HOME in the *Heartland*

Through her Hoosier Organic Marketing Education organization, Cissy Bowman helps farmers in need

STORY BY SHAWNDRA MILLER
PHOTOS BY JOSH MARSHALL

Cissy Bowman opens a pen to allow the chickens that her husband raises on their property to roam free. The chickens play a role in the overall permaculture farming process Bowman uses on her Clayton farm by eating bugs and spreading seeds and natural fertilizer.

A rural community gets help establishing a cooperative mill, which becomes a hub for incubating new agricultural businesses. A farmer staring down flood damage finds help through disaster relief funds. A roundtable discussion among growers, distributors and educational leaders yields a new initiative to bring local food into school cafeterias.

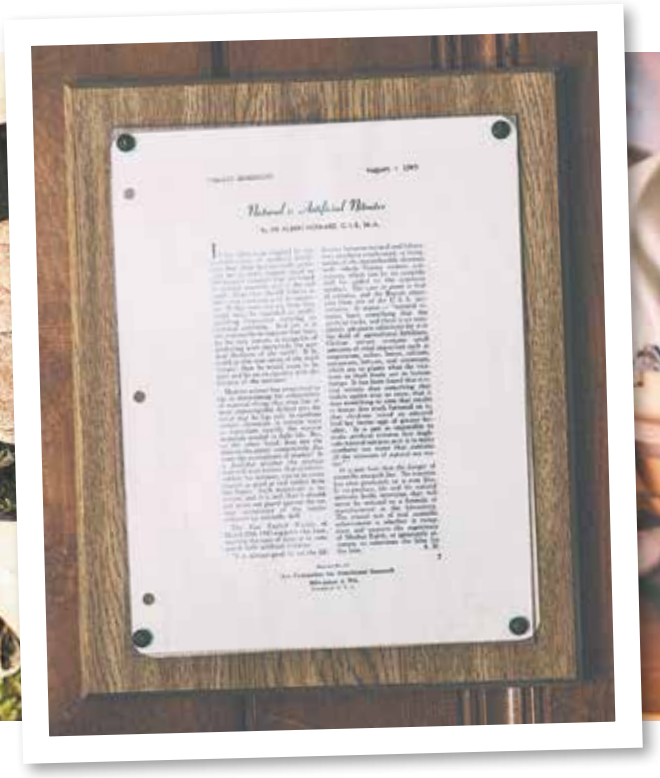
Central to all of these stories is Cissy Bowman, founder of Hoosier Organic Marketing Education (HOME). The nonprofit organization, incorporated 20 years ago, has a mission of education and advocacy around the certified organic label.

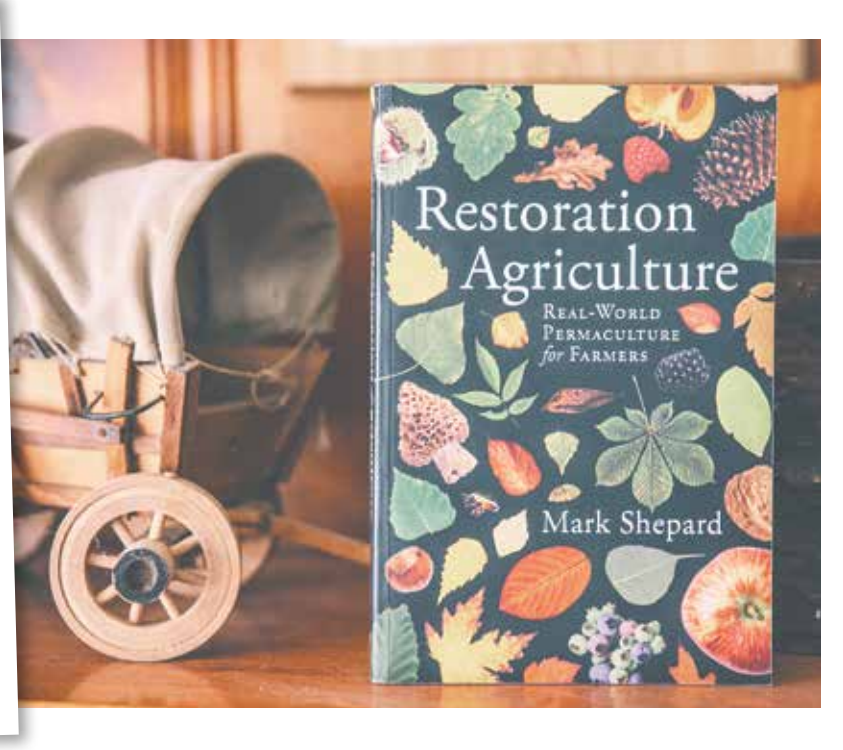
But HOME's work is much broader than just that. In practice it's all about making connections — connecting farmers to consumers, linking farms to funding and relating information about organic foods' importance to the public.

