

A Call to Duty

CONNECTING VETERANS TO THE RESOURCES THEY NEED TO BECOME ORGANIC FARMERS

Big ideas often start with an “aha” moment, when seemingly unrelated events come together in perfect synchronicity. That’s what happened for Cheryl Besenjak, a Vietnam-era U.S. Air Force veteran and community gardener, when she read our article “A Battle Worth Fighting” (October/November 2013), about veterans who are becoming organic farmers and ranchers: She realized that she needed to heed the call of duty once again.

In 1967, instead of heading to college, Cheryl joined the air force. She served in intelligence, briefing generals on photo reconnaissance. A new call to service came in 2006, when her husband, director of pastoral care at Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago and manager of the church’s food pantry, asked her if she would look into a program that encourages individuals to plant extra rows in their home gardens. The program, Plant a Row for the Hungry, is a movement sponsored by the Garden Writers Association that brings fresh produce to food-insecure families. Her husband’s request led Cheryl to lead the garden ministry and, eventually, to take master gardener training. In time, her efforts snowballed, and in the Lake Michigan town of Waukegan, Illinois, the Manna Garden Initiative was born: gardens, classes (including nutrition), and a free farmers’ market, helping neighbors develop food jobs and businesses.

“It’s not about me,” Cheryl says. “I’m just one of those people who’s good at networking and getting the right people in the room to get something done. I’ve always liked working as a unit, like the military, when you’re working together to achieve a mission.” The idea of providing agricultural training to veterans struck her as an important challenge. “This is bigger than a few raised beds and veggies. This is about training farmers! This is about helping other vets and feeding the country.”

After seeing *Ground Operations: Battlefields to Farmfields*, the documentary film featured in the *Organic Gardening* article, Cheryl contacted me, the film’s producer. She attended a Farmer Veteran Coalition conference, “Empowering Women Veterans,” which inspired her to start, with col-

leagues Lukan Paulus and Ellen Ewing, the Growing Healthy People network to connect veterans in Lake County, Illinois, with the resources they need to become organic farmers.

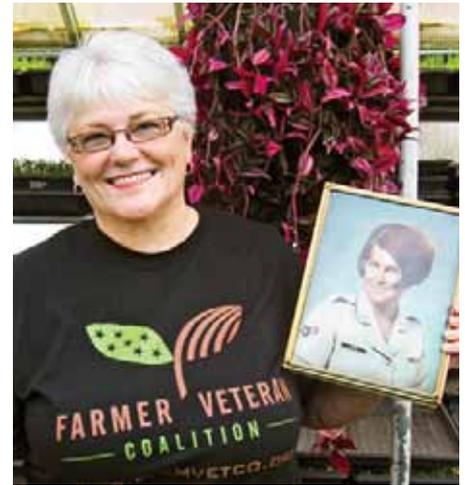
The College of Lake County, which offers an academic degree and certificate program in sustainable agriculture, ascertained the availability of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits for veterans at the school. Another key partner is the Liberty Prairie Foundation’s Farm Business Development Center, an organic-farm incubator. The center provides affordable leases for small parcels of certified-organic land, access to irrigation and shared farm equipment, and infrastructure for farmers, as well as experienced mentor farmers.

To reach veterans, the trio distribute copies of *Battlefields to Farmfields* to local service clubs and veterans’ groups. The film emphasizes the value of offering meaningful work to men and women returning from combat so they can create healthy new livelihoods for themselves. Organic farming serves that goal, while providing food security for the rest of us.

The timing couldn’t be better. Troops are coming home from Afghanistan; many Iraq vets are still unemployed; and, significantly, a new national label, “Homegrown by Heroes,” is being launched this year, giving shoppers the choice of buying food produced by veterans.

“When you’re a gardener, you’re always thinking in seasons—always looking ahead, always planning for what comes next,” says Cheryl. So what’s next? Cheryl has her eye on empty industrial warehouses in Waukegan as possible indoor hydroponic farms. The college has programs in trucking, culinary arts, sustainable agriculture, and green building. Connecting and collaborating with others to develop a regional food hub for gathering and distributing food is a bold goal that would pay off in the creation of local jobs. And Cheryl is up for the challenge.

—Dulanie Ellis



Cheryl Besenjak holds a 1969 portrait of herself in her U.S. Air Force uniform.

Growing Healthy People will host a benefit screening of *Ground Operations: Battlefields to Farmfields* during the film’s Midwest Film & Farms Tour in July 2014. For screening dates and more information, visit groundoperations.net.