FARM INDIANA

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SMALL FARM PROFILE

Josh Egenolf with his two Great Pyrenees dogs.(Below) Pigs are allowed to roam on open and wooded areas, digging for nuts and acorns while being fed scraps from local restaurants and minerals.

CARETAKERS of the LAND

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Josh Egenolf and Laura Beth Wayne take one day at a time on their young farm

Josh Egenolf tends to the younger pigs that are kept in the barn for safety.

In the chill of a frosty November morning, 11 woolly calves stand behind a thin wire of fencing, awaiting their daily mineral rations. Josh Egenolf and two farm apprentices are making the rounds at WE Farm, tending to the heritage breed pigs, the placid laying hens and the Thanksgiving turkeys guarded by two Great Pyrenees. Now it's the calves' turn.

"I think it's going to be a cold winter," says Egenolf. "Their coats got thick really early this year."

Though born into a farm family, Egenolf never imagined he would wind up raising cattle, pigs and poultry in his own farming operation. "I didn't really appreciate the childhood I had on the farm until I got older and was thinking about raising my own kids," he says, surveying the grassy field where the black and brown calves are all eagerness.

He left agriculture for 10 years, having been urged by guidance counselors in high school to broaden his horizons. But when he and his wife, Laura Beth Wayne, began thinking of having a family, rural life called him back.

Now the wooded ravines and open fields of his native Owen County are home to Wayne-Egenolf Farm, or WE Farm. Here on property leased from Lisa Harris of Indianapolis, he raises the animals on pasture. In the cattle's case, he maps out a high-density grazing pattern to maximize both their health and that of the pasture itself. Moving electrified fencing is a daily task that gives the animals access to fresh pasture, and right now they are queued up, awaiting a kelp meal. As the apprentices open a segment of fence, the calves step through and make straight for the supplemental minerals.

This brand of farming is just as focused on what's below the animals' feet as it is on the livestock themselves. Egenolf is intent on rebuilding the soil, and he uses his hooved and feathered charges to aid in that essential task.

Before WE Farm's livestock came to occupy it, this pasture's only output was hay, and it was never fertilized. "Basically it was mined for a decade, and now we're rehabilitating it," he says.

Egenolf favors grazing management instead of using inputs to stimulate the land's natural biology, addressing soil fertility through the innate behaviors of poultry and cattle in an integrated pasturing system. This means planting forage crops like turnips, wheat and rye for the livestock and choreographing an integrated grazing scheme. At any given moment, most of the pasture is at rest.

For the feeder pigs, vegetable scraps from three Bloomington restaurants are part of the diet, too, and toward the end of their 6- or 7-month life span, the "teenagers" roam through the trees to eat acorns, pawpaws, beechnuts and walnuts. "Chefs in particular appreciate nut-finished pigs," Egenolf says. The clean air and sunshine are absolutely critical to the pigs' health and vigor.

Year-round pork production is not a good fit here, because it doesn't give pasture enough time to recover between grazing rotations. "We don't like bare soil on this farm," he says. "We lease this ground; we're just guests here. We want to take care of the land."

This concern for the soil is not just window dressing. Egenolf worked in water resources management after college. There he came to see agriculture's potential as a force for land restoration. Later, while pursuing his doctorate in ecology at the University of Georgia, he had the chance to learn more than just theory. He tested out the principles of ecological farming on land owned by his adviser, starting a grass-finished beef enterprise.

That was enough to show him that he was suited to this livelihood. After all, he'd had many varied experiences, developing carpentry and handyman skills along the way. Most significantly, he'd absorbed all the foundational knowledge that comes from doing farm chores as a kid.

WE Farm is only 12 miles from the beef, sheep and row crop farm where Egenolf grew up. That proximity is a boon to the young farmer. He sources his calves from his family's cow-calf operation and regularly talks cattle with his uncle and father.

The five-year lease agreement with Lisa Harris cushions his financial risk and allows him to focus on making a go of farming without a mortgage hanging over his head.

Harris says the arrangement is ideal from her perspective because she was beginning to lose sleep over the property's upkeep, especially given the demands of her day-to-day work. She's CEO and medical director of Wishard/Eskenazi Health.

