



Terry Starks walks around her almost-7 acres on a foggy morning. This is her first summer of farming on the property, where the family moved in 1992.

Tribune photos by José Moré

FARM: ‘It’s Beau and he sends his love’

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hospital, pulling back the sheet, seeing Beau, she didn’t care if she lived or died. She was dead anyway, she figured. Might as well have buried her when they buried Beau in the cemetery where the sun bakes down between the corn-fields.

But then, after quitting a job as a dental assistant, taking a job as a secretary at a fence company that eventually had her driving a forklift, welding, you name it, she found herself—months and months later—finally noticing little bits of beauty.

“I’d say, ‘Oh, who gives a heck, but I’ll plant this stupid flower anyway.’ Then I would water it and nurture it. It’d grow. I cut it. Brought it in the house. My other kids [Emma, now 21; Mat, 17; and Lily, 16] would notice. It dawned on me, after all those months, I was noticing beauty.”

That’s when she realized. Realized maybe the one place where she could plant her sorrow, turn it into something beautiful, something lasting, was the almost seven acres that surrounded her old white resurrected farmhouse, the one that could have been condemned, had anyone but a stubborn someday-farmer lady bought it with her then-husband (they divorced three months before Beau died).

During those long, awful months after she buried Beau, she said, “I could not bear to be inside. There was nothing that could contain my sorrow, only the outdoors.” As she spoke, as the porch swing dipped, a barn swallow swooped out from the rafters just over her head, a hole in the porch roof she isn’t willing to fix until all the baby birds are old enough, strong enough, to take to the wind.

When the secretary-turned-forklift-operator gig folded, when the fence company closed in the fall of 2005, Starks says she had a come-to-Jesus meeting with her soul.

She’d been working six days a week for someone else; it was time, she decided, to work the earth. She set out to be a farmer. She would harvest beauty, just like Beau, day in and day out, till she could farm no longer.

Soaking up knowledge

She’d been hearing about a class called Farm Beginnings, a one-year hands-on workshop and mentoring program, a joint project of The Land Connection, a non-profit farm advocacy organization based in Evanston, and the University of Illinois Extension.

The program is designed to teach farming and launch farm businesses that are economically and environmentally sustainable. Would-be farmers learn everything from how to draw up financial forecast spreadsheets to goat-hoof trimming.

Starks started classes last October and wrapped up her last field day just a few weeks ago. Her teachers say she was “quick on the uptake.” Like thirsty soil, she soaked up every drop of farmer wisdom they poured her way.

She reads everything she can get her hands on. Started sending away for seeds back last November. Tried germinating squatty-pumpkin seeds in the dining room closet, just to see if she could do it. Never mind the calendar. Or the sun.

Named her farm, too, just this last January. But she’d had a hunch for the better part of two



This stone serves as a reminder of why Starks became a farmer.



Starks sometimes retreats to her “sanctuary,” an old barn, when she needs to cry (top). At left, she visits Beau’s grave; his fatal accident came 12 days after he turned 21. At right, Starks at work with Stubby the dog and her “gangrene” colored 1972 Ford pickup.

years what that name might be.

“My farm is called Beauregards, no apostrophe. It’s Beau and he sends his love. It’s a sanctuary for sure. We bought the land in 1992, raised a family here.”

A wake, then a death

Beau was 11 when they moved to the farm, about 10 miles north of Springfield. He climbed every tree there. Learned to drive and play the guitar there. Went off to war from there.

He came home to there, too, for the three weeks before he died. His leave got extended because his mother’s best friend’s 13-year-old died after swimming in a lake. Just dropped dead at summer camp after getting out of the water, worst thing that had ever happened, as far as Starks and her kids could figure.

Beau, a corporal originally stationed at Camp Coyote in Kuwait, 30 miles from the Iraqi border, had called his commander in North Carolina, asked for a few more days home leave, so he could help his mother get through the funeral.

Instead, he died hours after the wake for the 13-year-old. He died hours before the funeral he’d stayed home to get his mother through.

His mother never made it to that funeral. She just sobbed and walked in circles that morning, as the sun beat down and the farmhouse and the yard filled with friends who’d heard the news

and could not believe that Beau, Beau who always made the whole world smile with what his mother called his “umbrella smile,” could possibly truly be gone.

Starks walks into the old barn where she stores her seed packets, and records what’s sown where, and how it’s growing. There, leaning against the chalkboard she hauled to her first farmers market, advertising gourd birdhouses, \$8, and bouquets of herbs, \$1.50, fresh-picked, the green road sign spells it out: Beau-regards Farm.

Her pride and glory, that sign. Says it all, she says.

“I had nothing to give four years ago. At the time I never thought that anything good would ever come again. Ever. I found, by growing flowers, my kids would say, ‘I notice the lilies-of-the-valley.’ I realized this is good. This is good for everyone.

“Every time I planted something, not only was I honoring my living children. I was honoring Beau. The more I planted, the more I grew, the better I became.”

An inner light

Starks’ farmer teachers, the ones who taught her what to do once she buried her earth-stained hands in the loamy Illinois soil, couldn’t help but notice the bright light in the



Photo courtesy of Terry Starks

‘I could not bear to be inside. There was nothing that could contain my sorrow, only the outdoors.’

—Terry Starks on mourning her son Beau (above)



Ready to get your hands dirty?

If you, too, have a hankering to take up farming, to chuck the city life and sink real dirt beneath your fingernails, get in touch with The Land Connection, 847-570-0701, or info@theland

connection.org. Applications for Central Illinois Farm Beginnings are now being accepted online at farmbeginnings.uiuc.edu, or you may receive a packet through the mail by calling The Land Connection at the above number.

For Stateline Farm Beginnings, serving north-

ern Illinois and southern Wisconsin, contact Annette Meach, 815-494-5547, or annette@cslalearningcenter.org, or Parker Forsell, 815-389-8455, CRAFT@CSALearningCenter.org, of the Angelic Organics Learning Center.

—Barbara Mahany