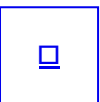


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Eno River Farm: Berries, Vision and Community in COVID-19 (Part 1)

June 15, 2020 By [Kevin LaTorre](#)

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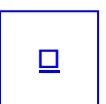
When you call the store number at Eno River Farm in Hillsborough, 23-year-old owner Keegan Czesak picks up. “I want to be the face of the customer interactions,” he says. “Not that we aren’t confident in our employees. I like to be as transparent as possible, because that’s how you do family-oriented, community-level farming.”



Eno River Farm

[Eno River Farm](#), a pick-your-own berry farm and ice cream stop ten minutes east of Hillsborough, has an unique origin. And because the store opened at the onset of COVID-19, it has also had an unique first season.

A Farm Born Between Childhood and College

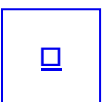




Eno River Farm owner Keegan Czesak

Czesak spent his summers until age 20 lending a hand on his grandparents' potato farm on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. The work convinced him to return to agriculture, a path which led him through Virginia Tech to study the subject. "I was set on going back to my grandparents' farm," he says, "and so I was narrow-minded about what I learned. Blessed with the curse of knowing what I wanted to do from a young age."

However, a college trip to Cape Town, South Africa introduced greater learning he still needed. "I saw multi-million dollar homes at the same intersection as a man living behind a rock," Czesak says. The sight inspired his future but also recalled his childhood in Virginia. His grandparents' potatoes had supported



the multi-brand corporation Frito Lay. “I wanted to make a difference. Something that would impact the community, not just make a mass-produced commodity.”

[A final project from Czesak’s senior year gave him that chance.](#)

“The prompt was to come up with a mock-business plan for a farm, starting from scratch.” His planned business (what would become Eno River Farm) only took shape in a conversation with his uncle, Jude Samulski. “Driving back from dinner in Hillsborough, we went past a piece of property for sale,” Czesak says, “and we joked about what we would do with the land if we bought it.” Samulski, the successful entrepreneur behind Asklepios Biopharmaceutics, Chatham Therapeutics and Merlin, apparently saw promise in the humor. He invested in the class assignment. And so Czesak began clearing the land for Eno River Farms in March 2019.

“There wasn’t a conversation [about the investment],” Czesak says. “We didn’t ask, ‘Are we able to do it?’ That was a non-issue. We had no doubt of fulfilment, it was one of those things that just fell into place.” For his part, Samulski declined give an interview. “You want to speak to Keegan and not me,” he said via email. “This is Keegan’s farm.”

Eno River Farms, Built by the Hillsborough Community

While Czesak spearheaded the effort to clear the land outside Hillsborough, he knew the construction need help. A few people in the area were uncertain. “There was a brief time of, ‘Are you sure you want to do this?’,” he says. “I made it clear that [the farm] would not fail, I would make sure it didn’t fail.” In turn, Hillsborough companies began to approach Czesak. Among the first were [Wilkerson Grading](#) and Wellsmont Landscaping, and Czesak takes pride in their involvement. “All the building came from guys born and raised in Hillsborough. We didn’t outsource to a big contractor.”

Eno River Farm

Doug Malinowski, owner and operator of Wellsmont Landscaping, still works with Eno River Farm. He himself grew up in Hillsborough, on his family’s horse farm until he graduated from Orange High School and Alamance College. All the while, he worked on lawn maintenance in the area. When the farm’s construction changed the store’s planned elevation to preserve the roadside trees, Malinowski came in to build a retaining wall. “Royce [Wilkerson, of Wilkerson Grading] introduced me to Keegan [Czesak] late last summer, and we compared samples for the wall,” he said. “The project just evolved from there. I think the biggest thing was, our views on how the place should look were very similar. All the walkways, the lighting, the beds, the access from parking lot to store, we had the same view.” With help from Wellsmont and Wilkerson, All through 2019, Czesak led the construction of Hillsborough’s newest farm by the work of Hillsborough builders.

A North Carolina Mentor and Advisor

Czesak made another friend in Cal Lewis, the third-generation owner of [Lewis Nursery and Farms](#) in Rocky Point, NC. “He worked for us when he could for about a month and a half,” Lewis said. “That meant everything from parking cars to working in the berry fields to scooping ice cream.” Czesak had visited Lewis Nursery and Farms as a child, but as a young man, he wanted to emulate it. He admired its position as a farm that supporting its community (residents use the land as a park). And so he had reached out to Lewis.

Though Czesak calls his time with Lewis an internship, Lewis said the position wasn’t so structured. “I said [to him], the best thing you can do is work for us. I’ll put you in a position to learn the business.” Czesak’s learning went well enough for the two men (and Walt Webb, the manager at Lewis) to remain in touch almost daily. “We’ve developed a priceless relationship,” Czesak says.

“I enjoyed working with him,” Lewis says in return. “I enjoy mentoring him and helping him run his business, I think the world of him.” They remained in touch all through the farm’s construction, until it opened March 27, 2020. “The farm was ready at 8 a.m.,” says Czesak. “We opened at 9 a.m.”

Make sure to read [Part 2](#) of the Eno River Farm story tomorrow, where we’ll cover how Czesak managed to turn the COVID-19 crisis into a successful first season.

