

Trading in politics for chicks

By Alex Kowalski

The fickle creek flows today. It hasn't for nearly a year, but after six straight days of rain, a trickle has reappeared and turned into a steady stream, transforming the parched soil into a muddy, slippery slosh. The rain, now a fine mist, casts a gray shroud over the landscape from which faint outlines coalesce into buildings and branches. The grass is greener; the trees are greener.

Beside this creek, beneath a 4-foot-tall white tent, Ben (not Benjamin – his parents didn't like full names) Bergmann hunches over some 5-week-old chickens, shepherding them apart from each other and cooing to each one. He is wearing tattered jeans, brown galoshes and a green sweatshirt with "Nonpoint Source Division Soil and Water Association" tagged across the breast. His hands, including the mottled ring around his finger, are crusted in mud as if they belong to a potter who has just sculpted a hunk of clay into a cup or vase. He looks up from the toil through tousled red hair the color of dry leaves and sighs.

"Oh, Lord."

Last week, 45-year-old Bergmann explains, it was sunny and the chicks were pecking freely around the ruddy pasture. But in the recent dank, cold days, he's had to separate the birds into groups of 20, placing each in pens under heat lights to keep warm. Still cold, however, the chicks have been crowding together, killing the unfortunate ones forced to the bottom of the pack.

"It's just been a terrible day," Bergmann continues, shaking his head, though it's only 8:00 in the morning (he's been up working since 6:00). "The chickens have just been piling up."

Dealing with piled up chicks. That's just one thing to do on a long list of chores at Fickle Creek Farm, the 61-acre plot Bergmann owns in Efland, N.C., with his partner (both in work and in life), Noah Ranells. As one of two men who have dedicated themselves to Fickle Creek (they have a few farmhands to help some days), Bergmann has his work cut out for him. He'll get it done.

"He's just absolutely tireless," says Jeffry Goodrum, owner of Seeing Stars Farm and member of Farmers of Orange with Bergmann. "With all he has to do to run his own farm, he still gives up so much to help others."

And he's always busy dealing with others while getting his work done. Still pulling the cold chicks apart from one another, Bergmann's cell phone (one of the few pieces of modern technology he's given in to) rings – it's Noah – and he stops without wiping the grime from his hands to answer.

"It is not nice out here," he says first. The two then outline the day's tasks: gather and wash the eggs from egg mobiles one and two; show a friend the new public market house in Hillsborough; prepare for tomorrow's bed and breakfast guests (a major pain, he says); keep an eye on the chickens; feed the guard dogs; pick up their 3-year-old foster son, Darryl, from daycare; and look at the van because the engine light is on. "If you do egg mobile four," Bergmann says into the phone, his high-pitched voice sounding like a persistent whine, "I don't think this will take too long."

He ends the call and turns down to look at the muck basting his boots. From behind his oval-lens glasses, his cool blue eyes moisten. The orange in his stubble competes with salt-and-pepper facial hairs to keep him young, though his long, wavy hair still resembles a teenage boy's haircut. He smiles.

“Overscheduled,” he says. “This is a particularly bad week because we have three markets starting tomorrow. I think I kind of fooled myself that there’s some down time, but there’s not.” He leans backwards, rolling his shoulders. “I really feel it on a day like today.”

Regardless of his workload, however, Bergmann loves what he has begun to achieve with his farm. It took him nearly 30 years to get to Fickle Creek and another nine to get things really moving. Before, he was authoring long papers with titles like “Nutrient recovery from swine lagoon water by *Spirodela punctata*” and living across the globe.

Spontaneity and change drove Bergmann’s old life, the one prior to living on a farm. He spent his younger years traveling the world, living in Spain, volunteering to grow vegetables on a mission in Guatemala, studying in Costa Rica. Even earlier on, he had moved around with his family, spending time in Denver, Wisconsin, San Francisco and Atlanta. It was not until 1999, while a professor at N.C. State University with a Ph.D. in Forestry (Noah worked there too) that Bergmann decided to consider a new life doing something he’d always dreamed of: farming.

“I like growing, creating, producing,” he says. “It’s just something I’ve always wanted to do. There was kind of this now or never idea as I got older. Now was the time to do this if we were ever going to make it happen.”

Heeding his desire, the couple bought a plot of land in Efland, about 40 miles west of Raleigh, with money they saved from their teaching jobs. At first it was not more than some dense overgrowth, but the couple began to shape the plot slowly. Trees were felled and structures were put up. Each step required a pause as they made enough money to proceed forward (Bergmann is proud they never went into debt). As they dedicated more and more time to the land, they eventually sold their house, left their jobs and switched over to fulltime farming. Nine years after settling the farm, Bergmann has spent more time there, in one place, than he has his

entire life. Unlike all the moving and uncertainty in his past, Bergmann's life has become much more static.

"It feels good to want to stay," he says.

Throughout the whole process of starting the farm, Bergmann decided to take an approach focusing on sustainability because he cares deeply about the world around him and understands what he can do to shape it. He and Ranells maintain the farm with nature always in mind. This decision, however, has made the farm take a little longer to get started.

