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From left, back row, siblings Addisyn, Mila and Corbin Hay gathered for a photo with their grandfather, John Kemmerer, as the third and fifth generations of Kemmerer Farm farmers. Photo submitted

Century farmers offered much-needed support

August 18, 2021

By KAITLIN LYLE

STANFORDVILLE — Raised on her family's 100-acre hay farm in Stanfordville, Emily Hay understands just how indispensable farms and farmers are to their communities. Having observed the hardships many longtime farming families endured during the COVID-19 pandemic, Hay and her husband, Bradley, sought a way to strengthen the roots many farmers planted in the region centuries ago. So they created the Centennial Farms Foundation (CFF), which operates out of Pine Plains.

As fourth-generation farmers, Hay and her siblings, John Jr., Leif, Victoria and Kristin, grew up throwing hay at Kemmerer Farm from when the sun came up. Today, the Kemmerer siblings (save Kristin, who passed away in 2019) can be still found on the family farm helping out alongside father John and mother Clara.

At age 17, Hay ventured off to open her own feed store in Stanfordville, Hay's Country Feed 'N Needs, and later in Pine Plains on Church Street, which closed during the COVID crisis.

Now raising a fifth generation of farmers — her daughters Mila, 9, and Addisyn, 5, and son Corbin, 3 — Hay said they go to her dad's farm as often as possible. She tries to instill in her children a sense of responsibility, not to mention the pride and satisfaction of hard work.

When the pandemic hit, Hay also lost all of her online business. As COVID-19 raged on, she helped her father run his farm, which celebrated its centennial anniversary this March.

Hay said the health crisis led her to evaluate how so many farms have struggled over the past year-and-a-half, as her family's farm did. She said she realized something needed to be done — thus CFF was born. Its focus is specifically on centennial farms and their owners.

"They are truly the founders of our country, our nation," Hay explained. "They put food on everybody's tables and they're very under-appreciated and very under-supported."

Admiring their contributions, Hay said, "They are a longtime staple that have, of course, been here longer than others. Their families are reputable members of the community; they're supportive — I don't know a single farmer that hasn't offered their hand or service. They're a necessity; they're a staple."

The goal of CFF is to help support centennial farm workers through debt fulfillment grants along with business planning for the future and property tax aid assistance. In addition to financial support, Hay said CFF wants to provide emotional support to the farmers.

A psychologist with 30 years experience has already volunteered to provide her services to farmers free of charge through CFF. As the demand increases, Hay said she hopes to partner with other nonprofits that provide similar services.

Donating to CFF is simple, said Hay, who hopes to spread the message through word of mouth.

"It's as easy to saying you can dedicate \$5 a month to help a farm family in need," she said.

Sponsors can donate any amount of their choosing as often as they can. Donations via debit or credit card may be made online at www.cff100.org, and checks can be mailed and made payable to CFOSNY Centennial Farms Foundation, P.O. Box 42, Pine Plains, NY 12567. All donations are tax deductible and donors will receive the appropriate forms following their donation.

Asked how they plan to allocate the funding to local centennial farms, Hay said they're starting in Dutchess County with its 31 registered century farm owners, and will then spread funding throughout counties in New

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York as their funding increases.

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“I hope that the support for such a cause will be so overwhelming that we can do this from state to state and nationally,” she said.

Going in order of hardship, Hay said CFF will help the farms with the worst financial situations first to help to prevent farmers in dire financial straits from losing their farms.

Given how many century farms exist in the area, she said, “I don’t think people realize that just one local farm may support a farm stand that they have at their community events. It might support the restaurants in their towns, it provides at least a few jobs and provides food to the neighboring animals. Where would all the local shelters get donated items?

“There’s a huge [snowball] effect,” she stressed, “and then, over time, it might be just one small farm, but when enough of the farms go out, it’s giving power to some of the larger farmers. It might just be one, but it’s a huge effect.”

CFF will hold a fundraiser, Centennial Hay Days, on Sunday, Aug. 21, from 4 to 9 p.m. at Kemmerer Farm, located at 391 Shuman Road in Stanfordville.

On top of breathtaking views of the Catskills, there will be live music from by the popular local singer Wanda Houston and the Band.

Hay said CFF will hold future community events, including silent auctions on the farm and other activities there during the warmer months, such as open-air markets. She added the primary sources of funding she hopes for to support CFF’s efforts will include individual donations, federal grants and county grants.

For more information, go to www.centennialfarmsfoundation.org.

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