

Aaron Wills recipient of Young Leaders Fund Grant

Guest Columnist: Elizabeth O. Hutchins

Aaron Wills is the recipient of the second grant awarded by the Ron Griffith Young Leaders Fund. The grant will enable Wills to participate in the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings Program. By the end of this year-long program which starts October 24, his goal is to have business and marketing plans for starting his own farm.



Specifically, Wills looks forward to running an orchard or berry farm. In talking about this aspiration, he says, "I hope to be able to provide healthy food mainly in the form of fruit such as berries, apples, cherries, plums, pears, etc. that is grown without chemicals (organically) and in a sustainable way. I also dream of being able to make cider, hard cider, mead, fruit leather, and other products from the food I grow that could feed Northfield in the winter and add variety to what food is available from the local food shed."

When asked why he wishes to be a farmer, Wills commented, "The work of farming stimulates my ingenuity, creativity, and imagination and really feeds me. I enjoy the day to day work of farming. I love the physicality and working hard. I love being outside and experiencing the weather as it changes from morning into midday into evening. I love the pace of the day and the importance of slowing down and just watching and observing."

When asked in what way his training with the Farm Beginnings Program might benefit Northfield, Wills says that he sees starting a small business (a farm) that provides healthy food produced sustainably for Northfield as one way he can be a leader and actively participate in the building Northfield's local economy and long term sustainability.

Offering leadership is not new to Wills. Currently, he serves as Vice-President of Just Food Co-op and Finance Director at Cannon River Watershed Partnership. Through his work with CRWP, he also assists small communities in Southeast Minnesota to construct and install new sewage treatment systems. In addition, he was member of the organizing committee for the Northfield Community Gardeners, has worked part-time at Silkey Gardens, and volunteers at Open Hands Farm. Before moving to Northfield, Wills spent two years in Bulgaria as a Peace Corps volunteer assisting with community development and observing first-hand how farms oriented towards producing food for the local community can be the bedrock of a local economy.

The Ron Griffith Young Leaders Fund (<http://northfieldymca.org/ron-griffith>), formed through a partnership between the Northfield Area Family YMCA and Just Food Co-op, welcomes grant applications from young adult leaders actively involved in local environmental initiatives, health food and nutrition, sustainable agriculture, and community building.