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HOT CENTERPIECE

## Clarke farmers providing employment for people with disabilities

By CATHY KUEHNER | The Winchester Star Jan 24, 2018



Maya Wechsler feeds the chickens at A Farm Less Ordinary in Clarke County on Wednesday. Wechsler and her husband, Greg Masucci, started the farm to create employment opportunities for people with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

Ginger Perry/The Winchest

BLUEMONT — Most parents agree: There isn't anything they wouldn't do to ensure their children grow up to be healthy adults with opportunities to thrive and be productive. It's hard work for parents of healthy children. It's harder work for parents of children with developmental disabilities.

Parents Maya Wechsler and Greg Masucci are working harder than they ever imagined at their 24-acre Clarke County property that is A Farm Less Ordinary.

The married couple moved their young family from Washington, D.C., to Bluemont in late 2014 to create a healthier, safer environment in which to raise Delilah, now 8, and Max, now 10, who is at the low end of the autism spectrum.

“His verbal skills are almost nonexistent, and he can’t sit still for more than 10 seconds,” Masucci said. Because Max has serious sensory and attention challenges, a caretaker must be with him at all times.

Living in the fast-paced, traffic-congested, confined space of Capitol Hill, Max’s parents constantly worried about their son’s safety. Additionally, “It became increasingly difficult to manage people’s reactions to Max,” Masucci said.

Out of necessity, they also became education advocates for all children with disabilities.

In 2013, an experience on a ranch in Texas made the couple think “country.” Max, who never stops moving and has trouble sleeping, fell asleep while riding a horse, accompanied by an adult, at the Horse Boy Foundation.

The Horse Boy Foundation serves children with autism through equine therapy.

After that, Wechsler and Masucci knew it was time to get out of the city.

“I looked at 1,000 properties in six states before we found this property,” said Masucci, 54, who works in real estate.

Wechsler, 39, is a proposal manager for PwC, also known as PricewaterhouseCoopers, a job that allows her to telecommute most days.

Neither Masucci nor Wechsler had any experience with farming, but for the love of their children, they jumped right in.

In only a few years, they have built A Farm Less Ordinary into a learning and employment opportunity for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It is a working farm that sells its produce at farmers markets and through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program that allows customers to pay once for a season of fresh food.

A Farm Less Ordinary is also a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with a board of directors.



“We believe that people generally look at people with disabilities and see what they can’t do,” Masucci said. “We want people to see what they can do.”

Wechsler and Masucci knew from the start that A Farm Less Ordinary would be a forever home for Max, but they also wanted it to be a working farm where young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities could learn skills, earn a fair wage and find acceptance and purpose.

At some point, young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities age out of educational facilities, often returning home to their parents.

“This creates a situation that leads to social isolation and financial burdens for everyone in the family,” Masucci said. “It can also lead to obesity and depression for the young adults.”

A Farm Less Ordinary provides employment for about a dozen teenagers and adults with disabilities from March through October each year.

“We know everyone has abilities — some that we can’t necessarily see at the start — so we find out what each employee is good at,” said Masucci.

Everyone who works at the farm learns other life lessons. Be on time. Wear the proper clothes. Don’t take too many breaks.

“Part of what we do is give caretakers a break, too,” Masucci said.

In addition to Wechsler and Masucci, supervision is provided by a farm manager as well as Max’s teacher, who lives on the farm. Individuals who work at A Farm Less Ordinary are never far from assistance.

Volunteers are always welcome to help at the farm, too.

“We want the farm to be family-friendly, too, because we want kids to see people with disabilities working,” said Masucci, noting that parents and schools are invited to bring children to visit.

He continued, “We believe that children are imprinted early. We want to imprint on them that people with disabilities work just like everyone else.”

A Farm Less Ordinary produces a wide variety of vegetables grown using organic and sustainable methods, including the use of organic compost, cover crops, minimum tillage and companion cropping as well as attracting pollinators and good pests.

The farm is also home to a dozen chickens and Nemo, a magnificent and gentle Labrador-Bernese mountain dog cross.

Wechsler and Masucci plan to add goats and alpacas this year.



Their 24-acre farm has 6.5 cleared acres, two of which are used for crops.

The property has a house, and Masucci has since improved it and built the chicken coop, storage sheds and hoop house. Another hoop house and more storage sheds are needed for the growing farm.

“My friends know I’m cheap — I mean frugal — so they let me know when homes are going to be demolished or renovated, so I can pick up counters, cupboards or whatever I can use,” said Masucci, smiling.

He is most proud of the cold-storage unit he built for the produce.

To become a farmer, Wechsler took advantage of free classes offered by the USDA and Virginia Cooperative Extension.

“Farmers are great about sharing their knowledge,” she said, noting one of her favorites is the Twilight Farm Tour series offered by the extension.

“Those are really helpful. You tour farms at the end of the workday and ask questions,” said Wechsler, who also researches and reads books about everything related to her small farm.

“I enjoy farming,” she said. “It’s peaceful, and I get to be semi-alone out there.”

She added, “I also didn’t know how much I would enjoy cooking with fresh food we raise ourselves.”

The farm is also growing its board of directors.

Rob Guerra, who is retired from a long career in technology and startups, serves as the chairman of the farm's board.

"We're restructuring the board and want to grow it from six members to nine," Guerra said. "We want to adopt a more business-like approach so each member has a responsibility."

Each board member will manage different tasks, such as sales, outreach, events, marketing and logistics.

"Greg and Maya have defined the mission and vision of the farm," Guerra said. "The board will support them, so they don't have to do everything themselves — they've been busy keeping their heads above water."

The nonprofit farm needs a more structured approach, Guerra said.



"All you have to do is look at the rising rate of autism," Masucci said. "There will always be a need for places like A Farm Less Ordinary."

He noted the challenge with the farm is that the work is seasonal. "We want to prepare people with disabilities for full-time employment."

A Farm Less Ordinary is currently looking for employees of working age who have intellectual or developmental disabilities for paid positions.

Younger children are invited to lend a hand, too, if they are accompanied by a parent.

Work begins in mid-February, when seeds are started in the hoop house. Work really picks up in March and continues through the fall.

A Farm Less Ordinary is also selling CSA shares for the upcoming growing season. Some shares have already been purchased by Loudoun Hunger Relief, which serves people in that county.

Masucci and Wechsler would also like to find outlets for A Farm Less Ordinary produce in Clarke and Frederick counties.

“We’d like to think that Max will work on the farm one day, but we’re realistic about his abilities,” Masucci said. “But that’s not why we started the farm. We moved here for our family. We started the farm for other people like our son.”



Learn more about A Farm Less Ordinary at [afarmlessordinary.org](http://afarmlessordinary.org) and follow it on Facebook. Contact the farm at 202-810-3276 or [info@afarmlessordinary.org](mailto:info@afarmlessordinary.org).

— Contact Cathy Kuehner at [ckuehner@winchesterstar.com](mailto:ckuehner@winchesterstar.com)

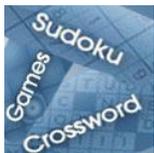
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