

Jon Parker, a horticulture technician at the WKU farm, waters the geraniums at the WKU Agriculture & Research Education Center on Friday, Feb. 9. "In my unit, the horticulture unit, a huge emphasis is on the farm-to-campus program," he said.

PASPOURE TO PLAYPE

story by **DEBRA MURRAY** photos by **BRODIE CURTSINGER** design by **AMELIA CURRY**



Shelby Felder comes to work at the farm each day to tend to her bosses: the cows. In a barn 3 miles away from WKU's main campus, 58 cows sleep on tempurpedic mats shipped from the Netherlands. Soon, their milk will be sold locally.

Felder is the dairy manager at WKU's Agriculture & Research Education Center, commonly referred to as the WKU farm.

"I work for the cows; that is my job," Felder said. "Everything I do is for the cows because cows that are not well cared for are not going to milk well. If you want a good milk cow, you got to give them everything they could possibly need and more."

The cows' milk is sent to the Hilltopper Creamery to create artisan cheeses and bottled milk for the Bowling Green community and for students on campus.

William Shrunk, the director of WKU's Agriculture & Research Education Center, said that buying locally allows consumers to know where their food comes from and connects them to their community, and it also lessens environmental effects caused by transportation throughout the food industry. Shrunk oversees the farm.

"If you bought local, then you're not paying for all that trucking. There's not anything wrong with trucking. It's a valuable industry but, you know, that adds to the carbon footprint of things being produced," Shrunk said. "So if you can buy local, you're really focusing more on sustainability there, too."

Shrunk said local farmers are also more weary of using pesticides.

At the campus farm, very few toxicants are used.

"We follow good agricultural practices," Shrunk said. "We're teaching students how to do it. So hopefully the things that we're producing should be and are being done correctly, you know, proper use of organic fertilizers and inorganic fertilizers. (We're) really trying to reduce the amount of pesticides that are used."

The WKU farm participates in the farm-to-campus program, which provides locally grown produce, dairy and beef products to campus restaurants.

Approximately 1,500 people eat at Fresh Food Company each day, Shrunk said. Certain days are dedicated to products from the WKU farm. For example, smashburger days typically use the creamery's artisan cheese and beef.

"It might give some students some exposure to at least get it in their minds, like, 'Hey, where does your food come from?'" Shrunk said.

To Shrunk, the easiest way to learn the origin of food is to support the small farmers in the local community.

"These are folks that you get to know, and that money stays within your community," he said.

Tesla Trammell is the livestock technician at the farm. She believes that everyone should be promoting their local farmers.

"I definitely don't think that there's anything wrong with going to Kroger or Walmart and buying from larger producers, but local farmers tend to run with their operations and money throughout

**"I work for the cows;
that is my job."
- Shelby Felder**



ABOVE: Jon Parker, a horticulture technician at the WKU farm, tills the vegetable production area at the WKU Agriculture & Research Education Center on Friday, Feb. 9. Parker has been a horticulture technician at the WKU arm since January. **OPPOSITE:** A cow looks through the metal bars of the hay-filled feeding area on the WKU farm on Friday, Feb. 9. Tesla Trammell, a livestock technician at the WKU farm, described cows as "very large dogs." "If they know who you are, they can be very loving, and if they don't know who you are, they can be very curious," Trammell said. "They all have different personalities, just like dogs."





the year,” Trammell said. “I definitely think people, if their financial aid allows it, should support their local farmers because it can be more expensive. But in the long run, I think it’s worth it.”

Prior to coming to the farm in October 2023, Felder worked at a farm in Oregon with two creameries that sold and bottled their own milk and made butter, creating a deep connection to the community.

“I think that the local community is a huge thing,” Felder said. “The community interaction and the support that you get from the community is huge. And I know that there’s that support here also.”

Shrunk said he hopes to expand the farm-to-campus program as their capacity for vegetable, dairy and beef production continues to grow.

“We’d love to expand that plan,” Shrunk said. “We’re currently working on trying to keep increasing some of our productivity. What’s really cool is that we got a lot of support.”

The WKU Restaurant Group and Office of Sustainability collaborate with the farm to coordinate usage of produce, meat and dairy in restaurants on campus.

Shrunk said he is grateful for the support from WKU toward the program.

“This isn’t just an initiative that the Department of Agriculture has started,” Shrunk said. “This is something that the upper

administration has been very supportive of.”

