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Bob Beyfuss

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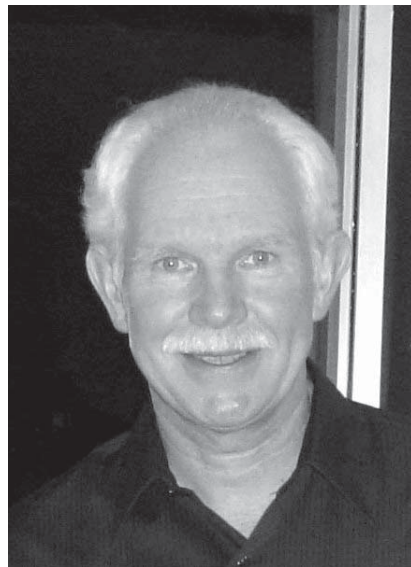
My current title is Agriculture and Natural Resources Issue Leader for Cornell Cooperative Extension of Greene County. I also serve as the American ginseng specialist for Cornell Cooperative Extension. I've been with Cooperative Extension twenty-seven years next March. I've been the Agriculture Program Leader for about sixteen years.

INTERVIEWED BY

Larry Van De Valk

October, 2003

I have a rather varied resume. I spent most of my summers in Greene County. When I was a kid, my uncle had a dairy farm. I spent my summers working on that dairy farm until I was about 16 years old. At about that time I decided that I didn't particularly like cows all that much—that's blasphemy working for Cornell—so I started spending my summers working on a local horse farm not far from here. I knew from the time I was four years old that I would eventually live in Greene County. While living in New Jersey, during the winter, I attended Rutgers University, where I graduated in 1973 with a Bachelor's degree in botany. I immediately moved to Greene County and became a blacksmith. I had some experience shoeing horses while working on the horse farm. I did odd jobs, worked in gas stations, and cleaned toilets in a factory in Schenectady. I had many various and sundry odd jobs during the '70s. There was a profound depression, well, not a depression, but a recession going on in the '70s. I had been laid off from the plastic factory that I was



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working at, and I was actually collecting unemployment.

I had never heard of Cooperative Extension, despite Rutgers University being the land grant college for New Jersey. In 1977, the employment service said that they had an opening for a part-time horticulture assistant at Cooperative Extension in Cairo. Well, I applied for the job. As it turns out, the person who is chairman of the agriculture program committee at that time was the farmer that had purchased my Uncle John's dairy farm. That farmer's name was Charley Kohrs. He was a kind and a wonderful man. He helped my Uncle John out a great deal. He said, "Oh, I know this fellow; he's a good kid. Let's hire him." I wasn't a kid. I was 27 at the time. So I was hired as a part-time, temporary summer assistant. After working here two or three weeks, I decided that this was a career I really wanted to pursue, so I tried very hard to make myself indispensable. I learned how to do my boss's job—a classic thing. Anything that he hated to do, I would do voluntarily. That's how you make yourself indispensable. By 1978, our local board of directors decided that they would create an agent position for me, and I was hired officially as a Cooperative Extension agent in January 1979. Fortunately, I had the bachelor's degree, which was all that was required in those days. I had reasonably good grades, and I had some experience. So that is how I got to CCE. I've tried very hard to make the most of it.

The nicest thing about my job is that it is so diverse. I do have regular weekly duties. I've been writing a newspaper gardening column, which appears in nine or ten newspapers. I've been writing that column for over twenty years. I've also been doing regular radio programming that appears on four radio stations, three of which are taped. One of them I do live every Thursday morning on WGY, which is a big, 50,000-watt station. It's a live, call-in show. I also am the editor of the newsletter that we send out—a monthly newsletter that Greene County CCE sends out. In the past, I had hosted a TV show in Albany that essentially consisted of interviewing farmers. A CCE media specialist named Barbara Meffert produced the show. Those are pretty much the routine things. These are the things that have to be done each week that require me to spend some time in the office. I also am a resource person on topics related to home grounds maintenance and gardening. I have a part-time assistant that helps answer most of the gardening calls, but I still spend a good amount of time answering peoples' gardening questions. I have fairly extensive coursework in tree pathology. I'm an internationally certified arborist. And consequently, I tend to get an awful lot of calls that pertain to hazard trees. I evaluate trees on a community wide basis for local towns and municipalities to see if they are hazard trees. I am often involved in issues regarding tree planting and disease diagnosis due to the fact that I'm a certified arborist.

My other regular duties involve research. I have quite a bit of ongoing re-

search and demonstration projects, particularly with American ginseng, and to a lesser extent with mushrooms, goldenseal, and ornamental plants. Primarily my research focus tends to be on ginseng, and the very practical side of learning the best ways that potential growers can grow it. I'm trying to come up with tools that will enable the average person to learn how to grow ginseng. I've got R&D sites where we bring in people and show them what ginseng looks like. We talk about the soil, and basically anything involved with that. I'm very fortunate. This is somewhat unique in the Extension system, to have a Cornell intern who works at the Arnot Forest. For the last four years I've been supervising an intern along with my partner, Louise Buck. We work on agroforestry projects—primarily ginseng, but also mushrooms and goldenseal. So in the summertime, I spend a good deal of time commuting back and forth between here and Arnot to work with that intern. I also do a lot of public speaking. I speak to garden clubs, to rotary groups, and I speak to Kiwanis. I'm usually speaking about topics related to gardening and horticulture.

