

# EQUITY TRUST NEWS

December 2021

## Welcome, Rooted Family Farm! Farmworkers become owners with secure tenure

We are pleased to report the successful first year of a new farm partnership. At the start of the year, Equity Trust signed a ground lease with Janette and Marc Presha of Rooted Family Farm for a 70-acre farm property in Orange County, New York that Equity Trust purchased and protected in 2018. Since then, the Preshas have been establishing themselves on the property while continuing to deliver diverse greens, other high quality specialty produce, eggs, and flowers twice a week to the Manhattan Greenmarket they serve. Marc and Janette, together with Janette's parents and two uncles, Blanca, Hector, Lucio, and Canuto Gonzalez, founded Rooted Family Farm in 2020. Although the business is a startup, the family is not new to farming. The elder Gonzalezes have been farming in the region for decades, and Janette grew up in that farming environment. They created Rooted Family Farm to shift from being



*The sun shines on Hector Gonzalez as he gets the fields ready at Rooted Family Farm (photo © Rooted Family Farm)*



*Canuto Gonzalez tends microgreens at Rooted Family Farm (photo © Rooted Family Farm)*

farm employees to owning and operating their own farm business, with the expectation of being one of the successor farm businesses on the farm where they had been employed. When plans at that farm changed, they needed to quickly find a new home.

As it happened, Equity Trust was in need of a new lessee for the same reason. Equity Trust had acquired our farm property in partnership with Orange County Land Trust (OCLT), Scenic Hudson, and a neighboring farmer, to prevent it being sold for industrial development. At that time, we granted OCLT an agricultural easement on the property, and the neighbor farmer agreed to lease and manage the land. However, when his plans changed, Equity Trust needed to make new arrangements to keep our land in production, and we were happy to welcome Rooted Family Farm to the property.

In addition to continuing to grow for their year-round market, the Presha and Gonzalez families have been hard at work upgrading infrastructure, building greenhouses, and rehabilitating the property, which had not been well maintained prior to Equity Trust's acquisition. They have many exciting plans and we look forward to their long and successful tenure on the land..



For over two decades, Equity Trust has promoted shared-equity ownership of farms as an effective way to keep agricultural lands in production while providing farmers with secure, affordable land tenure (see sidebar). We are happy to see a widening circle of organizations embrace this approach and implement it in their own work.

This summer, in eastern Massachusetts, the Essex County Greenbelt Association (Greenbelt) signed an agricultural ground lease—Greenbelt’s first, developed with our assistance—with Alex Cecchinelli and Stacey Apple of Iron Ox Farm. Now we are working with Lopez Community Land Trust (LCLT), in Washington’s San Juan Islands, and farmers Lena and Andrew Jones, to draft a ground lease for the 118-acre Lopez Sound Farm and Forest Preserve that LCLT purchased last year.

In 2019, Greenbelt acquired a 148-acre property on Massachusetts’ North Shore, site of a former organic farm, with the goal of reestablishing farming on the site. Greenbelt sought Equity Trust’s assistance in developing a structure that would ensure affordable tenure for farmers, support farm business viability, and be flexible over time, while preserving Greenbelt’s primary objectives of conserving the land and supporting its continued use for agriculture.



*Alex Cecchinelli and Stacey Apple, owner-operators of Iron Ox Farm, lessees of Essex Greenbelt on the former Green Meadows Farm. (photo credit: Neil Ungerleider)*

After exploring options, Greenbelt’s staff and board chose to make the land available to a farmer through a long-term ground lease. Greenbelt worked with Equity Trust throughout 2020 to develop the lease, and issued a request for proposals seeking farmers interested in leasing the agricultural portion of the property. Seventeen farmers submitted proposals, reflecting the high demand for this type of opportunity. The selected business, Iron Ox Farm, is a diversified vegetable operation, using organic practices, that sells

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## What's in a Ground Lease?

An agricultural ground lease defines the relationship between a land stewardship organization and the farmers who live on and farm the land. It establishes the rights and responsibilities of each party to meet the project’s social goals and protect the significant community resources that are usually required to acquire the farm. Designed to be long term (often 99 years, with an option to renew), the lease provides guidance for relationships designed to outlast those who drafted it.