"I consider organic to be very holistic," says Bowman, explaining why her mission extends far beyond those farms that are certified organic. Here in HOME's Clayton office, surrounded by Willie Nelson posters and Farm Aid memorabilia, she sits behind a large desk. At her right hand is a gray travel mug inscribed, "I can fix anything. Where's the duct tape?"

"It's like the organs in your body," she explains. "They all have to work together to create a healthy whole. So organic isn't just about Code of Federal Regulations 205, how you farm out there — it's about how

LEFT: Moss grows in the woods of the Bowmans' Clayton farm. **CENTER:** A framed copy of a 1945 Organic Gardening article, titled "Natural vs. Artificial Nitrites," hangs in the Hoosier Organic Marketing Education office in Clayton. The article, along with many other publications originally owned by a local farmer, was brought to Bowman by the farmer's daughter when he passed away. **RIGHT:** A book recommended by Cissy Bowman for someone interested in the permaculture farming process is "Restoration Agriculture, Real-World Permaculture for Farmers," by Mark Shepard.





we develop community. How do we develop local? How do we let the education evolve?"

Teasing out the strands in Bowman's life that led her to this point can be tricky; it's been a lengthy evolution of its own. It seems that her long association with farming has been a course of study — sometimes in the most headache-provoking particulars of the profession. It's an education that she's pleased to put in service by teaching others.

A central figure in the organic movement since before such a movement existed, Bowman operated Center Valley Organic Farm for many years, selling produce to CSA customers, at farmers markets and directly to chefs and health food stores. But her initial foray into food production was actually quite humble.

"I didn't want to be a farmer," she says. On this chilly day she has the space heater cranked up high. Next door to the cozy ranch house that serves as the nonprofit's office is the home she shares with her husband, Bruce. Here in her sanctuary, Tibetan prayer flags bedeck the picture window. A few steps away is the kitchen, with a refrigerator full of kombucha and fermented vegetables she made herself. She unspools the story.

"I wouldn't water a houseplant," she says. "I wasn't interested in (farming) at all." But when her children were born, she became more aware of health threats. Her protective instinct spawned a desire to garden.

"The first thing I decided (was) 'I can feed them," she says. "If nothing else, I can feed them.'"

Though her first garden was, admittedly, "pathetic," she benefited from a neighbor's subscription to a seminal periodical. "She realized I was seriously in need of help," Bowman remembers. "She handed me a magazine. It was one of the 1962 Organic Gardening magazines."

Soon, Bowman was subscribing to Organic Gardening herself, as she has to this day. She still has all her back copies, dating to the 1960s.

Fast forward a couple of decades: Bowman learned there was a growing market for the kind of produce in her ever-expanding organic garden. Just as she was beginning to pursue this unexpected outlet, long before the USDA's National Organic Program existed, something happened that began her journey into advocacy.

She's still not exactly sure why, but somehow she got invited to participate in the creation of statewide organics regulations. Perhaps someone got wind of how much legwork she'd already done.