I guess the other big hat that I wear is in the field of public health. Greene County does not really have a health department. We have a public health nursing department with one doctor, that's it. So we have very severe needs in the field of public health. Greene County is one of the leading counties in the state in terms of Lyme disease. If we had a health department we might be the leading county, but a lot of our cases are diagnosed outside of the county and consequently, they don't get recorded here. Last year, right across the river, Columbia County was the leading county in the US in terms of Lyme disease. So we do a lot of public education on the topic of "don't get bit by a tick." I coordinate school programs and environmental education programs regarding Lyme disease prevention. We have a tick ID service, and we educate people one-on-one, including most of the local doctors. If a patient shows up with a deer tick, or any tick on them, they usually send that person to us to educate them about the ecology of Lyme disease and deer ticks. I also work on public health issues like West Nile Virus and rabies. Those are the three public health issues that I get involved in. I spend a good deal of time doing public speaking on those particular topics too.

I supervise an extraordinarily talented, but extremely independent staff of three people. I have a full time agriculture agent whose specialty is livestock—Mick Bessire. Mick also works with field crops, and we also subcontract him to Columbia County to do some of their field crops work. But Mick's specialty is primarily in livestock. Marilyn Wyman is another educator that I supervise. She is a part-time person, and she works on community issues. Marilyn has really taken the lead on a lot of these big projects. Marilyn works on specific topics that are related to public policy and things like that. My third staff person is my horticulture assistant. His name is Rick

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Burstell. He pretty much coordinates the Master Gardener program, although I do a lot of teaching for that. He coordinates the day-to-day Master Gardener program schedules, the volunteers, and he answers most of the phone calls that come in regarding horticulture. He also does a lot of the public health work in terms of answering questions, identifying ticks, and working with people.

What I enjoy the most about my job, particularly over the last five to eight years, has been working quite closely with students—particularly interns. Not so much in the classroom, but in one-on-one situations. In addition to the Cornell interns at the Arnot forest, I've had a couple of interns right here in Greene County. I think that of all the things I do on my job, I like working with interns one-on-one, that type of education. I've had some great interns. I make them work fifteen-hour days, occasionally. We'll take off from Greene County and we'll go up to Lake Placid to look at some plots, hit a few other spots, and get them back home at midnight. I really like that intensive one-on-one kind of education. That's what turns me on the most about the job.

My personal goals pretty much revolve around two things. One is making a difference in young people's lives, and that ties directly back into working with the interns. I would like some of these young people that I've worked with over the years to be able to say, "That guy made a big difference in my life." I've had some very talented interns that may go on to do great things, really great things. I would love to have some former student win a Nobel prize, be in Stockholm and say, "You know, there was this old guy in Greene County that really pushed me in that direction..." That would be the dream thing that I would like.

My personal goals pretty much revolve around two things. One is making a difference in young people's lives.

My second goal relates more to the fact that I feel as though I am helping to create an industry that will have a positive effect on the lives of rural residents in upstate New York. It's interesting that at the turn of the 20th century there were over 5000 ginseng farms in New York. Now they have kind of petered out in upstate New York. I would like to be responsible for at least stimulating that industry to make a comeback. I'm also very concerned about this particular plant—American ginseng, which is sort of a threatened, or at least a commercially exploitable plant. I would like to be able to say that due to my work, my efforts, we understand more about the ecology of the plant than we did before. And as a result of some of my

work, we've taken strides to reintroduce this plant to its native habitat in New York. I would like people to say that about me when I'm gone.

In 1984, I was granted sabbatical from Extension in Greene County to pursue a Master's degree. I attended Cornell. I was very fortunate that my local association agreed to pay my entire salary for the entire year while I was a student at Cornell. Cornell waived tuition and fees, and I was able to get a couple of scholarships on

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top of my salary. So I was a wealthy graduate student. I rented a room from my counterpart in Tompkins County, two blocks from the Cornell campus. I lived well there for a year and had a wonderful, wonderful time academically, emotionally and physically.

Within six months, I had decided that I wanted to write my Master's project on American ginseng. The reason for that was because I credited con-

suming American ginseng with the success that I met with in graduate school. When I left here to go back to school in 1984, I was petrified. I had been on the job for about seven years. I was in a marriage that really was kind of falling apart at the time, and I had gotten about forty pounds overweight. I was very nervous about going back to school, especially with the Cornell reputation—all the smart kids out there. I was under a great deal of stress. When I first returned from my first weekend home from school, my wife said she wanted a divorce. She wanted it immediately—to add to the stress load. Well I had heard a bit about ginseng from some people that I had on my TV show in the Albany area, and I learned a good deal about ginseng from interviewing farmers. Not just how to grow it, but how it's used; it was reported to be the best thing in the world for stress. So when I returned to graduate school in 1984, and found myself confronted with all these stresses, I started taking wild American ginseng. I think it had a profound effect on my own personal health. I suddenly found that I could work from 7:00 in the morning until 1:00 AM. I went to the gym every night, lost all the weight I needed to lose, got all "A's" in my grades, did well academically; and I credited the ginseng with it.

So when it came time to prepare my Master's project, I asked my major professor, George Good, if I could write my project on American ginseng. Being the wonderful person that George is, he agreed. So I started the paper search, the research in the stacks. I found that there was virtually no information out there, which was actually good. It made anything that I was going to come up with hard to

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refute, but on the other hand, it was easy to learn a lot very quickly. So I spent my second semester in the library doing my research and the paper chase. Then I took a summer and actually visited ginseng growers and got some practical experience. I spent some time in Wisconsin, where most of the ginseng in this country is grown. Spent some time in Canada, and visited some of the ginseng people in North Carolina. I rounded out my master's project, which took about a year and a half to finish, write and get published. I officially got my Master's degree in the Department of Horticulture in January 1987, but the Master's was in Agriculture.

