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SPACE RESERVED FOR SUBSCRIBER ADDRESS

Living the Pastoral Dream

KYLE BARR

Port Jeff natives Andie Fortier and James Burke are regulars at the Port Jefferson Farmers Market, but these young sowers and growers are working hard to make their dream of tending the land come true— A3



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Town Founding a Farm

Young Farmers and PJ Natives Carve Out a Living on the East End

BY KYLE BARR
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Boots squelching in the morning dew of the roughly shorn grass in East Hampton, James Burke and Andie Fortier together know they have a long day ahead of them.

In the land known for its mansions and rich flavoring from Southampton to Montauk, nothing comes easy to those who work the land. The farmers, both just 23 years old, have many vegetables to grow, their winter squash, the hot peppers, watermelons and many others in the small plot of land behind the restaurant they work for. After working a full day there, it's over to another patch of land they farm in Amagansett where they grow produce for their stand at the Port Jefferson Farmers Market. They will be working from early morning until the sun kisses the horizon, but they will return to their small Amagansett apartment proud of what they've done, because everything they have, has been built with their own hands.

The pair effectively operate two small farms far out on the South Fork. One provides the food for a multitude of local restaurants, the other is for all their produce sold at the PJ Farmers Market, where they hold their stand as Sand and Soil Farm.

To them, nurturing things, whether it's any one plant or an entire garden and farm, is only natural.

"It's really satisfying to see something from start to finish, from when you put a seed in the ground then take care of it and harvest from it — watching things come full circle," Fortier said.

Burke said he relishes watching the way customers react to their food. At their farmers market stand, customers come and say what they used the farm's produce for. Others look for something they haven't cooked with before, then they come back the following week and "they're hooked on it," Burke said.

Getting Hooked on Produce

Starting a farm at a young age is certainly not common, especially for two people whose families have no recent history or experience with extensive agriculture.



Andie Fortier and James Burke at their garden behind the East Hampton Nick and Toni's restaurant. The pair work seven days a week during the summer. Photo by Kyle Barr

The pair are both 2015 graduates of Port Jefferson high school, though it would have been hard for either of them to say five years later they would find themselves knees in the dirt and their hands in the earth.

In high school, Burke was engendered to environmental issues. Later, when attending Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., he started working at an urban farm, which helped grow local products in the so-called food deserts, or the places in poorer urban areas that have no local access to a supermarket or any kind of fresh food. Coming back to Long Island, he knew that's something he would want to continue but on a larger scale.

Fortier, like her father Andrew, was interested in music but did enjoy working with her father outside in his carpentry business. After graduating with Burke in 2015 she went to The New School in New York City to study theater. Missing wide open spaces and looking to find work she could really enjoy, she returned to Long Island and "fell into" the agriculture industry more on the education and market side of things. Gradually, she grew to love the farmer's life.

"If you had asked me in high school if James and I would own a farm together, I would have said, 'What are you talking about?'" she said.

The two worked at Amber Waves Farm Market & Kitchen in Amagansett for just a few years when in 2019 the owners of the Nick and Toni's restaurant in East Hampton asked for somebody to clean up the establishment's backyard garden. The person who previously worked that patch of land up and left one day without a word, and over

PJ FARMERS Continued on A10

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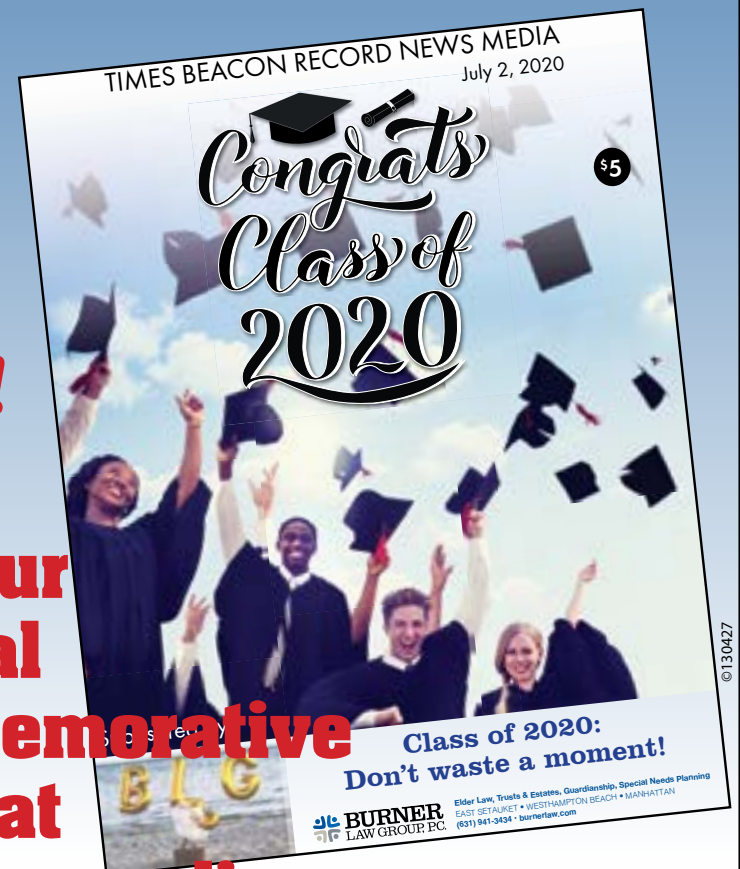
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Turtle Island: A Your Turn Series