In Bowman's quest to determine how exactly to market organic vegetables, starting around 1983 she'd written a series of letters to find out what other states required in order for a farm to label its produce as organic. In that pre-Internet age, the predictable result was a mailbox stuffed with reams of paper, all of which she read. When she went to the downtown Indianapolis meeting, lugging her box of paperwork, it was clear she'd done her homework.

It was 1989, and she joined the Indiana chapter of the Organic Crop Improvement Association, along with Hoosier Environmental Council and Citizens Action Coalition, in drafting the statewide regulations.

Before long she was nominated to be vice president of OCIA International, which meant frequent trips to Washington, D.C. As legislative liaison, she represented OCIA in the development of the National Organic Program. Many organic standards board meetings later, the national law superseded the statewide efforts, but that early networking proved invaluable. "It was a wonderful process to get people together to meet and try to understand what was going on," Bowman says.

Having been immersed in the regulatory process, she began working as a certifier, ultimately starting a business called Indiana Certified Organic. She started speaking to groups, because so many people wanted to learn about this trend.

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>
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"Then it was like it just never stopped." She wouldn't have imagined that 20 years later her winter calendar would be full of speaking engagements, some close to home like the Indiana Small Farm Conference, some as far away as the Missouri Organic Ag Conference.

As Bowman settled into this new role, a small group of volunteers worked with her on educating the public about organic food and farming, starting around 1992. "We just started doing it because we realized that there was a need," she says. "It's very fulfilling work."

But what eventually gave HOME a boost from those unofficial beginnings was a grant from the office of the Indiana Commissioner of Agriculture, which had been referring inquiries to the self-described "crazy organic" font of information in Clayton.

Bowman recalls, "They said, 'We have this grant program. If we were to give you money, what would you do with it?'" She jumped at the chance to create a nonprofit. With that startup money, in 1994 she was able to formalize the work she was most passionate about — advocating for organic farming and community development.

Fittingly for a 501c3 started from a grant, HOME now administers grants to facilitate farmers' projects. Bowman and her five-member, all-volunteer board will walk a grower through the application process, provide letters of support and serve as liaison with government officials.

HOME also serves as a "pass through" allowing people to donate to projects like the Carthage Mill, a sustainable agriculture processing site in Rush County. The mill is located in a historic lumber mill and is poised to become a hub of ag-related business. HOME's involvement helped co-founder Anna Welch create an LLC and business plan to carry the work forward.

"Those willing to put in seed money received a tax write-off," Welch explains, "and that seed money encouraged action on the part of the Rush County Economic Development Board." After the paper mill closed, she says, Carthage seemed like another "dying rural town." But with Carthage Mill and its commercial kitchen serving as business incubators, things are looking up. Two local men are employed already in construction, and Welch says, "They're really buying into what the potential is. We can employ so many people."

Welch and her husband, Keith, along with another partner, Judith Avery, started the farming venture Fields of Agape eight years ago. They grow organic corn, beans and other crops on a small scale in Rush County. Without the cooperative mill, they likely would have needed to stop offering value-added products like cornmeal and flour and focus solely on the organic grain, seed and bean market.

"Cissy saw how discouraged we were getting," Welch says. "That's the role that Cissy plays. She understands how hard it is, and she's run the gamut on organic projects. She knows what's viable. She knows a person's intent. If she knows your work ethic and if you've got a serious intent, she'll find a way."

Another piece of HOME's mission is disaster assistance. Through Farm Aid, the organization helps bring relief to farms in crisis. When Indiana farmers call (800) FARM-AID, they are given Bowman's number. Maybe a family member's health status has triggered a financial crisis. Maybe the problem stems from drought or flood. Maybe the thin thread that keeps a farmer's debt load manageable has snapped under the weight of rising operating costs. Regardless of the hardship's origins, Bowman will help file the paperwork for Farm Aid approval.