It was funny, because when I returned to Greene County, I had learned about ginseng, and my goal was to develop this ginseng growing industry. At that time ginseng was grown under artificial shade cloth in a field situation. I really did not realize at the time how intensive that system was and how dependent it was upon synthetic inputs, particularly pesticides. Since ginseng is a very minor use crop, there are very few pesticides registered for it. Before I knew it, within three or four months after returning from school, I found myself working with a group of investors who spent over a million dollars trying to grow ginseng on a farm in the Catskills. I was very involved in that commercial nine-acre ginseng operation. It failed horribly. It failed for a number of reasons—bad management, no pesticides to use, and a host of other factors that went wrong; which got me disgusted with the way it was produced in the mass quantities.

It turned out to be fortuitous because no sooner had I thrown my hands up in the air and said, "This is not the way it's going to work," the price of cultivated ginseng just went in the toilet. That's because literally thousands and thousands of acres that were being properly managed were springing up in Canada. In 1984, there weren't more than 200 or 300 acres of ginseng in Canada. By 1990, there were close to 5000 acres in production. So the market, the supply, was just huge. So I got away from the field-cultivated ginseng just as the prices were falling apart. That was a good thing, but I never lost my interest in ginseng. I was still fascinated with the plant and its ecology, particularly the woodland version.

I kept watching the ginseng prices. As the price for the field-cultivated ginseng was going down, the price for the wild ginseng, or the wood's cultivated ginseng, was going up and up and up. I remember in the '70s, it was like \$100 per pound. In the '80s, woods grown ginseng was around \$185 per pound. Well by the late '80s, it was getting \$300–\$400 per pound. It was like, "Wow, you could grow this stuff in the woods; you could make some dough here!" Then, when Louise Buck contacted me probably seven or eight years ago, she was working in agroforestry and said ginseng might be a component of an agroforestry system. You know, that rekindled my interest in working with it. Louise has been my primary benefactor

ever since. Without Louise, I don't think I would be on this path; she has been the most important person in me being where I am today.

I'm going to tell you about the story of how we organized the ARC. The ARC is a resource center, the Agroforestry Resource Center. You wouldn't believe how we struggled with the name. The Sustainable Landscape Learning Center was one that we kicked around a lot. There have been a lot of names, but we finally settled on the ARC. I think because that encompasses all we are trying to do here. What we envisioned was not just a place where students can come and learn about topics that are related to agroforestry, but also a place that would serve as a resource for people that are interested in rural land management and some of the issues that are involved in rural landscape development. Our original focus was on three things. One of things was the classroom where we could actually teach. The second thing was the resource center where people from all over the country, indeed all over the world, could come and learn on the accumulated body of agroforestry and rural

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land use planning issues. The third focus was to be able to offer what we had to the rest of the world through distance learning. The one impetus to get this thing off the ground was the fact that we received a \$35,000 grant to acquire distance learning equipment.

I guess my first thought about doing something like this happened before any of those grants actually happened. In September 2000, we hosted an international ginseng conference right here in Greene County. This was kind of a culmination of the time I had spent working on ginseng. Meeting many people over the years in the ginseng industry, being a very small group of people, I was able to attract some really high-powered people to that conference. I was also able to get some political support. Our local Assemblyman at that time was a gentleman by the name of John Faso. John really had, and still does have, a great deal of foresight. He was at the ginseng conference giving the introductory remarks since he came up with a \$10,000 member item to support the conference. We used this money to provide scholarships for farmers because it was a very expensive conference. It cost \$300 to go to it. We took John's money and we gave scholarships to farmers who were interested in growing ginseng.

I remember that at the end of the conference, John Faso said to me, "Well

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Bob, this was all very nice, and it was a very successful conference; you got a lot of excitement and enthusiasm. Where are you going to take it from here?" And I said to John, talking off the top of my head, "Well, we really need to have some sort of a facility that is actually devoted to this type of research, and not just regarding ginseng, but other things that are happening out in the woods. 85% of this county is forestland. That's what we really need." And he said, "Then why don't you just go out and do it." And so the egg was hatched in my brain. I said to myself, "You know, we could do something like that."

My specific role was to meet face to face with people and twist their arms. I have a lot of passion for this. If I get in someone's face, it is very hard to say no to me. Although, believe me, people have said no to me. We were not as successful with Assemblyman Hooker as we were with Senator Seward, but it was not for lack of trying. So I think my main role in this was to get my face in other people's faces and use my reputation, my gray hair, my experience, and the fact that I'm pretty well known around here, to try and convince people to go along with this.

My main role was to meet face to face with people that were important for our support, but I didn't do that entirely—Andy did a good deal of that too. Andy handled a lot of the NYC Watershed connection. We all met with Senator Seward and Jim Campion. Once those initial meetings were held, I would turn it over to my staff to work out the details. I got the president of Columbia-Greene Community College to commit to a certain amount of money. It was up to Marilyn to get that all figured out—all of those details. I got WAC [Watershed Agriculture Council] to consider giving us money, but it was up to Andy to actually get the contracts. There is a ton of work in that stuff. A lot of these things call for matches—coming up with this, coming up with that. The staff did all of the administrative work, and I was basically the idea person, the promotion person, and the guy you hand the microphone to talk about it on the radio. This is kind of my style because I detest administrative work. I have no stomach for it and they know that. Andy is smart enough to realize that there are certain things certain people can do, and if you let them do it they do well, don't force them to do things that they don't do well.

