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Hive in the Sky

WFYI's buzz can be heard high above its National Public Radio studio

By Shawndra Miller

»On top of a downtown Indianapolis building, honeybees sally forth from two beehives to a rooftop meadow where grasses and wildflowers wave in the breeze. With traffic noise from Meridian Street below competing with the hum of ventilation fans, it might be a little hard to hear their buzzing. But here atop WFYI's roof, thousands of bees are hard at work gleaning nectar and making honey.

Ross Harding, beekeeper-at-large and a downtown resident himself, installed the beehives this spring. The green roof came earlier, when Rooftop Greenworks planted it in March 2013 as a sound buffer for the recording studio directly below. But the two projects fit hand-in-glove as the honeybees pollinate the flowers, whose nectar in turn feeds the bees.

The hives themselves are situated a little distance away from the green roof, in an area that is both sunnier and more protected from wind. The separation doesn't stop the bees from enjoying this bountiful source of nutrition. "Every time I walk by the green roof and look," Harding says, "there's always bees out there."

That's music to the ears of WFYI board member George Plews, who was instrumental in funding the beehives. He also serves on the board of National Public Radio, where he played a key role in installing rooftop beehives at the Washington, D.C., headquarters.

He and his wife, Christina, keep bees on their own property. In actuality, Plews says, "My wife is the driving force behind all this. She really gets the importance of bees to our natural ecology. She has educated me on this." (The couple has since underwritten placement of beehives at Eskenazi Health, alongside the hospital's Sky Farm.)

On a recent summer afternoon, Harding showed a group of curious WFYI staffers the secret workings of the hive. Using no special gear beyond a small smoker, he removed a panel from the top box and held it out for closer inspection. "These bees are very good bees," he said. "They're well-behaved bees, and they've made a lot of food."

Encouraging everyone to step forward and watch the bees go about their work, he kept up a steady patter of bee-related factoids. He explained to a growing number of observers — among them CEO Lloyd Wright — that bees barely move without sunlight, that the hive communicates through dance, that some 2,000 bees die each day of natural causes, and that "undertaker bees" remove the deceased from the vicinity of the hive.

"Want to take guesses on how many bees live in this box?" he asked the peanut gallery. A few people called out numbers from 1,000 to upward of 10,000. Harding finally upped every

single guess, saying, “Sixty thousand!” with a dramatic flourish, conveying his own amazement at this figure.

With a paint scraper, he peeled away some of the wax capping a portion of the honeycomb to reveal the familiar golden sweetener. Bees quickly encircled the opening as he announced: “This, my friends, is honey.” He explained that the bees pack each cell with a combination of nectar and enzymes from their stomachs. “What they’re doing is filling the cells and dehydrating (them),” he said. “Once they dehydrate it, they cap it like this.

“They’ll repair this in a matter of seconds,” he said. “Anybody want to try it? Get a finger in there.”

Careful to avoid the bees industriously repairing the gap (in a matter of minutes, it would be covered over), WFYI staffers stepped up to sample the sweetness of just-made honey.

“They’re getting ready for the winter now,” Harding continued, as he passed the panel to the CEO to hold. “They’re condensing the layer the queen’s laying in, filling it with honey. It’s going to be sort of a rainbow, a dome of honey all around to insulate her. It’ll stay 87 to 94 degrees in the winter. Two inches away from that it’s the same temperature as outside.

“They’re going to survive the whole winter in there,” he explained. “They won’t fly around. They just stay in a tight ball and vibrate, keep warm and eat honey, which sounds like a nice way to spend the winter.”

Clearly, this is work Harding relishes. “Bees, I just love them,” he says later. “It kind of radiates to people, my passion. … I’m glad to talk about this stuff.”

Because of that passion, he’s become the Central Indiana Beekeepers Association’s go-to person when calls come in about rogue bee colonies. If bees take up residence inside the walls of a house, or a swarm lights on a tree in

someone's backyard, the desperate property owner often contacts the association. Fortunately, there are alternatives to extermination.

"I've done a lot of these," says Harding. "So when somebody emails the association, they're like, 'I'm not going to climb a ladder with a chain saw, but Ross will.'"

In fact, the two bee colonies at WFYI were both "rescued" — one from the property of musician Sarah Grain, who performed in WFYI's Tiny Desk concert series.

CEO Wright says that having rescued bees and a rooftop meadow at WFYI dovetails with the nonprofit's mission of "inspiring the best of our community by telling stories and connecting people." Creating greater awareness of the need to protect bees is part of that story.

Harding manages about 36 hives in Indianapolis, Fortville, Beech Grove, McCordsville and environs. He cobbles together a living doing what he enjoys: tending fish in a saltwater aquaponics setup each morning, spending his afternoons foraging for wild foods and caring for beehives. He supplies about 20 high-end restaurants with the delicacies he harvests from area woods. The fish go to Caplinger's Fresh Catch and Goose the Market, as well as restaurants.

However, honey is another matter. Because he's sensitive to the bees' requirements, he's unable to supply honey to everyone who wants it. "I believe in only taking honey if there's a surplus of honey," he says. "The bees need 60 pounds at least."

This summer, he says, conditions were challenging for the bees. "I noticed the bees started with a strong spring," he says. "They were really kicking butt, bringing in a lot of nectar, then we had the rainiest month to date." Honey stores in all his hives dipped low

during the summer as the bees were unable to get nectar. For a while he thought he might lose 80 percent of his hives.

But he hopes to see a rebound as fall progresses: Cool nights and warm days have meant an explosion of asters, wildflowers and particularly goldenrod. That may not sound so great for allergy sufferers, but goldenrod is a terrific source of food for honeybees. Ideal for the bees is a balmy fall, with a late frost date.

“They can’t make any more honey after the first frost,” he says. “And some hives are just so low on honey they’re not going to make it.” He’ll feed those bees sugar water to get them through the winter and try for a better season than last year’s winter, when some 30 to 45 percent of bees were lost across Indiana.

He’s philosophical about the losses, knowing that there are natural cycles, even as certain threats have crept up on honeybees (see sidebar). “I still love what I do,” he says. “It’s better than sitting in an office.”

Plews, for his part, has noticed a commonality among the folks who care for beehives. “One of the nice things about getting to know bees is getting to know beekeepers,” he says. “They’re some of the most naturally happy and energetic and hopeful people I know.”

Asked what it is about beekeeping that fuels him, Harding talks about the peaceful, almost meditative state the bees inspire as he tends them. “Just to stop and pay so much attention,” he says. “To stop your mind from racing. You’re just looking at bees, and everything seems far away, and you’re in their world.”

From the WFYI rooftop, that world looks pretty sweet.

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