The lease creates a shared-equity structure where the stewardship organization retains ownership of the land while the farmer is able to invest and build equity in the farm infrastructure. Adapted by Equity Trust from its use in affordable housing (which several Equity Trust founders played key roles in designing) this structure removes the land from the speculative market while reducing the farmer’s cost of access.

Equity Trust created ground leases for some early farm protection projects including Roxbury Farm in Kinderhook, NY and Caretaker Farm in Williamstown, MA; then, based on those experiences, published a model lease in 2009. Since then, while assisting more farm protection projects, we have added new elements and developed guidance for adapting the model to different circumstances and needs.

A ground lease addresses a wide range of issues in a legal framework, but ultimately it lays out a set of expectations between farmers who produce food on the land and the organization that holds that land on behalf of the wider community: What level of production do the farmers commit to and how will that be measured? How will the land be cared for? What infrastructure can be built? Must the farmers reside on the property? Who else can live there? When it comes time to find a new farmer, who is eligible and who is responsible for selecting them? All this, and more, needs to be discussed and decided to create a successful long-term partnership.

# Building community helps us recover Equity Trust Fund

Like the projects in its portfolio, the Equity Trust Fund demonstrated resilience this year after difficult times in 2020. Gratifyingly, given the isolation and deprivation so many have experienced during the pandemic, most of our new loans went to organizations dedicated to building communal bonds and helping others. Several are intentional communities that share deep roots with Equity Trust. Each has a strong social justice mission that inspires its members to reach into urban communities to provide support and resources, complementing our work with farms and rural lands.

Washington, D.C.'s **Assisi Community** was the borrower of the very first Equity Trust Fund loan way back in 1992. It was used to purchase one of the two houses its members live in (the purchase of the other house a few years later was also aided by an Equity Trust loan). In 2014, Assisi Community committed to permanently reserving its property for affordable housing in an agreement with D.C.'s **Douglass Community Land Trust (DCLT)**. When (if) the community runs its course, both houses will be donated to DCLT. This loan finances needed renovations, building code upgrades, and energy

efficiency to both maintain a decent living space for current members and preserve the value of the property for its future owners.

**Benincasa Community** is a Catholic Worker-style group formerly based in and primarily serving underprivileged people in New York City. Although neither we nor they knew it until earlier this year, members have ties to Equity Trust friends and allies going back to our founder Chuck Matthei and including former board member Monica McGloin. The group has an extensive network of supporters and close relationships with a wide variety of activist organizations. This loan finances the purchase of property near New Haven, Connecticut where the community will be able to grow food for itself and for local charitable providers and offer a different kind of hospitality experience for its many guests and visitors.

**Saint Francis House** has helped incubate numerous local grassroots organizations in New London, Connecticut, including the Southeastern Connecticut CLT, our current partner in the newly reorganized and renamed **Southeastern Connecticut Fund for Land Equity** (formerly the Francis Fund, which Saint Francis House helped found and served as our original partner). This loan helps finance deferred maintenance and repairs of the two houses where the members live and work, and which we hope will eventually be added to the CLT.

The **New London Homeless Hospitality Center** was one of those organizations launched with the help of Saint Francis House and is a frequent borrower from the Southeastern Connecticut fund. It has become an important local nonprofit offering a variety of programs assisting the homeless in that area. Previous loans enabled it to acquire and renovate homes, and to acquire land and build homes, for use as transitional and affordable housing for the people they serve. This loan finances the purchase of a building that will host a resource center for low-income people to supplement the Center's headquarters and main shelter. The second floor will eventually be converted to efficiency apartments to be made available to the organization's clients.