I am a good friend with the fellow that owns this place, Eric Rasmussen. He's been a good volunteer. He's also been on our Extension board of directors for many years, and been very active in forestry. Eric was the "Tree Farmer of the Year" not too long ago. We have always used his property across the street, I would say, for the last thirty years. That has been the stage for our conservation field days, where we get 400 or 500 sixth graders in here, and we take them around to different stations. He's got a nice nature trail and a demonstration site over there. So I'm sitting down having coffee and chatting with Eric one day, and I mentioned what John Faso had

said to me about “go do it” and I said, “Eric, you need to give us some land. Donate us some land, so that we can build this entity I have in my head.” And Eric said, “I think I can do that, I think I can do that. I have to talk to my family, my kids, but I think I can do that for you.”

After Eric had agreed to virtually give us some land over there, I started coming up with some estimates of what it would cost to build a resource center. The estimates of what I got were in the neighborhood of a quarter-million dollars, and I’m thinking there’s no way we’re ever going to get that kind of money, at least not that I could envision. But there was a chance we might be able to get some money from Cornell, either for a learning center or whatever, but certainly not enough to

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build an entire new facility! So I approached Eric about this particular building. The building use to be the recreation hall for his resort across the street. I said, “What about your recreation hall—what are you going to be doing with that?” And Eric said, “I really don’t have any plans. I’m just storing junk in it right now.” And I said, “How about you lease us that building?” And then he said, “I might be interested in that.” About that time, we got

the grant for the distance learning equipment and it was like, “Well, now we’ve got this equipment we’ve got a place we can get virtually for free. He’s not going to charge us a lot of rent because he’d really like it to be used as well as the forest across the street...” So now all I have to do is come up with some money to be able to renovate the building to move forward.

I consider myself a catalyst. A catalyst is something that speeds up a reaction that is probably going to happen anyway. I basically helped a reaction that was going to occur, occur. I sped up the process. This would have happened—maybe not here, maybe not exactly under this situation, but what has happened here would have happened. I think a good metaphor for this would come from Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*: “How could such things happen as this?” The metaphor he used is: “When the apple is ripe, it will fall.” I think the apple was ripe, and I just happened to be the guy sitting under the tree when the apple fell and conked him on the head.

I turned the project over to Marilyn and Andy Turner at that point. They were very passionate about this. Marilyn is a special projects coordinator. I said, “Marilyn, boy have I got a job for you. Eric is willing to let us use this building, and

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we need to renovate the building; we need the money.” She said, “We also need to put together some sort of support.” If we were going to look for money, we’d have to get our ducks in order; we’d have to get people who are willing to write letters of support. We needed to find people who would be willing to go along with us. So Marilyn convened a series of meetings where we brought in people that might have some sort of interest in agroforestry. We brought in people from the Maple Producers Association, beekeepers, CCE, Delaware County, Columbia County, the local RC&D (Resource Conservation and Development), Hudson Mohawk RC&D people, farmers, foresters, and the Watershed. We brought in people from the WAC, the Catskill Forest Association, and we invited people from the NYFOA [New York Forest Owners Association]. We invited essentially anyone that might have some sort of interest or stake in agroforestry or forest land use issues. We sat down around the table, had a couple of meetings, gathered data, lined up our support, and then we started putting together presentations for potential funders.

At one point we invited Senator Jim Seward to meet with Andy, Marilyn, and myself to talk about what we are trying to do here. We needed money. We asked him specifically if he could help us out with some financial help. I thought the presentation went well with Senator Seward. And a week later he called up and said, “I’ve got \$50,000 for you.” Well, that really put the impetus to it. Now we had the promise of about \$30,000 in equipment, and another \$50,000 coming from Senator Seward. The initial meeting with Senator Seward was a key turning point, and getting the distance learning equipment was the other. So now we had something that we could parlay.

We then approached the WAC, and got them to commit to \$25,000. I guess that was the third turning point. That was crucial. It was primarily Andy’s doing. Although Marilyn wrote the proposals, I think it was Andy playing golf with JC Shaver that facilitated that. You know as well as I do that a lot of times things happen because of a golf game, or a poker game, or an aside comment, or even a personal relationship. And that’s how things happen. So those were the three features, and again, I credit Andy entirely with getting the learning center, or at least getting the distance learning equipment; of course Marilyn did all of the administrative work on that.

We went to the local community college, which is Columbia-Greene CC. It serves both Columbia and Greene Counties, but it’s located in Columbia County. One of the contentious issues between the college and Greene County is that when a student from Greene County goes to a community college other than Columbia Greene, there’s a charge-back. Basically, the county gets a charge-back from the college. In most counties, the county government pays those fees. In Greene County,

those charges get passed on to the towns. So there are some towns that are paying \$15,000–\$20,000 per year for charge backs as a result of the fact that their kids are going to colleges other than Columbia-Greene. The Hudson River is a barrier, even though students can actually get their dollar amount back if they go there. So Columbia-Greene is trying to expand their presence on this side of the river. I approached the president of Columbia-Greene, Jim Campion, who has been an acquaintance of mine for about thirty years. I told him we'd like to offer some Columbia-Greene classes on this side of the river, and he said that's what they would like to do too, maybe to help with the charge-back issue. I asked him for some money, and he agreed to support us to the tune of about \$6,000 per year, and in return, I would offer a course. I offer the course that I am now teaching, called "Introduction to Temperate Agroforestry."