Environmental Racism Exacerbated by Coronavirus

People of low-income, and especially minorities, constantly struggle with the financial and social hardships that arise from racism. While the financial disparities and social injustices are well known, many are still unaware of the environmental racism that many people and communities endure, and how deadly it actually is. Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic is making this issue more apparent and is increasing the need for awareness about environmental justice.

Environmental racism is a form of systemic racism where people of color are disproportionately impacted by environmental hazards through policies and practices. It has existed in America ever since the Europeans made contact with the Native Americans, and it has progressively worsened with the Industrial Revolution and the increasing amount of toxic waste and new technology that is being created.

The working populations that lives in low-income communities aren't given the power to have their voices heard regarding environmental laws. Moreover, the land in these areas is cheaper for industrial actors to acquire. This is why about 70% of contaminated waste sites are located in low income communities. With such a great imbalance of political power between the upper class, less diverse neighborhoods and the low-income African American neighborhoods,

the latter's communities are being subjected to the greater amounts of air pollution, toxic waste sites, landfills, lead poisoning and flooding.

The health effects from environmental racism are extremely harmful and lethal. Most often, people of low income communities who are subjected to environmental racism will see increases in obesity, asthma, diabetes and many different cancers because they are living amongst industrial toxic chemicals and toxic waste.

One example that demonstrates the harmful effects of environmental racism is the so-called Cancer Alley in Louisiana along the Mississippi River. In 1987, African Americans of low-income neighborhoods started noticing an abundance of cancer cases within their community. People began making the connection between cancer cases and the 85-mile-long stretch of oil refineries and petrochemical plants. The petrochemical plants are extremely harmful to human health because petrochemicals can be absorbed through the skin or ingested and will accumulate in tissues and organs. They can then cause brain, nerve and liver damage, birth defects, cancer and asthma. This is why living in Cancer Alley increases one's chance of getting cancer by 50%. Currently, Cancer Alley is also experiencing a highest rate of coronavirus deaths.

Another community that is a target of envi-

pair started to get innovative, where they buried crockpots in the ground to keep the seeds warm at 75 degrees before being taken out in the mornings to receive light.

"We had to work with what we got," Burke said. "We had to get creative."

Growing Something New

The work was enough to keep anybody busy, but the pair wanted something more, something they could call their own. Working with the Peconic Land Trust's Farms for the Future Initiative, a program that aims to protect land that could be potentially developed and keep it for agriculture, they hit the books, literally. The PJ natives trawled through pages at the local library along with online articles about how they would set everything up — from creating a business plan, to figuring out how many seeds they would need to buy, to what equipment they would need at the start. In Amagansett, they managed to procure a 1-acre plot of land, a piece of a larger property owned by the Peconic Land Trust where portions are run by a number of other small-scale farmers. They moved in this March.