"Eight years to work up to a garden – for most people it's not worth it."

Following this concern for the environment, Bergmann and Ranells built everything on the compound, the house, garage, shed, barn, chicken mobiles (coops) without machinery. They used their herds of cows, goats and pigs to clear and fertilize land for future vegetable patches.

"Why use all the chemicals and petroleum input when the animals can do it for you?"

Bergmann says.

Their passion for sustainability has created something that contrasts with many of the larger farms in the state and given many markets and restaurants a reason to take interest in their products. Fickle Creek is small scale, so it leaves a very small impact on its surroundings when other conventional industrial farms are pumping out products and pollution like any other factory.

"One corporate farm will probably do in one year what we do in our entire life,"

Bergmann says. "They process 40,000 birds every eight weeks. Isn't that amazing? We do 1,000 in a whole year."

In such massive scale operations, animals are living as unnatural a life as possible, Bergmann says; a pig (Bergmann's favorite animal) resides in a metal cage over a sewer filled

with its own excrement. On the other hand, at Bergmann's farm it runs free, gets baths and good food and Bergmann's love and attention (he is always talking and playing with the animals). To Bergmann, it only makes sense to support animals that are treated as well as possible.

"If you're going to eat eggs or meat," he says, "it's just more responsible to get it from animals that are raised humanely."

In fact, Bergmann was a vegetarian for 17 years because he didn't want to support inhumane animal treatment and consume hormones and medications given to livestock by farmers. But after learning firsthand that processing an animal can be done efficiently and safely, he has switched over to a much better balanced, healthy diet.

Besides raising animals properly, Bergmann has also learned much more on the farm that he could have never discovered in the classroom. Each day brings new challenges he has learned to overcome. Even with all his formal education in horticulture, he still learns most of what he knows about farming as he takes on new tasks each day.

"It sounds a little bit cliché, but you learn by doing," he says.

Bergmann's learned to grow basil, squash, eggplant, tomatoes, cucumbers, beans, okra, carrots, arugula and potatoes. He plans to grow more vegetables once they have enriched more of the soil with organic matter from the animals, he said. The farm is also home to sheep, goats, steers, laying hens and broilers, or chickens for eating. He has names for them all.

Yet, even though Bergmann is no longer a doctor and learns from the plants and animals, not textbooks, his academic past often slides into the conversation. When he's pointing out the pigs covered in mud: "I don't want to sound too anthropomorphic, but I think they're happy." It's hard to shake a man of his old habits.

There is one thing, however, that can distract Bergmann from his workload on the farm: kids. As a gay couple, Bergmann and Ranells were unable to have children, so they have taken to fostering kids for the county while their parents overcome personal struggles. They've had 13 (sounds unlucky, Bergmann says, but it's not) so far, who stay sometimes for months, sometimes for years. Bergmann considers the children's time on the farm (they all like to help out) positive for them, even after they leave.

"Not to sound too idealistic," he says, "but it's a nurturing environment because they're outside getting exercise, enjoying nature. They leave with good habits." Their current son, Darryl, no longer likes video games.

All this work – children and chickens – has kept him busy, but Bergmann has to do all he can to make a living running the small farm. He and Noah spread their income out by operating a bed and breakfast on the farm, housing guests from as far as South Africa, India and Japan, and by selling 20 percent of their pork and chicken products to local restaurants and grocery stores: Weaver Street Market; the Refectory, the cafeteria at Duke's divinity school; Padgett Station; and Lantern, but they make most of their money at farmer's markets in Durham, Orange County and, soon, a new one opening the following day in Chapel Hill. Bergmann will be getting up at 3 a.m. to prepare for all of them.

"We try to do everything we can," he says. "Sometimes it seems like it's too much."

His farm has to take in at least \$10,000 more than production costs each year to cover insurance and taxes when accounting for the \$3,000 alone it takes to cover the liability that comes with selling meat products.

"We're so small scale," Bergmann says, "the Holiday Inn at the intersection can pay for all its insurance in a night of renting, but for us it's six months."

But Bergmann's intelligence and hard work have paid off. Fickle Creek Farm has avoided going into debt and is seeing increasing support and enthusiasm for the sustainable products they produce. They even have a helper, 25-year-old John Hanto, who does little jobs around the farm, so Bergmann knows he's finally "hit it big time."

"Ben is just a great resource," says Hanto, who came to Fickle Creek hoping to gain experience working with livestock. "If he doesn't know the answer, he knows someone who does, or he will find it out."

It is true. Bergmann will always do what he can to get the job done. He applies his dedication and knowledge to everything he does, but he still has fun doing it and can smile when times are hectic. When the change in lifestyle has been such a major undertaking for Bergmann, he still enjoys every day. Although he's tossed out a lot of the comfort he had back in his old jobs, he is doing something he loves now even if there's little rest or monetary reward.

"On days like today I wouldn't mind being in a warm little lab in clean clothes, but then I'd have to deal with department politics. That's much worse."

And that's the kind of person Ben Bergmann is – he'd rather deal with chicks (even if they're piling up) than politics.