She knows how difficult it can be for

HOME board member Jeff Evard and Cissy Bowman

Evard drives a pole as part of a 24-by-48-foot-high tunnel construction project on the HOME office property.

Hoosier farmers, proud people one and all, to ask for help. Often it takes someone calling on their behalf, or an absolute rock-bottom moment, before they will accept assistance. One man called her "all but in tears," she says, remembering a particularly heartbreaking case. "He said he had two teenaged children; they'd get up in the morning and open the cabinets, and there wasn't enough food for them to eat."

Janice Tucker, a small dairy producer in Hendricks County, was one of those who called Farm Aid in desperation and ended up talking with Bowman. "I honestly didn't know if anybody would even answer the phone," she remembers, "let alone (offer) any assistance out there. I didn't even know there was assistance provided. I about fell over when somebody answered the phone."

Things had gotten tough for Tucker's farm in the past few years. She'd quit her day job to farm full time after adding a milking parlor in 2003, and the loss of steady income and health insurance proved difficult.

"We're not people that throw our money away on new stuff and things like that," she says. "When we started this, we went with a lot of used farm equipment. Here with the drought a couple years ago, feed prices got really high. Hay, if you could even find it, got high. Corn prices went through the roof."

That pressure, combined with their existing debt, made for a lean couple of years.

"Things started getting pretty tough," she says. "I'm still in debt, but Farm Aid provided $500 to me and that bought some groceries and paid some bills." That sum gave her a little breathing room so she could figure out her next move. Now she's in the process of selling some of her land to a renter.

Bowman says it's not unusual for people to be shocked that Farm Aid actually works. Many people have told her, "I didn't even know Farm Aid was real. I was just at my wit's end … and somebody answered the phone and told me to call you."

In the scheme of things, the amount of the grant is usually small. A $500 sum, in itself, is not life-changing. But getting connected with HOME's network of resources might be.

"It's the fact that somebody cares, there's someone I can talk to," Bowman acknowledges. That's when she introduces other funding possibilities, such as high tunnel grants from Natural Resources Conservation Service.

HOME's educational mission runs the gamut from "where can I find available money?" to "how does the Food Safety Modernization Act affect me?" to "how do I participate in the process of creating laws that affect me?" Bowman is proud of the fact that every aspect of her work allows regular folks to reclaim their power around agricultural issues.

That takes the nonprofit's impact far beyond individual farmsteads or even communities. Members also work for systemic change. For example, Bowman was able to get a small grant from Farm Aid to host a roundtable for people interested in putting locally raised food into school lunches. The result was the Indiana Farm to School Network, which connects farms all over the state with school cafeterias and classrooms.

"We share information to empower people," she says, emphasizing that the empowerment extends beyond the farm. "If you are a consumer, if you eat, you're part of agriculture."

Helping consumers give input on regulations is no small matter. HOME took part in raising a record-setting response to the 1997 proposed rule that would turn the fledgling National Organic Program into practice. That early stab at promulgation was "horrible," Bowman says. She helped to analyze the rule against the Organic Food Production Act and distill the major issues into a one-page handout.

Then it was time to spread the word. She and other volunteers fanned out to put leaflets on cars in parking lots of health food stores and farmers markets.

With HOME and many other linked organizations frantically working to galvanize input during the six-week public comment period, the response was unprecedented. Over 275,000 public comments, a record-setting number, came through to tell the USDA to go back to the drawing board.

Which is exactly what happened and exactly why Bowman is so clear on the power of the consumer.

"I think the majority of our citizens feel disempowered," she says. "There's no reason to feel that way. And I absolutely dislike it when people tell me they're never going to make a difference, because I've watched a group of people, (all) over the country and the world, change the face of agriculture." *FI

For More Information:

To reach Hoosier Organic Marketing Education, contact Bowman at (317) 539-2753 or CVOF@earthlink.net. For more information on organic standards, visit www.ams.usda.gov/nop.