

## Save the Date!

Saturday,  
December 7, 2024  
Benefit in Carmel, IN  
Labor Day Weekend  
2025  
20th Anniversary  
Reunion

## Reflections From our Staff Retreat

By Casey, Caretaker

Guided by steady, gripping fingers, humming along to rushing currents, goldenrod scratches across the paper balanced on my knees. More colored pencils, thin tubes of wood-encased hardened pigment, lie scattered among the decomposing bark around me.

I pick up chestnut then olive, thinking about the Greenbrier River flowing before me and the theme of our retreat: watershed discipleship. Theologian Ched Meyers uses this framework to engage the ecological crisis through faith rooted in a place – in bark and river – and invites us to ask: What do our sacred texts and wisdom traditions teach us about caring for our local places? Remembering Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River and told parables inspired by life in his bioregion, what can we learn from our watersheds about prayer?



*Returning to Watershed Discipleship*  
By Casey Murano

2023. Colored pencil on paper, 24x24 inch

Cerulean brushes over the paper's surface. Seeing shrubs peeking through melting frost brings me back to the community vigil at this riverbank last summer.

In the short space between summer and winter, a one-thousand-foot length of metal tube the height of a toddler has arrived. In six short months, verdant mountain slopes slip into mudslides and neighboring creeks run cloudy rather than clear. I pick up sap green light, to capture the hue of the pipe on the paper. The Mountain Valley Pipeline carries colorless fracked gas – I have no pencil for it. But we will continue to care for this Greenbrier River. Laying down the final passage of indigo swirls, burnished with cloud blue, I can still draw watershed discipleship.

## 2024 Group Week Openings

### Summer High School Group Weeks:

- **June 9 – 15** NEW!  
10 Openings Available
- **June 16 – 22** NEW!  
4 openings (All young women high school group week)
- **June 30 – July 6**  
8 openings remaining and accepting waitlist requests
- **July 7 – 13**  
2 openings remaining and accepting waitlist requests
- **August 4 – 10** Newly Opened!  
22 openings remaining

### Family Week: Spots available!!!

July 28 – August 3

### Adult Week:

September 14 – 19 (Saturday - Thursday)

### October College Group Weeks:

- **September 29 – October 5:** Open
- **October 6-12:** Open
- **October 13-19:** Open
- **October 20-26:** 20 openings remaining

\*May also be open to High School or College Groups as exclusive weeks

Canning Lids >

Cordless Makita  
or Dewalt jigsaws >

Luci CORE  
Solar Lanterns >

Makita impactors >

Biodegradable  
Shampoo & soap >

Postage Stamps >

Paint Brushes >

Check out our  
online tool registry  
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[bethlehemfarm.net/  
wish-list](http://bethlehemfarm.net/wish-list)

W I S H L I S T



## GREEN NEIGHBORS PROGRAM IS LOOKING BRIGHT

By Colleen, Caretaker

2024 started off strong with the successful installation of solar panel systems at two local clients' homes by the end of March.

Thanks to the generosity of the Wheaton IL Franciscan Sisters, our Green Neighbors Solar Upgrades program has been enabling low-income West Virginians to access renewable energy for several years. Green Neighbors offers zero-interest loans for renewable energy installations to local homeowners. As part of the program, we help educate homeowners about residential solar panels, connect them with trusted local installers, and offer guidance and advocacy as needed.

One of our 2024 solar clients is a family that we have known for years. As Mary Ann says, "I keep an eye on Bethlehem Farm," since her family lives up the mountain from Bethlehem Farm and can look down and see us when the leaves are off the trees. Mary Ann and her son have had to endure the installation of the Mountain Valley Pipeline on their property over the last few years, against their wishes. The company was granted eminent domain to bury the 4-foot diameter gas transmission line through their yard and surrounding property. This has been very disruptive to their daily life, and has ruined their livestock pond and caused many other problems. While they cannot do anything to change this incursion, they decided to make an energy choice they WERE able to make: installing solar panels on their property. Mary Ann now proudly shows friends their ground-mounted 8.64 kW solar array, which over the course of a year should produce 99% of their electricity usage. We are very happy for Mary Ann and her family, and we celebrate their choice toward a positive energy future.