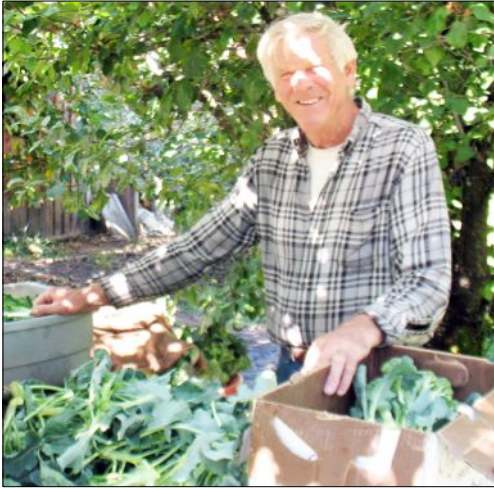
Another frequent borrower (this time from our general fund) is the North Carolina-based **Jubilee House Community**, which runs the nonprofit Center for Development in Central America in rural Nicaragua, helping small farmers organize into cooperatives for the production, processing, and marketing of a wide variety of organic crops including peanuts, cotton, and sesame. Cooperatives growing each of those crops have benefitted from Equity Trust loans to Jubilee House at one time or another. This loan enables an expansion of organic peanut acreage.



*Renovating the new home of Benincasa Community, CT  
(photo © Benincasa Community)*



# Remembering Stephen Decater



We are saddened by the loss of Stephen Decater, of Live Power Community Farm, who passed away on November 4. Equity Trust honors Stephen as an exemplar and mentor for many farmers, and a teacher who helped connect

two generations of children to food and the land it comes from. We remember him as the source, along with our founder Chuck Matthei, of the vision for farmland protection that has been central to our work for more than twenty-five years.

Live Power Community Farm in Covelo, California was the first farm Equity Trust protected, back in 1995. We worked closely with Stephen and Gloria Decater and their CSA members to craft and purchase an innovative agricultural conservation easement that pioneered the use of both resale restrictions to preserve affordability and farming requirements that ensure the land will always be used to produce healthy food for the region.

From beginning to end, Stephen and Gloria's vision shaped the project and their energy and deep ties with their CSA members made it possible to carry out. The goals of keeping land affordable to farmers and ensuring that those who use the land accept responsibility for stewarding it and passing it on are based on a deep understanding of the value of reciprocity and community, precepts that continue to guide our work. We are very grateful for the inspiration and example Stephen and Gloria have provided.

## Johanna Rosen moves on

This summer, after eight years with Equity Trust, Johanna Rosen moved to Agrarian Trust where, as a Commons Alliance Facilitator, she'll continue to promote community land ownership and economic justice. When Jo joined Equity Trust in 2013, she helped lead a multi-year project, Secure Land for Urban Agriculture, informed in part by her experiences as co-founder and Director of Mill Creek Farm, a non-profit educational farm in Philadelphia. She was also part of our Farms for Farmers consulting team, supporting several Hudson Valley Farm Affordability projects as well as land access initiatives for immigrant farmers in Western Massachusetts. We wish her well in her new role.



## Farm protection, coast to coast *(Cont'd from p. 2.)*

through a CSA and farmers' markets, and wholesale to restaurants. Stacey and Alex had been farming on two leased acres, so they will have a lot of room to grow with the 20 tillable acres at their new home. They also plan to share the land with a second farm business, Lillooet Sheep and Cheesery. By rotating between vegetable crops and grazing, the two businesses will make productive use of the land while improving soils. The farmers aim to make the farm into a community space where people can learn about and get involved with food production and enjoy nature.

Meanwhile on the opposite coast, LCLT has been following a similar trajectory. The Lopez Sound Farm and Forest Preserve is the second property acquired under LCLT's Lopez Island Farm Trust (LIFT) program, established "to hold farmland in trust to support a resilient local food system [and] a healthy local economy and provide a community place to gather and learn."

After purchasing the property in 2020, LCLT put out an RFP and ultimately selected Andrew and Lena as the lessee farmers, who will begin establishing their farm business on the land next spring. Their plans include planting perennial fruit and nut trees as well as annual crops such as oats, beans, and other seeds, using regenerative agriculture, agroforestry and permaculture practices. LCLT staff and the Jones are now jointly drafting the ground lease that will define their relationship for the coming decades, and have asked Equity Trust to provide guidance in this work.

We are pleased to support these important new partnerships and we look forward to seeing these deeply rooted community farms flourish in the coming years.