I don't think a course has ever been approved this quickly. Normally, it's about a two-year process from the time you put together your course proposal to the time that the students actually show up. Well this all happened in about three months. It had to go through the departments, and I didn't appreciate how much they bent over backwards to accommodate me at the time, but I do now because I now know what's involved in putting together a course. I'm going to offer some more courses here. So the community college agreed to kick in some money.

When passion did not persuade, politics sometimes did. Even though they may not have shared the passion, politically, they could see this as being a good thing. For example, Columbia-Greene CC is a wonderful college, but they don't need me to teach a course. But from a political perspective, it's a good thing for them to be able to go and say to the county legislature, "Look, we're now offering courses on your side of the river; therefore, you should continue to support us." So although Jim Campion may not have shared the passion for what we are doing here, he sure is smart enough to know that politically it's a good idea. It was in his self-interest to do this. With other groups like the Empire State Ginseng Growers Association, again, it is in their business interest to support an entity like this too.

So passion is good, but you really need to convince people that from a practical standpoint it's going to be good for them. That's very hard to do if you're thinking long-term. You can convince somebody that if you do something today it's going to pay back two years from now. But it's hard to convince somebody that by planting this little maple tree that in thirty years, this tree is going to be better than that tree over there. To say, "Mr. Maple Producer, you're going to be dead when these trees are producing." To convince people that it's in the self-interest of their industry is the trick, and we were able to do that to a great extent. When passion doesn't work, politics and self-interest do help. Even Andy, though he's impassioned to do

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this, somewhere down the line might decide he doesn't want to be the executive director of CCE. He might decide he wants to be the president of the board of the ARC. That could happen. Marilyn might even want to be the education coordinator for this particular entity. She's wearing that hat now in addition to her other hats. So you have to find some self-interest among your partners to push it forward, because your passion alone is not going to carry it.

We didn't ask any local legislators for money at that point. We pretty much were going to try to do this without going to our local funders to ask for more money—they had been kind to us. We soon found that we had enough pieces of the puzzle together and then another important person came on board. We had this old building, which was an old recreation hall, but we needed a learning center. I happen to have a good friend who is an architect, named John Tobin. John taught at RPI [Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute] for a number of years, and now he is in private practice. He and his wife, a former 4-H agent, have been very good friends of mine. He is a superbly talented architect. I said, "John, do you think you could have a look-see at our building?" Before I knew it, John had jumped in with both feet. He did the design and the planning; he did so much work in terms of designing the structure, and he did it for free! So that was another big, big bonus that came out of it. All of these other people that we had worked with since we had enlisted their support were willing to support us however they could. They didn't have any money, but they would do what they could. A lot of them would help us with "this or that." So with all of our supporters, we had enough money to go ahead with the renovation.

You need to convince people in the community, to instill some sense of pride in them. You need to remind people that there are good things happening in the community. Everything you see in the news is all negative; it's all the bad things that happened in your community. You need people going around the community saying what a great community it is and what wonderful assets the community has, but only if people would use them. That's a message that we don't get out. There are not enough people bragging about Greene County. There are not enough people bragging about the northern Catskills. That's what I do: I brag. I tell people how wonderful their community is, and how they can make their community the showcase of the world. When I go speak to the Rotary group in Windham, I don't say, "We're building something that's going to be

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a star in Greene County.” I say, “We’re building something that’s going to be a star in the whole northeast.”

People really have a low self-esteem in rural areas in general. Rural communities, particularly poor rural communities, (and we’re certainly not a rich county) have suffered from a lack of self-esteem. They don’t realize the wonderful resources that they have available to them within their community. You do need to be a cheerleader; you do need to convince people that there is a sense of community,

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that it can be something really good. If you start telling people that what they are doing is great, that their community is great, pretty soon they will start believing it. That’s how you get their support. If you don’t tell them, they don’t know it, and they don’t think they can do anything until you convince them that what they do have going is a good thing.

I love taking people that may start as a volunteer on a small sub-committee of a planning board, for example,

and I watch these people develop as they realize that they can actually do things. The whole process of taking a person from a community and turning them into a leader is a wonderful thing. I think we do this well in Extension. We empower people. I don’t particularly like that term, but I think it fits in this case: empowering local citizens to realize that they can make a difference. I think we all tend to be a little bit lazy, a little apathetic; we’ll wait for somebody else to do it. If you can actually empower someone by convincing them that they can make a difference, then you’ve created something very powerful.

You are doomed to failure unless you have widespread support, but you cannot let the inmates get control of the asylum. You have to have their support, but you can’t give up control, and you can’t do anything big by committee. It’s important to get support, but it’s equally important to have people that are willing to take action and responsibility for their actions. Andy took a tremendous gamble with this. He was willing to convince our board of directors that we should lay out all this money in the hope that we are going to get it back. It was Andy who convinced the board of directors to allow him to work on this, to allow me to work on this. It’s not an issue of “if I’m not working on this, what else am I working on?” It is not an issue because I do other things. It would only take about two or three board members

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who say, "This is a half-baked, cockamamie idea. This is crazy; this is not what you should be doing in Greene County." All it would have taken to thwart this project at almost any step along the way would have been for a half a dozen people in the community to say that this was a bad idea, that this was something that we should not be using our resources to do. That didn't happen, and it didn't happen because people like Andy and Marilyn had the vision. We basically made them an offer that they couldn't refuse. So you need to be committed, and you need to be passionate about it. I also learned that passion does not always persuade as much as I'd like it to.