"I don't think I would ever let go of the property, but I wasn't sure what I was doing with it," she says. Egenolf's well-thought-out plans impressed her from the start, and his commitment to raising animals humanely and sustainably is entirely consistent with her values. Now every alteration to the 150-acre property is made in keeping with her long-term vision for the land. The lane that Egenolf drives up every morning to tend to the animals was sited with her eventual house in mind.

She praises the integrity and commitment of her tenant farmers. "I'm just very proud of what Josh and Laura Beth are doing," she says. "They continue to evolve it in a very thoughtful and deliberate manner. I think he's working hard not to get out ahead of himself, to take a step at a time and do it right. It's an enormous amount of work."

For his part, Egenolf believes that the single biggest opportunity for beginning farmers lies in connecting with landholders like Harris. "There's a lot of unlanded farmers … and there's a lot of landed folks, who pay somebody to mow it, just to make it look a certain way. But a grower can make a property look appealing while putting it to good use, creating value where before there was only expense."

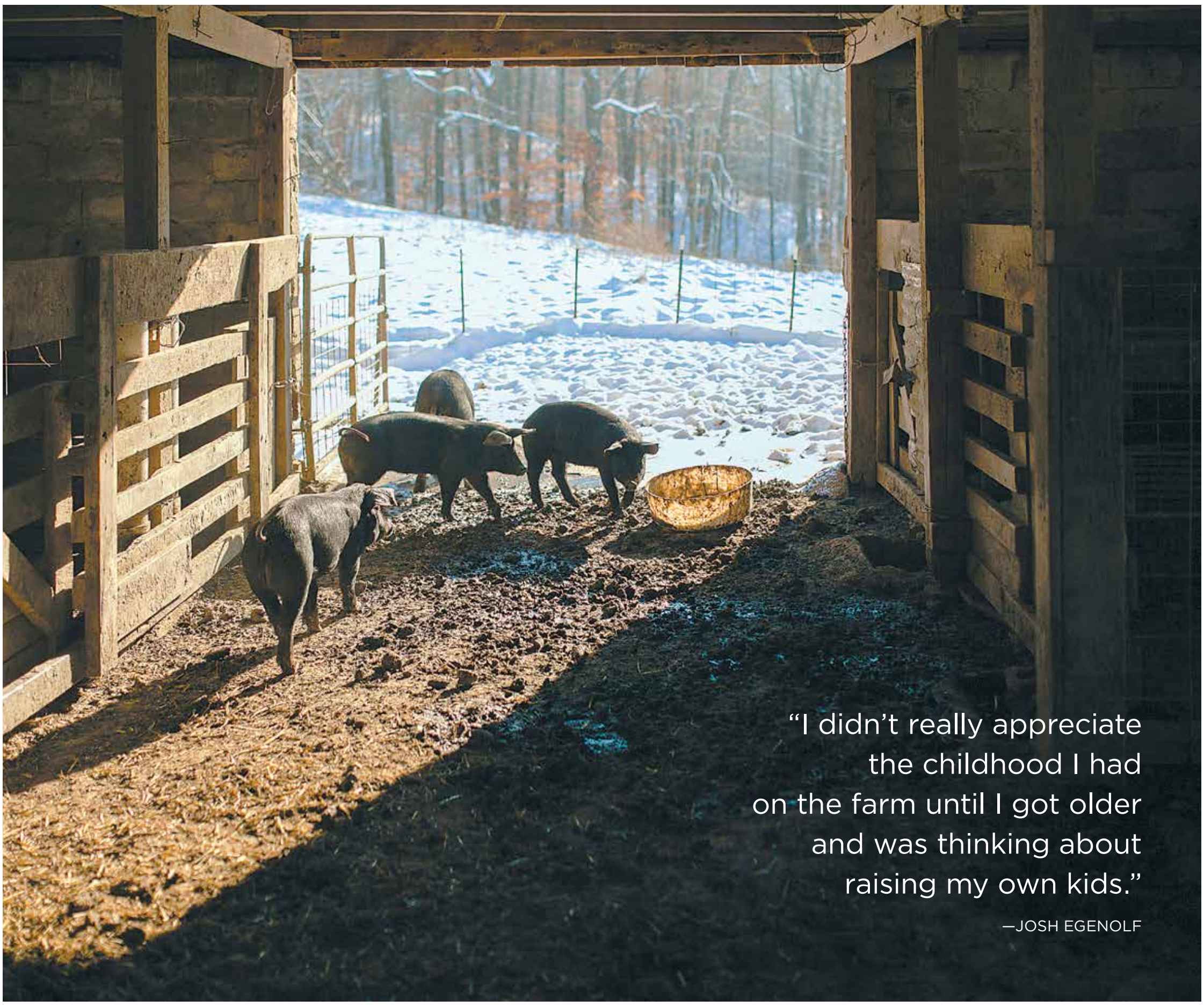
Harris agrees. "Now that they're making the land productive, I feel much better about it than when I was trying to just keep control of it," she says.