Through a winding dirt road cutting through

'Environmental racism is a form of system racism where people of color are disproportionately impacted by environmental hazards through policies and practices.'

ronmental racism is the African American community of Uniontown, Alabama. On Dec. 22, 2008, an impoundment burst and spilled more than a billion gallons of highly toxic coal ash into the Emory River. The coal ash contained various pollutants such as arsenic, mercury, and lead, which can penetrate deeply into the lungs. Two years after the spill, the Tennessee Valley Authority moved four million cubic yards of coal ash from the Kingston spill to Arrowhead Landfill in Uniontown Alabama. The workers who were sent to clean up the coal ash suffered from brain cancer, lung cancer and leukemia due to exposure. The people of Uniontown Alabama, a low-income African American community, saw similar health effects to that of the workers. Unfortunately, the people of Uniontown did not have any recourse because the Resource Conservation Recovery Act classified the ash as non-hazardous in Uniontown.

There are hundreds of examples of environmental racism, but we are currently witnessing one of the largest impacts of environmental racism. With the COVID-19 pandemic, we are

seeing that African American and other minority communities are being hit hardest by the pandemic all across the country. With a lack of available resources and preexisting conditions that already arise from environmental racism, people of these communities are more susceptible to catching COVID-19. African Americans not only have environmental racism to worry about during this pandemic, but also mass incarcerations for minor misdemeanors, overcrowded housing, and under-funded public transport, which all have been increasing the COVID-19 infection rates. Unfortunately, this connection between pandemics and low-income neighborhoods isn't new because in the 1990s there were higher mortality rates among communities of color for the HIV pandemic as well.

Different policies and laws set forth by our government have placed African Americans and minorities in these neighborhoods which are subjected to environmental racism. We need to stop hearing news stories of the unbreathable South Bronx air, the North Carolina hog farm raw sewage lakes enveloping African American farmland and lead in the Flint river in Michigan. The environmental justice movement is one way to achieve equity for the African American and disadvantaged neighborhoods because it focuses on fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens.

Sapphire Perera is a rising senior at Port Jefferson high school. The "Turtle Island," as the name for this ongoing column refers to the Native American mythology about North America existing on the back of a great turtle that bears every living being on its spine.

PJ FARMERS

Continued from A3

months the half an acre became overgrown with weeds that reached up to chest height.

"It was kind of a blank canvas, so we just started seeding," Fortier said. "It's just grown and grown over the past couple of months."

Practically by themselves, Fortier and Burke transformed it into a thriving garden, adding more onto it since they started handling it full time last September.

So much has been built by hand. Using excess wood found in a pile on the property, the pair built a 10-foot wide toolshed. Elsewhere in the garden, they found old half-moon metal rails buried in the weeds, and taking those they constructed their own greenhouse. The only items of those two projects they purchased was the roof for the shed and the canvas for the greenhouse.

During the winter months, especially at the edge of March during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the two had to keep seedlings warm in the greenhouse though they lacked a space heater. That's when the

fields, Fortier's well-used van bounces along the uneven path until they reach their little patch of dirt in the northwest corner of the property, a place bursting with sunflowers, tomatoes, Malabar spinach and daikon radishes.

They didn't have anything to start. They didn't have a tractor or any heavy machinery to speak of, knowing that would be the biggest expense for any farm starting out. When plants needed water, they filled up a giant tub at home, stuck it in the back of a trailer and lugged the gallons down to the parched land in the spring and early summer when there was very little rain. So much of the heavy lifting was done by hand, and it was especially hard at first digging in each trough and seeding every ridge. The young farmers finally got an irrigation system going in early July, but they had to come up with solutions on the fly, like netting around the tomatoes to protect them from crows.

The families of the PJ natives have also noticed just how much the two care for their new farm. The Burkes and Fortiers often come out on Saturday to help with harvest and packing, getting everything loaded into vehicles so the two can set up their stand at the Port Jefferson Farm-

ers Market on Sundays. During the pandemic, such escapades to the pastoral landscape were especially nice getaways for the families being stuck quarantined in their homes.

Burke's sister Kyleen Burke said in an email that she was amazed, too, at the innovative means through which the pair have created so much from so little.

"I don't think anyone is surprised that James has made his own way, but it is still amazing to see what he and Andie have been able to do and how quickly they have made the farm grow," she said.

Now with summer starting to wrap up, the verdant field and garden are now what they have to show for their work. When they speak of their bounty, it's with a sort of reverence one could reserve for one's children. The two have even sectioned off a small part of their apartment where they keep vegetables in with the air conditioning on to help them avoid the oppressive heat of the late summer. They are still working out the logistics of owning a walk-in cooler.

"It doesn't feel like work a lot of the time," Fortier said. "It's a real start of life now, sleeping next to the tomatoes."



Sapphire Perera