There's a neat story there. We put the job out to bid, there weren't that many bids that had come in, and we accepted the low bid. No sooner had we accepted the low bid than the person who had made the bid called us up and said, "I have made a terrible mistake. I underestimated my bid by a good \$20,000". His bid was for \$66,000, and he said it was going to cost a good \$88,000 to do what we wanted to do. We could either re-bid the job, or we could say, "OK, go ahead." Well, we said, "OK, go ahead." Andy made the decision to agree and then hope that we could work with this builder. That in itself had a dramatic effect. The contractor was stupefied that we had agreed to the fact that he had just upped his bid by 25%. Well he came in and did the job for his original bid, actually a little bit less than his original bid. He worked very closely with the architect, and he was able to do the job. So it turns out that we did get the building renovated for what we were looking for. It was great. That was a surprise that turned out all right.

The most serious disappointment was when we met with Assemblyman Hooker, who was newly elected. Basically, we did the same pitch that we did for Senator Seward, but we got the exact opposite reaction. Assemblyman Hooker said he would not support this. He thought it was a great idea, but his political philosophy was that funding for an entity such as this should come from the private sector, not the public sector. He said there would be no line item money coming from him, and he said this in a nice way, but that was disappointing. That was the only time that Andy, Marilyn and I were actually bummed.

We were also a little disappointed when we took Mr. Hooker's advice, which was to go to the private sector and solicit funding from all these foundations and private organizations that have some aspect in forestry. We did go to those at his suggestion and received virtually nothing from the private sector. So that was a bit of a disappointment. I forget the exact number of solicitations, but I think we sent out more than fifty or sixty and we didn't get a dime. We did get a little help from our local bank, and our Chamber of Commerce is hopefully going to support us to a certain extent. That was kind of a gray day when we sent out all of those letters and

got nothing back in return—even from people that I really thought would be donors. You know, when you really believe in a project that someone else doesn't support, it makes you feel like you're not doing something right or you're not worthwhile. You try not to take it personally, but you do.

Other than that, there was a little moment of trepidation when the class was coming here to meet for the first time. It was 11:00 AM and the class was due to be here at 2:00 PM. We had no desks, no tables, no chairs—our furniture hadn't been delivered yet! Marilyn was frantically on the phone calling the office supply company: "You've got to get those tables. We've got students coming out here this afternoon!" By noon, the tables and chairs arrived, and by 1:00 we were set up, and at 2:00 the students arrived.

Then Marilyn went to work on lining up other things that we were going to do here. I was going to teach the college course, but this is not set up just to teach a college course. This is set up for other things, like meetings. However, we've been having credit free courses here. Marilyn has been booking meetings; NYFOA met here and the CCE executive directors met here. So Marilyn has been very busy organizing the schedule of activities that take place here at the ARC. She continues to work on that. I had almost nothing to do on the administrative side—calling meetings, setting up appointments. I did not write letters. I looked at letters that were being sent out and I made suggestions. I did not attend many of the meetings in which the actual strategy was being planned on how to do it, other than enlisting John Tobin's aid. I don't think I was at this building at all when it was being renovated. I had very little to do with the actual nuts and bolts, the nitty-gritty of turning this recreation hall into the Agroforestry Center.

Sometimes if you are nice to people, if you do the right thing, it pays you back. Like Andy going with the contractor instead of re-bidding the job, and hoping he would do the right thing—he did the right thing and then some. Also, even though this building is not in the NYC watershed per se, the fact that the watershed people were still willing to commit to it I think was a very positive thing because they believed in the mission. We also got breaks from the office equipment people. We do a lot of business with a particular office supply company, buying a lot of paper and equipment. The company that we've been doing business with all these years literally sold us our desks, tables and chairs at 50%, because they've appreciated our business over the years. The deal with the office equipment worked out very well.

It was just a whole bunch of people sharing a vision who all seemed to think that this is something that should happen now. Ten or fifteen people had the same thought on what this thing could do for the future. It was something like an idea whose time had come, and we just happened to be in the right place at the right

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time for it to happen.

A local forester named Mike Greason is an amazing person. He's a retired DEC [Department of Environmental Conservation] forester, but Mike is also one of the greatest volunteers I've ever worked with. He is very active with NYFOA. He's a bit of a maverick. He works in the private industry as a forestry consultant. He doesn't work on commission like most foresters do; he works on an hourly basis. He really tends to think more long-term and is much more interested in the welfare of the forest than he is in the welfare of the forest owner. Mike really made a nice connection to the private sector, talking about this organization, supporting it with his own tremendous efforts, and also getting other volunteers to jump on board. So Mike's connection with the private sector was extremely important. He was a big player in that regard.

Eric Rasmussen, who is a forester by training, owns this land. He has hosted the conservation field days for the past 30 years. He has made the forest available to our students and us at all times. He has this passion for what we are trying to do here and has been as supportive as anyone possible can be. I mean Eric and his wife were over here washing the windows the day before the center opened. They were mowing the grass and planting flowers, stuff that they are not the least bit required to. He had this piece of property surveyed and put on a separate deed, so when he sold the resort, this would be an entity unto itself. I could anticipate all sorts of red tape if this was still tied to the resort across the street. Eric is quite a character with more energy and passion than you could ever expect from someone. Another character was John Tobin, the architect. I never in my life dreamed that he would spend maybe a hundred hours or more of his time working on this project. Coming down here twice a week meeting with the builder and the guys who were doing the work—getting things for free.