Egenolf's strong ties to the region aid in his goal of staying as local as possible in every aspect of the business. A nearby butcher processes the meat, so he doesn't stress the animals by driving them to a processor hours away. Nor does he drive far to work every day. He, Laura Beth and their young son, Orrin, live in a friend's house a mile up the road. She works as a teacher in Bloomington, while he gave up an outside income in 2013 to focus on expanding production on the farm.

Where to find WE Farm products:

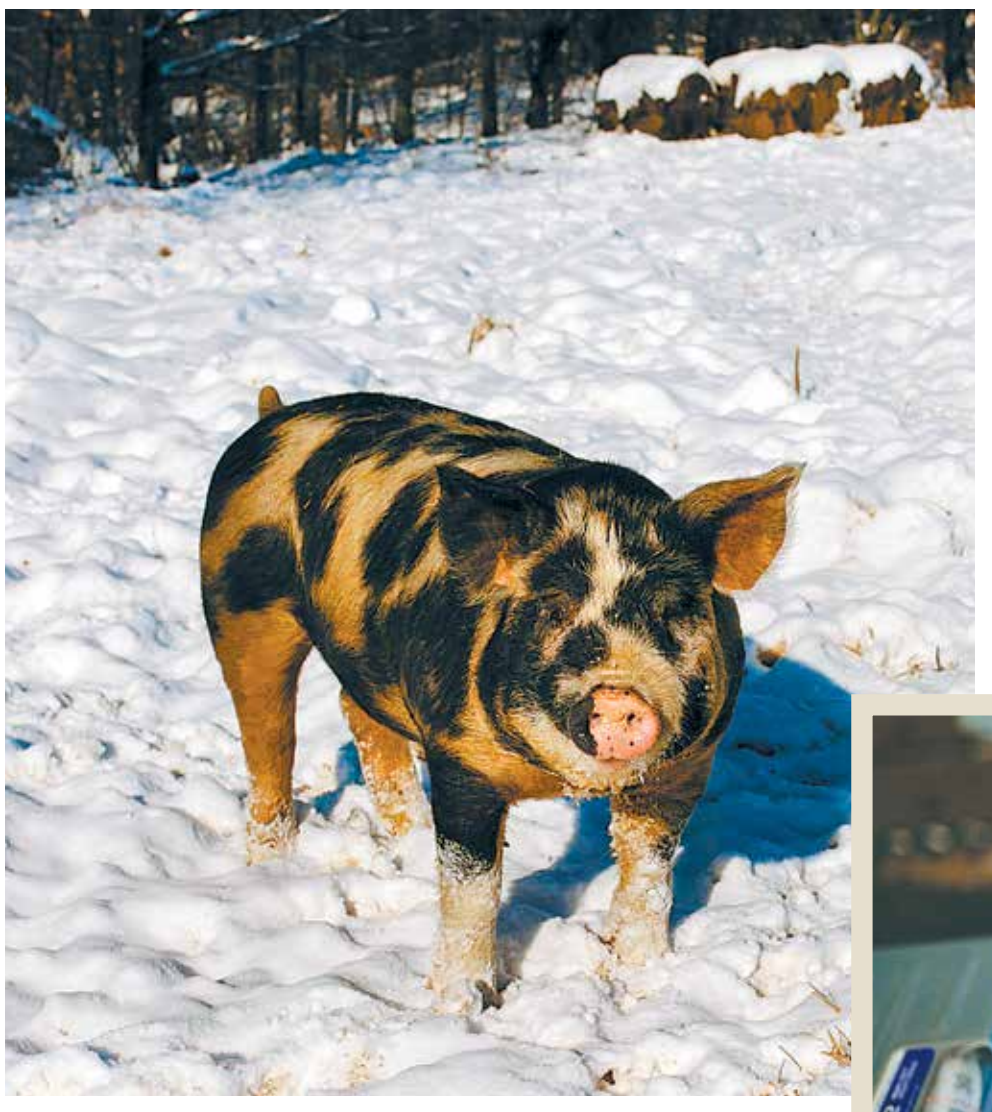
Bloomington Farmers Market
Traders Point Market
CSA Program
Feast
Finch's Brasserie
Upland Brewery
Restaurant Tallent
The Rail

