

spotlight on
LAURA FREEMAN

AHEAD OF HER TIME

LAURA FREEMAN TURNS HER ENTREPRENEURIAL
TALENTS TO HEMP PRODUCTS

BY RENA BAER
PHOTOS BY RICK SAMUELS



Laura Freeman checks young hemp plants before they are planted.



Kentucky leads the nation in hemp acreage.





Hemp has replaced the hormone- and antibiotic-free cattle Laura Freeman raised on the fifth-generation family farm.

When Laura Freeman's daughter asked her five years ago about growing hemp on their family's Mt. Folly Farm in Clark County as part of a state pilot program, the former owner and founder of Laura's Lean Beef had a vision. "I'd seen those Paul Sawyier paintings," Freeman said in reference to Kentucky's foremost landscape painter. "I thought we were going to grow rope."

Freeman, who was living on Martha's Vineyard at the time, returned home to Kentucky for the first planting and then the harvest, which amounted to 13 acres yielding two bags of hemp grain. "It was like nothing," she said. "It was terrible."



Freeman's expanding line of products includes honey and candy.



The hemp had been planted late, during one of the wettest summers on record, and didn't thrive as expected. "I thought, 'Holy cow, what can I do with this?' By that time, I'd been to enough seminars and done enough reading that I had started to realize this wasn't about rope."

It was about the plant's nutritional and health benefits, Freeman continued. (See sidebar on page 32.)

"So, I am looking at [the yield] and wondering if I can make healthy candy like I did healthy beef," she said.

New directions

These days the dry-erase boards in her Mt. Folly office are crammed with ideas and details, written in colorful markers and illustrative of how much goes through her entrepreneurial mind every day. She is busy with a threefold mission: sowing and selling hemp and hemp oil products; creating regional economic growth for Appalachian Kentucky; and using her farm and voice to draw attention to climate change. If it sounds like a lot, it is ... exceeded only by her passion for that mission.

She, and her husband, Bill, came back to run Mt. Folly right after the first hemp harvest. They ordered a big block of dark chocolate from Ghirardelli's, purchased a double boiler, and used the tiny crop to make hemp chocolate, which they sold at the Christmas Farmers' Market in Winchester.

"You know how popcorn gets in your teeth? There was a little bit of that problem," she said. "But, people were pretty interested in it. And, I said, 'Yeah, this could work.' "

Freeman talked to the folks at Mount Sterling-based Ruth

Hunt Candies and got the hemp chocolate on the market in the fall of 2016.

Fueled by a love of reading and learning, Freeman has always been a little ahead of her time. When she first returned to Clark County in the early 1980s at age 23 after attending college in the Northeast, her mother had inherited the now fifth-generation family farm. It was being used as a mini industrial cattle operation and losing money due to drought conditions and an economic crisis. So they decided to sell the cattle company.

Instead, Freeman began farming organic beef after reading several books about industrial meat and the danger of feeding animals antibiotics. "I knew I did not want to do that with cattle," she said, adding that she was at the tail end of the hippie farmer movement that shunned chemicals in food, wanted to build topsoil, and eschewed factory farming.

In addition to grass feeding her cattle for the lower fat and cholesterol, she also kept them hormone- and antibiotic-free. Freeman said no one really paid attention to what she was doing until she branded it in 1985 as Laura's Lean Beef. "The whole list," she said. "But lean got it."

So much so, that the company grew to distributing its natural beef in 47 states, doing \$150 million annually in business.

Freeman sold Laura's Lean Beef in 2008 after a riding accident three years earlier had injured her spine and caused neurologic damage, forcing her to relearn many of life's daily activities, including walking, swallowing, and talking.

As she recovered, Freeman decided to attend the Donella



Workers plant a new crop of hemp in Mt. Folly's fields. Freeman recalls that the initial planting five years ago yielded just two bags of hemp grain.

Meadows Leadership Fellows Program in Boston, which had been launched in 2003 to train leaders and develop systems in global sustainability. Her particular group of students was assigned to address climate change.

"I was in a lot of pain, but my cognition was all right, and I could absorb things," she said. "So, I sat there for two years and listened while these climate change people paraded through."

As an environmentalist and a believer in science, she also absorbed the research that shows the extreme likelihood that greenhouse gases are leading to climate collapse. She took seriously her charge to go back into the world and create a sustainable system.

While her classmates had dispersed to places such as London, San Francisco, and all corners of the world, Freeman was back from Martha's Vineyard — to Clark County. "I was trying to think: How do you develop a system that will be carbon neutral, at the least, in protein/coal country?" she said.