A real key player was Senator Seward. Senator Seward had the foresight, even when he was here for the opening ceremony, to say, "Look, this is important." He said, "I couldn't spell agroforestry when I met with you folks. I had no idea what you were talking about. But I recognized right away that it was something important, something that was going to happen, and that we had the chance to be on the leading edge."

There were a lot of people in the background. They were the ginseng growers, who have their own agenda; the beekeepers, who have their own agenda; the maple producers, who have their own agenda; and the watershed people, who basically have their own agenda as far as NYC is concerned. So there were a lot of characters that we dealt with along the way.

Andy, in particular, is the most committed person I've met. Philosophically,

he believes in wise land use and sustainability—all these buzzwords that politicians like to throw around—but I don't know how many of them believe it to the extent that Andy absolutely believes it. Andy passionately believes in making a difference in people's lives and preserving the rural character of places like Greene County while having sustainable development, as does Marilyn. Both of them are extremely passionate and willing to work twice as hard as anyone to see these goals accomplished. Both of these people have great, great long-term vision. Neither one of them has any sort of an ego, "what's in it for me" type of deal. Basically, "What can we do for our community that's going to make it a better place down the line?" And they're not just passionate; you need skills too. They are also good at what they do and did a fantastic job.

In retrospect I don't think we could have preceded much differently than we actually did. I think we just got lucky. I think the fact that we had brought together this large core group of people to solicit support—to get talking about this. Yet all of the decision-making and all of the actual doing was basically Marilyn and Andy. I think it's great to get a whole bunch of people on your side, but when it comes to getting things done you cannot do things if you have to deal with a committee of ten or twelve people. There is no board of directors for this entity yet. We haven't even gotten into governance. Some organizations would say, "First you start with your governance, and then you put together your overall structure, and then you build it." Well, I think that would have hindered the process. This whole thing

happened in less than two years from concept to the classroom. I think what made it happen was most of the decision-making was in the hands of three people—Andy, Marilyn and myself. Primarily one person did the logistics, so you didn't have to carbon copy thirty

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people every time you made a decision.

I'm sure there are important people that we overlooked in terms of soliciting support. Even though we tried to literally include anybody who might have something to say, there were probably some areas we could have worked harder in, for example, The Nature Conservancy. There are probably some organizations that we did not push as hard as we should have, and maybe we spent too much time working with some other agencies and people that really couldn't do much but lip service. There's been a notable lack of work with the DEC on this. I think that they could have been an important partner. I think the DEC is so big and so political that they are a little bit more difficult to work with. But I think there might have

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been some other private players that we probably could have approached from the beginning.

It was always a concern of ours that we didn't want to let the "inmates get control of the asylum" either. We wanted to maintain control of the decision making process until this thing becomes a self-sustaining entity, which is our goal. We had a meeting here the other day talking about that. We didn't want to get involved with someone who was going to call the shots and make the rules. We had our vision and we didn't want to change our vision for any particular players' self interests. That can happen; I've seen that happen.

We had a good deal of support from the Department of Natural Resources at Cornell. Louise Buck, Gary Goff, Pete Smallidge, and a number of people from the Department of Natural Resources came to the meetings. They came out here from Cornell, and yes, their presence sitting around a table makes a big difference, even if they are not "big players" per se. They are, to a certain extent, in that they are helping with the teaching, but just the fact that they came to the table, that they lent their support to it, certainly made the job a little bit easier. We were very fortunate. I really think that this happened much easier than it could have. It could have been a lot harder than it actually was. We were really lucky.

The most rewarding aspect of this project for me was the fact that the local community college would trust me to teach. I am now faculty at Columbia-Greene Community College. I personally am gratified that they think that I can do this—that I am qualified enough to teach their students. That was the biggest gratification to me, the fact that I do have students coming here. That's what really rocks my boat right now—working with the students. That's going to continue. I can see myself eight to ten years down the line when I retire from CCE. I'll probably still be a part-time faculty member, and I'll probably still teach classes here because I really enjoy doing that.

What I learned from my experience of organizing the ARC is that I am surrounded by talented people. I learned that there are people that will support a person if they think that they've got a winning proposition. I learned if you work really hard on something for twenty years, you could be an overnight success. I've learned that it is very important to maintain good relationships with people in the media because if you don't get good press, you're dead.

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I've also learned that sometimes the process is more rewarding than the fulfillment. Sometimes the chase is more rewarding than the hunt. Why do I hunt? I hunt because I like to hunt. Do I like to kill animals? No, I don't like to kill animals; I like to hunt. For example, when we had the grand opening a couple weeks ago, there were about 150 people crammed into this place. We had invited about forty, but it's an election year. I don't know if that's why, but we had about 150 people here. I sat by myself in the back room and it was like, "Aww, gees, it's really opening." It was bittersweet. I thought, "How did this happen so quickly? I really didn't have anything to do with this." But I did. So I learned that sometimes accomplishing your goals is not nearly as important as working towards your goals.

I learned that there are many people who share the same thoughts, the same ideas and the same passion. I'm always amazed at the talent of the people I work with and how smart they are. I knew that to begin with, but sometimes even your staff surprises you. I really was not disappointed with anyone involved in this project. I've been disappointed by people in other projects, people who made commitments they didn't keep, but that was not the case with this project. Virtually everyone who agreed to do something did it. No one at the last moment said, "I can't do what I said I would do." It was amazing that everybody who committed to do something

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did what he or she said they would do and even went beyond it. I didn't expect Eric to be up here washing the windows, cleaning up the garbage, mowing the grass. I taught other people that it's good to dream, that dreams sometimes come true. That was good for Andy in particular because Andy is so idealistic anyway. It was nice for him to see that someone can have a dream and that if people work together the dream really can come true.