The view from Egenolf's morning drive to reach his calves.



"I didn't really appreciate the childhood I had on the farm until I got older and was thinking about raising my own kids."

—JOSH EGENOLF



» For more information on WE Farm, visit wefarmlocal.com.

"We've been in development mode for three and a half years," he says. That intensive work extends beyond the on-farm infrastructure to market and relationship development. Egenolf works to keep solid bonds in every connection — from butcher to customer to employee to chef.

"There are all these different chains of production in this business, and there are different people you rely on to help you make it all work, and there's not enough of them," he says. "So you can't treat people poorly. You need those relationships to be golden."

He has also cultivated an open line of communication with the natural resources management specialist serving Owen County. A USDA cost share program is tied to specific conservation targets. In exchange for keeping eight inches of cover on pasture, for example, the program covers 70 percent of fencing costs. And because the driveway is an erosion control measure, USDA dollars were available to help pay for that, too.

He says these types of conservation goals are a no-brainer for the type of farming he practices. He points to the reappearance of the lowly dung beetle as evidence of a return to balance. His animals are not subject to chemical worming, so this insect can play its unglamorous yet critical role — controlling flies and parasites while sequestering carbon and nitrogen in the ground.

The cost share program is just one financial strategy. Egenolf counts himself fortunate that he's able to keep the business low risk because of the lease agreement. "Making mistakes and having a mortgage hanging over your head are what breaks a lot of new farmers," he admits.

But even with a lowered financial risk, the startup phase is arduous, with long hours and uncertain wages. Egenolf says would-be farmers and their spouses should go into it with their eyes open. "If you're in a relationship, you have to both be on board with it. Farming is a lifestyle choice; it's not a job. I have a great partner in that sense."

He further advises new farmers to avoid using credit to fund their startup as much as possible. "We started from a $9,000 loan, and ever since that we try to bankroll the whole thing in profits," he explains. That practice allows any growth to happen organically instead of building on a house of cards.

Among his toughest lessons, even without taking on extensive debt, has been managing the erratic cash flow of his trade. "Your expense liability is huge," he says. "Before payday you're shelling out money, buying the animals' feed, and you don't get paid till you turn that piece of meat into a dollar. You have to bankroll the business until you can earn that dollar."

Meanwhile, unexpected expenses crop up, and sales may not be as robust as projected. The result can be a painful cash crisis.

To temper that risk, he says, it's important to add new ventures intelligently, while maintaining at least one enterprise that promises a stable source of income. "You're going to make mistakes. Weird things are going to happen, and you want your failures to be experienced on small scales." He points to a recent experiment in raising pastured rabbits that was a complete flop, and from a monetary standpoint, this past year's laying hens weren't so great, either.

"You need to have one enterprise that is foundational, that you can rely on," he notes. In WE Farm's case, the core enterprise is embodied in these contented calves, now dispersing onto the fresh grass for a day of grazing.

"We've lost a few battles this year, but we had those core things in place to take care of us through the year." *FI