking control, which she deemed “like having 100 children” maneuvering in and out of the small lot. At 5 p.m., vendors start selling their wares, family activities begin and invited musicians serenade the crowd. When breakdown

begins at 8 p.m., the Bozeman City Band takes the stage for an hour, and the two women call it a day by 9:30 p.m.

"It's a labor of love," Huber-McGee said. "Sometimes we look at each other and ask 'Why do we do this?' But it gets us involved with the community. We hope people appreciate it, and we think they do."

Across the hill, Livingston's Farmers Market is a program of the Western Sustainability Exchange (WSE), where Annie Conley is market connections program director. "Our approach is this is a community building event that provides economically sustainable stimulus to members of the community," Conley said, while also promoting environmental stewardship.

Several individuals and organizations got the original Livingston Market started, but under WSE's sponsorship, it has grown steadily for eight years. It is held Wednesdays from 4:30-7:30 p.m. in Sacajawea Park. More than 180 different vendors sold at the 2009 market, while nearly 90 have shown up this summer on a single market day.

Conley, 57, modestly credits WSE director Lill Erickson for setting the big picture, and market master Rob Bankston for running the show with a smile, but she keeps things going. "There is so much to do behind the scenes," Conley said, "advertising, making signs, lining up sponsors and a lot of time on the phone with vendors. There's a lot more

to it than most people realize, but at the end of the day it's an incredibly gratifying thing to do."

Like most of the local markets, about one-third of the booths at Livingston offer farm products such as produce, ranch-raised meat and dairy goods, wool, preserves, honey or baked goods. Prepared foods represent the global economy, with Greek, Jamaican, Vietnamese and Mexican dishes available. Arts and crafts fill another chunk of spaces, as do non-profit groups. Live music is played in the bandshell. Livingston also promotes sales by children through a Youth Booth program.

"It's a valuable lesson in giving back to the community," Conley said. "They pay \$2.25 a week, and at the end of the season we poll the kids as to which non-profit we donate that money. Even more wonderful is watching these kids look an adult in the eye as they make a sale and make change and all."

Last year WSE teamed up with Junior Achievement to start a BizKids Camp, where children learn about money, business and taking charge of their finances. Another program, Biz in a Box, helps children develop business plans and products they can sell at the market, including garden crops they manage.

"These programs teach both entrepreneurial skills and sustainable practices like recycling," Conley said. The elderly also benefit at the market through the Senior Nutrition Program. And, she

Other area markets

Farmers Markets are run by women in three other local communities. Joanie Miller, 60, of Clyde Park, said she prayed for some way to bring her community together, and three years ago God gave her the idea to start the Shields Valley Farmers Market.

Limited to products that are "homemade, handmade or homegrown," much of the produce available at the dozen or so tables comes from locals with small gardens. The Saturday morning market, held 9 a.m. to noon in Clyde Park City Park, "is small and personal, and has a real old fashioned feel," Miller said. She acted as market master for the first two years, but now the vendors rotate that job, which makes them feel like they have a say in how it is run.

Down in Big Sky, Wendy Swenson, 35, is the market coordinator for the Big Sky Town Center, which holds a farmers market Wednesday evenings from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. Previously, a market had been held at a local store, but grew too big. A committee of locals decided to resurrect the market several years ago, and now 80 vendors gather in Firepit Park, providing food, crafts, music and kids' activities as well as the chance to support school fundraisers.

"It's so great to work with all the businesses and residents on this, and to see the tourists enjoy it also," Swenson said. "And it's great we can get really fresh produce right here."

To the west, the Manhattan Farmers Market is also held on Wednesdays, from 4:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at the City Park. Pat Figgins, 52, used to be a vendor at the Gallatin Valley Market, but decided five years ago that what was needed was "an opportunity to sell fresh produce and develop a market at the west end of the valley. I saw the power of the market."

Run by the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce, the market features entertainment and about 18 vendors and attracts both young and old, who can take part in the Senior Nutrition Program. "It's a big social event midweek for Manhattan," Figgins said. "I love the market, it's an addiction, and so social. I just want to see it keep growing and continue."

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Fresh onions at Bogert Park's Farmers Market in Bozeman.

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added, for several single mothers, the money made helps pay the rent and buy school clothes.

The Livingston Market also promotes community education through a series of special days, where practitioners and non-profits can inform the public of needs and availability. This year's special event days encompass a Kid's Day, Mental Health Awareness, Sustainability, Health Care and Arts and Culture.

"What's important about the farmers market is that it encompasses every aspect of sustainability," said Conley. "It showcases what is wonderful about this community, and brings fresh, vibrant, healthy food to the marketplace. It amazes me that the community is just hungry for this."

Born in Alabama with ties to Montana, Conley has lived in Livingston for 27 years. She has always worked in the health food business — except for a brief stint working on helicopters — as a store manager, in a restaurant and a food co-op. She loves her current position because the market itself is an education.

"It is for the vendors because it's an exercise in getting along," she said. "It is for the shoppers because it's an opportunity to be handed food by the hands that have gotten dirty growing and harvesting it. When you are looking at an artisan's creation and they're standing right there, it puts people into connection. It's a real privilege to be involved in those connections." ●

Nancy Kessler is a freelance writer in Livingston and a frequent contributor to the Bozeman Daily Chronicle niche publications.

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