Other people have wondered, "Why is this crazy man working on ginseng? What is the point?" I think there have been a lot of people, particularly at the university, that have wondered, "Where is this going?" A lot of people are now saying "Holy Smokes! This guy is not just an isolated nut-case, he's kind of on the wave here, on the edge of something that is happening, and maybe he's not as crazy as we thought he was."

So I think some people, particularly at Cornell, have been quite a bit surprised that we have accomplished this. Some people in some departments are saying, "How

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did they do this when we are struggling with budgets and we're letting people go?" We're letting people go too; we're all struggling with budgets. We surprised a lot of people. We had some local legislators here from the county that were wondering "How did they do this without our money? How did they do this without our support?" A lot of them were pretty well surprised. Some people have learned that you can do things if you work really hard. Hopefully my students will learn something too.

The first bit of advice I would give you is to find some like-minded people, people who share your vision. Of course, you have to have a vision, and I'm assuming that a new educator interested in doing something like this has a vision for it. So the first step is to find people who share your vision because you can't do it yourself. The second thing you need to do is to put together a team of people that has some basic skills. You need someone who is going to be a very good administrator—someone who is going to write the letters, who is going to be able to call the meetings and do a lot of the paperwork. You need someone who is not going to be afraid to ask for money. So you need someone who is not shy; who is outgoing, and is as part of your team.

You are also going to need as many allies as you can possibly get. So you need to start building not just a few like-minded people, but you need to start building support among a lot of different groups and organizations. So you get your team in place, get your support in place, and are able to articulate what is crucial about what you are going to do. I think there are a lot of people that just want to do good things. I think from the very beginning we were able to articulate our three main objectives, which are teaching, research, and extension in the distance sense of extension—not just extension in the county, but extension to work in the world. Be able to articulate some of the basic things you want to do, then put your team together.

Give yourself a timeline. We had a five-year timeline, but we did this in two years. Actually set up a timeline, set some goals for yourself, and what you wish to accomplish by a specific timeline. Figure out what it takes to achieve those goals. Line up the people to do it; it's got to be a team approach. There were a lot of three person meetings between Andy, Marilyn, and myself. It was here that the three of us sat down and said, "What are we going to do next? Where are we going to go? Who's doing what?" We would leave these meetings with a list of things that we

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were going to do. For example: “Hey Bob, you call Jim Campion at Columbia-Greene. Get an appointment to sit down and talk to him.” “Marilyn, start drafting a letter to the watershed people.” “Andy, talk with so and so to see if we can get this, this, and this...” There should be a lot of meetings between the management team to set your goals. You should always have a plan B. If plan A fails, you’ve got to have a plan B. Go at it.

As I look back at our mistakes, we tended to over-commit. This was a big deal, a big project, and it took a tremendous amount of energy from a lot of different people. I came very close to burning myself out because of my other commitments

Be very, very careful when you take on a project this big that you don’t already have so much to do that you can’t do it right.

and responsibilities. To be honest, I worked seven days a week for almost a month and a half, not just on this project, but on all these other things that I had done in conjunction with this. So be very, very careful when you take on a project this big that you don’t already have so much to do that you

can’t do it right. I’m just now catching my breath from what has been almost two months of seven days per week work. It’s been difficult. It’s OK, but if you’ve got a family, you’ve got little kids; you’re not going to be able to put the time in. I’m a single guy. I can work seven days a week without too much of a problem—especially if you love your work. That’s the advice I would give. Take care of your family, which is most important. I see a lot of younger Extension agents, and I get a little bit nervous when I see how much they are working. I know that in Extension the more you work and your reputation grows, the more people will come after you to do things. It’s very gratifying work to have people think that you’re the expert or that you have done something remarkable, and they want to get close to you as a result of that. But the gratification that you get from your work is only one type of gratification, and you need to have a life in addition to your job. That’s probably where people like myself fail, because we do so much work.

As a new Extension agent, you need to try to maintain a balance between work and family. It’s great if your work is something that you are passionate about in your private life, but you really should not allow your work to become your life, as I have done. I’m not holding myself up as an example for anybody else. I’ve been very happy; I have no complaints. But in looking back over the last 25 years, I’ve been married twice and divorced twice. I’ve paid the price for my passion. But I have no complaints.

I’ve become more of a dreamer as I’ve gotten older. I originally thought of this

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as my swan song. For many years I've wanted to do an international ginseng conference. I've worked with ginseng for so long that it was kind of like "I want to do this, I want to do this." This was important for my life and my career. So I did the ginseng conference, but that was not the swan song yet. So what was I going to do? I wanted to leave a mark. So then the ARC was going to be the swan song, but it was going to take longer. Now I'm thinking the swan hasn't sung yet and I'm not done yet.

I think that as I get older, I tend to dream a bit more. When I was younger, I was dreaming about having a job in five years. Now I'm 53 years old, and I'm going to retire, eventually. I know I'm not immortal anymore. It takes you a while to realize that. I'd like there to be something to look back on that someone could say that I had an effect somewhere along the line. The older you get the more you become a student of other people and what they have done. When I look at some of the remarkable things that have been accomplished by people like Liberty Hyde Bailey, Ezra Cornell, and people like that, you say, "Wow, those people were spectacular. They were people with a vision and a dream. They were able to get other people to work with them to make things happen."