The WKU Hilltopper Creamery and Farm Market is a storefront located directly on the farm that is partly run by student employees. It sells products made by students taking classes at the farm. Hilltopper Creamery and Farm Market sells cheese, meat and produce made while educating students on those processes.

At the farm, cows are milked throughout the day for the creamery, but a majority of the milk is picked up to be processed by Dairy Farmers of America, which sells milk from smaller farms to wholesale providers.

“The amount of milk that we’re producing for the amount of need that the creamery has is just not the same, which is why it’s beneficial for us to have DFA to ship extra milk to,” Felder said.

“You know, we’re milking 58 cows as of today, and our herd average right now is over 85 pounds per cow. I’m working on getting it up.”

Average production varies across farms based on management strategies, nutrition, and milk needs. It is hard to put an accurate number to that, Felder said.

Felder describes her relationship with the creamery as “close but distant,” because all of her work on the farm impacts the milk and cheese that the creamery is processing.

“Everything that I do on the farm impacts what they end up receiving,” Felder said. “If they have any issues with their cheese



ABOVE: Shelby Felder, the dairy manager of the WKU farm, cleans the teats of a cow at the WKU Agriculture & Research Education Center on Friday, Feb. 9. Felder said what keeps her coming back to the farm are the cows. “There’s good days and there’s bad days, and there’s times that it’s hard and frustrating, but there’s also a lot of really good, beneficial times,” she said. “The cows are part of all of that, and so you never know what each day is gonna bring.”

OPPOSITE: Jon Parker, a horticulture technician at the WKU farm, holds a vegetable plant at the WKU Agriculture & Research Education Center on Friday, Feb. 9. Parker graduated from WKU with a degree in agriculture in 2015. “When I was a student, of course, I loved the textbook information that I learned, but actually getting your hands in the soil, actually working it ... You can read about it all day, but once you actually put your hands in the ground, and start working with these plants, you learn a lot,” he said.

or if I have any big issues with my cows, obviously I want them to know about that. But I don't go up there and make cheese, and they don't come down here and milk cows. We work together but separately at the same time."

Felder is a sixth generation dairy farmer, but she did not grow up on a farm, so it wasn't until she attended Washington State University in 2014 that she was able to develop her passion for working with cows. She said WKU's program provided her with the resources and space to learn. Felder is starting her master's at WKU this fall.

"You know, that's what really started that foundation for me, and I've been very fortunate," Felder said.

**"Growing up I knew I always wanted to work with animals."
- Tesla Trammell**

Similar to Felder, Trammell did not grow up in agriculture, but she said realized she wanted to work with cows when she came to WKU.

"Growing up, I knew I always wanted to work with animals. I just wasn't exactly sure what it was that I wanted to do," Trammell said. "When I got here to WKU for my undergrad, I decided that I wanted to work with cows, so I started working out here on the farm, under the livestock technician."

Beyond creating produce and dairy for the community, the farm provides educational opportunities for WKU students ranging from working in horticulture, creamery and directly with animals.

Felder is just one of the farm employees who work with students.

On the dairy side of the farm, students start with learning to milk cows and cleaning the barn, then there are opportunities for them to learn more about taking care of the cows, such as administering vaccinations.

"What you'll find a lot in the industry is people that do a good job with whatever job they have. You know, a lot of places will start people in the parlor milking cows, and if you do a good job there, and you show that you're interested in learning more, then they move up and start giving you the opportunity to learn more things," Felder said. "You work your way up the chain essentially."

Students also learn how to process and package beef in order for it

to be sold at the farm's storefront or served on campus.

"A big part of what I do when it comes to that is I raise steers that go to slaughter and then they go back to our meat lab up on campus where the students learn to process and learn about different kinds of meats and stuff," Trammell said.

While people can buy from the market online, the market also has a booth at the year-round Community Farmers Market on Nashville Road.

"That's a great place to go meet local farmers to get some quality produce, to meet a lot of people in your community," Shrunk said.



ABOVE: Jon Parker, a horticulture technician at the WKU farm, looks for any issues with the geraniums at the Agriculture & Research Education Center on Friday, Feb. 9. **OPPOSITE:** WKU farm livestock technician Tesla Trammell pets Blackbird Lady in a cattle chute at the WKU Agriculture & Research Education Center on Friday, Feb. 9. Agriculture students use the cattle chute to safely restrain the cow in order to be comfortably handled.

