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From High Rises to Rolling Hills

Never dreaming of owning a working grass-fed beef farm, Sylvia Burgos Toftness grew up in the Bronx. Yes, that's right, the Bronx as in New York. It's a long way from high rises to rolling hills and the grazing BueLingo cattle of Bull Brook Keep farm.

“Rotational grazing enriches the soil.”

Sylvia's chosen career path was journalism and public relations. In the 70's she worked as a radio and TV reporter on the shores of Lake Superior in Duluth, Minnesota. Maybe it was a seed planted from her childhood that nudged her to the country, the trips to the Staten Island country side visiting grandparents. Maybe it was working with organic producers and sustainable farmers in the twin cities area that urged her to contemplate agricultural practices. Maybe both influences worked together, Sylvia began to envision herself and her husband, Dave, owning a working farm. In 2009 they purchased the 72-acre farm in Clear Lake, Wisconsin.

Sylvia credits her friends, neighbors, sustainable grazing classes and the Land Stewardship project – Farm Beginnings for their success. In the year-long Farm Beginning class participants are encouraged to develop a plan for the farm to meet their life goals. They discuss the tough economic aspects of farming and make sure both partners have similar visions for the farm and the future. Local farmers participate in the lecture series sharing practical hard-earned lessons. Sylvia found the contribution and commitment of participating farmers in mentoring new members of the agriculture community extremely helpful.

Prior to farming, Sylvia's drive to and from work in the city took her by fields with a particularly lovely herd of belted cattle. They appeared incredibly healthy and content. Seeing the robust calves gaining weight while grazing day after day, she pulled into the farmer's drive one afternoon, determined to purchase some of these cattle. That was the start of BueLingo grass-fed cattle at Bull Brook Keep.

The farm in the past had been continually grazed resulting in lack of plant diversity and poor-quality forages. Dave and Sylvia began rotational grazing from day one. The ongoing task of adding handling facilities and fencing began.



from the high concentrations of organic matter deposited,” Sylvia mentions.

Enjoying the connection to the land, one of Sylvia’s goals is to share the farm experience with others and to it as a teaching tool. The proximity to the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota enables her to invite folks to the farm to pick up their grass-fed beef, learn about raising cattle on pastures and even participate in the baking and cooking classes. “The opportunity to connect with the land, walk through the pastures, watch the cattle graze is a learning experience



practice and taste, nutrition, soil and water quality and community vitality.” The podcasts are posted on iTunes and on Sylvia’s website (<http://www.bronxtobarn.com/>).

Using electric Turbo Braid (<https://am.gallagher.com/us/product/2536/turbo-braid-7-2f64-22>) and step-in posts (<https://am.gallagher.com/us/product/3107/hd-treadin-post-white>) Sylvia makes temporary paddocks to ensure the best use of the acreage.

Healthy soil is essential, Sylvia says, “it’s the backbone supporting life on the farm. Rotational grazing enriches the soil. The cattle trample in organic matter from the plants also adding nutrients from manure and urine.” Their cattle have year-round access to a barn but only seek shelter during sleet or high winds preferring to be out in the pastures. Winter bale grazing is done on thin soiled or gravelly areas. “We’ve seen the soils benefit



for many.” Sylvia notes folks are busy when they first arrive; telling stories, asking questions, excited by all that is new. A change takes place after about 20 minutes; the people suddenly quiet, beginning to take everything in. “A connection is forming, they are feeling the land,” says Sylvia.

In that new understanding visitors begin to connect the dots between what we eat and how it is grown. To help ensure those dots get connected Sylvia co-hosts a program at a local radio station, WPCA 91.3 FM, every Saturday morning from 9 to 9:30 AM. Deep Roots Radio is streamed live with the intent of enabling folks to make better informed choices about food and the agricultural practices used to produce food. On her website Sylvia says, “Farmers, ranchers, scientists, chefs, authors, film makers and activists, students, teachers, policy gurus and others are among the many guests featured on Deep Roots Radio every week. They describe their experiences and make the linkages between food choice, farming

The Bull Brook Keep farm website states, "We farm with a tiny carbon hoofprint (R), so that you can enjoy delicious, nutritious beef and know you're part of a healthful food system." If you are interested in walking among grazing cattle in green pastures, baking artisan breads, learning more about sustainable agriculture and connecting the dots between what we eat and how it is grown". Check out Sylvia's website (<http://www.bronxtobarn.com/>) and give a listen to the Deep Roots Radio pod cast.

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