Recent legislation called the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) has been a big help to those looking to go solar. For local homeowners that owe federal taxes each year, up to 40% of the price of a renewable energy installation can be applied to one's tax liability as a credit for the years following the installation. This is a huge help to many of our homeowners. The IRA also included the helpful provision that nonprofits, schools, and churches – which of course are tax exempt and cannot benefit from tax credits – can receive a rebate of at least 30% of the price of a renewable energy installation. This is also very impactful for churches and charities who are considering solar.

There is a group of people who do not benefit from all these incentives, though, and that is low-income homeowners who do not make enough money to owe taxes each year. These folks, who may be the most in need of assistance in making the transition to renewable energy, are the ones not able to access the tax benefits. This problem issue has stumped us for a while, as we coordinate this program which is intended to help lower income Appalachians access solar panels.

Our colleague Autumn Long at the Appalachian Solar Finance Fund, our friends at Jerusalem Farm, and a new connection with the CEO of Georgia BRIGHT have inspired a new option for these low-income homeowners through the Green Neighbors Program. For families who do not qualify for IRA tax incentives and cannot afford a system of their own, leasing a system can be their only affordable option. Bethlehem Farm has developed a pilot program for homeowners to be able to lease solar panels owned by Bethlehem Farm.



Setting up the infrastructure for this new aspect of the Green Neighbors program has been time-consuming – and sometimes mind-numbing to comb through pages of IRS documents! – but we are very excited about the leasing option making it possible for many more clients to access renewable energy for their homes.

We are so grateful to the Wheaton Franciscan Sisters for their support of this transformative program, and we look forward to helping more clients power their homes with the sun's energy throughout 2024 and beyond.

## Home Repair Updates

By Anna, Caretaker

Spring is here! We've welcomed college and high school students to work with us and our homeowners on some big projects. Working at Kenny's and Marcus's have been two major highlights this spring. When we began work at Kenny's, his porch was collapsing and beginning to separate away from his house. His roof was falling in, leaking and sagging in several places, indicating that the decking was rotting away underneath the rusted-out tin. Kenny has worked his entire life and doesn't let a bad back stop him from being a part of the crew. His energy and enthusiasm for teaching others has affected both site leaders and volunteers.

Marcus is the father of a young autistic son. When their home burned down about a year and a half ago, they moved into a shelter for nine months as Marcus slowly worked on repairing their trailer. Marcus eventually found a new trailer and relocated. After his power tools were stolen and the pipes burst, Marcus began to lose hope. When we connected with Marcus this winter, he had no electricity, no water, and the looming threat of eviction from the shelter due to too many extensions. Bethlehem Farm quickly coordinated resources to restore his electricity. We built him two porches

## Become A Caretaker!

Can you see yourself living on the Farm year-round? We are seeking folks to join us as Caretakers! We are especially seeking someone excited about the House Manager role and Home School Support. A minimum one-year commitment is required. Applications can be found at [www.bethlehemfarm.net/caretaker](http://www.bethlehemfarm.net/caretaker) or contact Casey at [hire@bethlehemfarm.net](mailto:hire@bethlehemfarm.net)

and steps to ensure safe access to his home. We also put up underpinning around his trailer to block the wind and insulated the pipes underneath it after Marcus fixed them. It's been a joy to work alongside Marcus and his son, who have both had a long couple of years. We're glad things are looking up for them!



## Seeds Beyond Our Vision

By Molly, Caretaker

Bubbling with nervous excitement, eight of us gathered in our high school's chapel in early June 2015. Our chaperone shared the prayer "Prophets of a Future Not Our Own," written by Fr. Ken Untener, often attributed to St. Oscar Romero.

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.*

We spent the next week at Bethlehem Farm, glimpsing the vision, fingernails dirty from planting onions with our neighbor Anne, sweatshirts clinging to campfire smoke, "welcome home" echoing in our ears. We tangibly experienced a fraction of a kingdom so extraordinarily beyond us, one that we are called to work toward anyway.

*This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.*

Each year I returned to the Farm, learning more about the kind of foolish hope we must have to grow a garden, to believe in the seeds. What a glorious, heartbreaking reminder of the small part I play in this future promise!