Freeman explained her ideal of using agricultural land to absorb greenhouse gases (sequestering carbon) by growing cover crops, hence fostering photosynthesis, year-round. At her own farm she is evaluating her organic practices of using no synthetic fertilizers, no herbicides, no pesticides, and putting organic matter back in the soil, including composting manure from the local horse farms. The hope is to sequester

HEMP'S RESURGENCE

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Kentucky was the largest producer in the nation of hemp fiber, used to make items such as rope and sails. Henry Clay was a hemp pioneer, bringing seeds from Asia and planting them on his estate, Ashland. Hemp also was grown at Calumet Farm. The plant lost its foothold after World War I when tobacco became the state's cash crop and synthetic fibers were more readily available. Hemp went into a full retreat in the 1970s during the federal "War on Drugs," which declared it a controlled substance because it contained THC, though in levels too low to have the same "high" effect as marijuana.

Kentucky restarted hemp production in 2014, after the federal government passed the Agricultural Act of 2014, and later relaxed regulations further with the Hemp Farming Act championed by U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell as a replacement crop for tobacco. Mt. Folly took part in the state's initial pilot program, getting in on the ground floor of the nation's discovery that hemp oil (cannabidiol or CBD) might reduce inflammation and help with chronic pain. Studies on its efficacy are still underway and the FDA advises caution in using the product.

Kentucky now leads the nation in hemp acreage.

carbon in a stable environment, but she acknowledges it is not easy to study and she is reaching out to biologists and soil experts for help in quantifying the results.

She also is trying to simplify her message about climate change without being controversial.

Freeman said she recognizes the important role coal has played in Kentucky's economy and doesn't want to be seen as a competitor or naysayer but rather as someone who is offering an alternate path for the future.

"I'm selling hemp as a product, but I am trying to build a culture," she said, adding that she tries to speak publicly once a month and explains her goals on her website. "You also can't meet with me without me hitting you up about the carbon economy."



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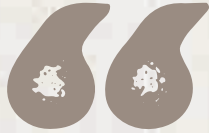
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I'M SELLING HEMP AS
A PRODUCT, BUT I AM
ALSO TRYING TO BUILD
A CULTURE."

— LAURA FREEMAN



A rustic cabin serves as the farm's main office.

Ben Pasley, who serves as COO of the farm and grew up nearby, said he works with Freeman because she is "taking the risk and going after things people aren't willing to do.

"It's an environment of interesting people and creative ideas," he said. "You spend time with Miss Laura, and you are going to experience and learn things like nowhere else. It's never run-of-the-mill; it's always something new, something different. We are going to take risks that no one else does."

Freeman constantly gives credit to the 18 employees who surround her, several of whom she considers part owners, for Mt. Folly Farm's success. In addition to the oil and the chocolate, they are also selling CBD (cannabidiol, derived from the hemp plant) topicals for people, and CBD treats for dogs at regional outlets, online, and at Laura's Mercantile, a small store on the farm. And sales are going really well, she said.

In October, plans are to move the store to downtown Winchester, where Freeman is opening a distillery, bar, and farm-to-table cafe in a historic 1800s building that once served as a meeting house for the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The church sold the building to a battery company in 1926, and

the city bought it in 2001 with plans to turn it into a parking lot.

Much to the relief of many Winchester residents, Freeman acquired the building, which has a natural spring beneath it. She bought it several years ago, pre-hemp, with the distillery idea in mind. Always forward-thinking, she had already trademarked "Moonshine Trail."

"I had wanted to start a business that would be part of the revitalization of Winchester and go into the Eastern Kentucky mountains," she said. "I thought about what that could be.

"To build a regional economy, I have to come up with jobs for people who are not going to be involved in the extraction of fossil fuels," Freeman continued. "So, coming up with the distillery and Moonshine Trail was one thing. I had put that in play before I realized CBD oil would become such a big thing."

Part of that realization, she said, came from personal experience. Freeman said once she had learned how to use CBD oil properly, "it was unbelievable." It helped with the residual neurological pain from her riding accident and arthritis. "And I said, 'We're raising this.' And we had to stop the distillery to do it.

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spotlight on

LAURA FREEMAN



Mt. Folly-grown sweet potatoes produce sweet potato vodka. Right, Zach Pasley examines the latest batch of the liquor.



"Now that we are getting more staff [all local], we can move back to the distillery," she said.

This past summer husband Bill and Zach Pasley (a fifth cousin to Ben), who will be president of Wildcat Willy's Distillery, were experimenting with a still on the farm, trying to nail down a recipe and the enzymes necessary for their new formulation: sweet potato vodka.

"It's definitely a niche," said Zach Pasley. "I have never seen sweet

potato vodka on the shelf ... Eastern Kentucky is known for sweet potatoes, and Laura's trying to do something for Eastern Kentucky, so this is our part."

Though the ideas might seem to come naturally to Freeman, she spends an inordinate amount of time thinking and figuring things out.

"To do this in Kentucky, in the foothills of Appalachia, is hard work, but it's the crux of what makes me tick," she said. **KM**



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