*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.*

As I prepare to move away from the Farm after four years as a Caretaker, my spiritual director prompted me to chew on this prayer as I plant beets that I will not harvest. To wash the dishes, bake the bread, plant the seeds. To cling to hope with all the foolishness of the prophets, to build the kingdom of God on Earth!

*We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.*

**MISSION STATEMENT:**

Bethlehem Farm is a Catholic community in Appalachia that transforms lives through service with the local community and the teaching of sustainable practices.

We invite volunteers to join us in living the Gospel cornerstones of community, prayer, service, and simplicity.

**OUR COMMUNITY:**

- Colleen Fitts
- Eric Fitts
- Anna Koshiol
- Jack Lampton
- Marcus Lyons
- Jarrett Murano
- Casey Murano
- Steve Rassa
- Molly Sutter

**BOARD MEMBERS:**

- Arielle Chard
- Brenna Davis
- Brent Fernandez
- Andrew Ketchum
- Lauren LaCoy
- Caitlin Mattera
- Mary Catherine McDonald
- Kathryn Moran
- Steve Morrill
- Jennifer Scott
- Tim Showlin
- Rachelle Simon
- Craig Snyder
- Richard Storey
- Nick Vergatos

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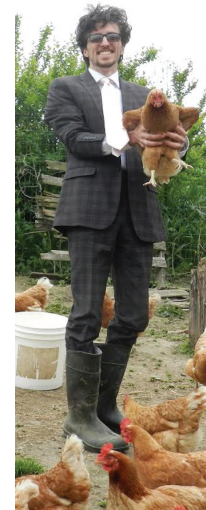


By our friends at Panther Graphics  
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**Welcome Home to Our 50th Caretaker!**

Jarrett Murano has joined us twice before as a Summer Servant – most recently for two months this past fall. He documented the installation of our 32,000 gallon rainwater containment system, utilizing his skills as an artist and musician. Jarrett studied graphic design at the University of Lynchburg. Following graduation, he spent a year in DC with the Franciscan Mission Service, living in community and delivering food to neighbors with life-challenging illnesses. Jarrett is excited to trade the big city for farm living and is especially eager to work with his hands as animal tender and house manager.

Jarrett brings with him an abounding love for the chickens, tremendous capacity for hard work, and an energetic spirit that fills any room with life. Be it with his eccentric humor, stellar guitar skills, or penchant for storytelling, Jarrett infuses every situation with energy.



**A Better Future Ahead for the Farm**

*By Eric, Director*

As I mentioned in the fall newsletter, the Board and Caretaker Community have been renewing the Master Plan for our next 3-5 years. As we reflected on our past and dreamed about our future, ideas were shared for new efforts, things we could shed, and ways to deepen the impact of what we already do.

The “Better Future” we are seeking is: **By 2028, nourish a resilient organization committed to engagement within our local community and integration of sustainable teachings.**

As part of this process, we have highlighted four Learn & Grow Objectives:

**Caretaker Sustainability**

- Seeking a sense of balance for Caretakers in the midst of hosting hundreds of people each year – amidst walking with homeowners through challenging housing situations, while being ministerially present every day from 7am - 9pm on service-retreat weeks (i.e. preventing burn-out).

**Local Community Engagement**

- Involving local volunteers and local board members
- Form a local advisory committee to further engage local wisdom
- More local community participation in Farm life, including local youth

**Integration of Sustainable Teachings:**

- Further integrate Laudato Si’ & Laudate Deum into our programming and operations
- In a time of climate chaos, live into the call of what it means to be Catholic in this moment
- Resilience in face of a changing environmental/social/political climate
  - Pursue an even more local, organic diet
  - Further reduce fossil fuel use (electric vehicles, yard equipment)

**Master Facilities Planning**

- Completing new buildings
- Determining best use for existing buildings and spaces

We have formed working committees around each of these four objectives that will be meeting via Zoom on a regular basis. If you are interested in contributing to the work of any of these committees, whether as a regular member or with one-time feedback, then please feel welcome.



**Check us out online!**  
[www.bethlehemfarm.net](http://www.bethlehemfarm.net)

Questions or Comments regarding this publication, article submissions and photos can be sent to the editor at [caretakers@bethlehemfarm.net](mailto:caretakers@bethlehemfarm.net)