When news that a farm the size of John Gill’s 1,255-acre holding in Hurley sells, alarms raise. For starters, land that size hasn’t changed hands in these parts for decades, if ever (the average size farm in the region is 136 acres). Further, in a region where one farm is lost every three and a half days, everyone is all too aware of one constant, looming threat—development: strip malls, apartment buildings, supershores.

Luckily, Gill, like his father, and his father before him, has the good sense to believe that farmland is good for only one thing: farming.

“Everyone had their ideas about who was going to be the one to sell, and nobody thought it was going to be me,” says Gill of his recent $13 million dollar sale. funded by the NoVo Foundation, Jennifer and Peter Buffett’s (son of investor Warren Buffett) New York-based foundation. “I didn’t either.”

It was an almost-too-good-to-be-true proposition for Gill, who hadn’t previously considered selling but had no willing successor: A top-dollar sale (the going rate for farmland in this region is between $2,000 and $6,000 an acre), and the security that the land wouldn’t just continue to be farmed but would be refashioned into the Hudson Valley Farm Hub—a central locus for access to education, information, land and capital for area farmers. In addition, an intention of the Farm Hub project is to provide a way of directing money toward the physical and human capital needed to help farmers and food businesses in the area to better produce and market their products. It was almost an easy out—a chance to finally put his feet up and feast on the fruits of someone else’s labor, for once. But John Gill wasn’t looking for an easy out.

“This land is all I know,” says Gill. “I’ve been here my whole life. I’ve been living this place. I’ve been ‘putzing’ around growing stuff since I was a little kid.” Which is why he also took the foundation’s offer to stay on and work the land and help lead the farm to become one of the most innovative, imperative farm-research operations in the country.
A Family Farm

The New World Foundation, Hudson Valley Farm Hub's parent organization, knew exactly what it was doing when it sought out this land, and Gill, to bring life to and ultimately define the Hub, which was announced in December 2013. "The farm was chosen for its unique combination of attributes: its central location—near transportation corridors, proximity to the region's major population centers—a large number of acres with rich soil and water and, last but not least, John Gill, who enthusiastically committed to staying on to be a part of this project," says Brooke Pickering-Cole, manager of community relations for the Local Economies Project (LEP), a Kingston-based nonprofit and the part of the New World Foundation responsible for developing the Hub.

"There's not a better man for the job.

"Every farm, every piece of land is unique, and you have to learn it," says Gill. "It's not smooth sailing. I can pick up the soil—I know when it's ready to grow and when it's not. I know every wet spot, every weak spot. That's something nobody can teach you."

Gill was born a third-generation farmer on land his grandfather bought in 1939. His grandfather, also John Gill, came to the region in 1937 from Long Island, having lost his farm after one late payment during the depression. He, along with a neighbor named Paul (who bought the neighboring farm the same year—which also just recently sold) spent two years renting nearby land, growing sweet corn, cabbage and tomatoes before paying $500 an acre, already steep prices by the day's standards, for his own parcel. John Gill died young, leaving his son, Jack A. Gill, in his early thirties (with a two-year-old John Gill in tow) with little choice and even less support, to take over the land.

By the time John Gill was in his early twenties, he'd been farming alongside his dad most of his life. He left only once, for college, and came back to the land for good in 1977 with an associates degree in ag business and a plan: a farm stand on Route 209—a concept he hatched in his ag business course. He had another plan, too—to marry his sweetheart, Loretta, that fall. His father had a clear, long-term picture response to the news. "If you're going to have a family," Dad said, "we have to look for some more land," explains Gill. So, Gill and his father took their 800-acre-strong holding, and grew it together, piece by piece.

The Gills, like most Hudson Valley farmers at the time, ran their farm as a monoculture: corn on corn. They cover-cropped—1,100 acres of oats and treacle to fix nitrogen and hold the root systems—but still firmly depended on fertilizers and pesticides to grow profits. The corn business boomed, and they kept adding on land, acquiring their last piece in 1999.

Meanwhile, John and Lorena nurtured the farm stand, starting with two or three acres of vegetables and a tiny greenhouse. By 2013, they were raising 65 acres of vegetables including asparagus, squash, beans, peppers, tomatoes and cold crops like kohlrabi, kale and, of course, pumpkins, and hosting booming festivals every fall.

Despite its small economic bolstering to the family farm (Gill claims the stand helped the family in lean years, but for the most part, it was corn that made the farm a sustainable amount of money), the farm stand came to be the heart and soul of the Gills' farm. "This
was the place where you could come and see our souls laid out on the
table," Gill recalls.

There was hardly a day in peak season you wouldn’t find Loretta
there, manning the register and talking to customers, the community’s
only link to the land that surrounded the Esopus Creek as far as the
eye could see.

“Our customers made us. They were great, great, great people—
everybody. They made me a better farmer,” says Gill. “I love to grow
stuff, take the soil and make it green, make it brown and make it
green again. That would have been enough for me.” But customers
would come in describing an eggplant from their homeland, a pepper
their great-grandmother used to grow, and Gill would go home and
dig around on the Internet until he found the right seed. That’s how
the Gills came to grow 25 different kinds of eggplant, peppers, beans
and squash in every color and size.

In all uncertainty, the work that’s behind John Gill—years of
land acquisition, managing droughts, floods, diseases and fertilizers,
and supporting a staff of 160—pales compared to the work that’s ahead.

First, there was the work of calming the neighbor’s nerves.

“We’ve always all gotten along,” says Gill of the dozen family farm-
ers from Ellenville to Kerhonkson. “Yet we’re all trying to compete
for the same customers. I want everyone around me to have as good a
crop as I do, because the worst crop makes the market.”

Getting along has meant sharing everything from tools to informa-
tion. So, when news of the sale was met with fears about competition,
and a hit on the overall market, Gill was the perfect person to set the
record straight—the Farm Hub is a clean slate, a place to come and
learn, for everyone.

Most inviting, without surprise, are old friends of the Gills, and
new farmers, like Creek Iversen, of Whirligig Farm, who grows vege-
tables and cover crops on 16 acres of the former Paul farm. “We
are glad to have neighbors (farmers) which together create a strong
regional identity. The farmers at the Hub—and John Gill—have
helped us in various ways to get off to a great start.”

Then, there’s the technical work the Hub has endeavored to tackle:
finding the best methods—organic or conventional—to grow on this
land; experimenting with cover crops; researching technologies and
practices that promote resiliency; and assisting new farmers as they
establish and grow their own farms.

This work comes with backing from leaders in agricultural research,
such as Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) of Ulster County, and
support from dozens of partnering organizations, a number of them,
like Hawthorne Valley Farm and the Rondout Valley Growers Asso-
ciation (RVGA), which are also bolstered by generous Novo Founda-
tion grants.

What does it mean to be a farmer backed by a foundation with
assets in the $30-million range? For starters, you can take risks that
weren’t possible before.

“Corn is one of those things—everyone wants it, but to grow it
organically is expensive, time consuming, and it requires tremendous
space,” says Gill. “You can get two to three crops of beans or tomatoes
off the same piece of property; corn, by contrast, produces only one
crop a year. But cover cropping, rotating crops to support the market
crops (corn, grains and vegetables) with things like alfalfa, timothy
grass, mustard and rye, among others, has proven benefits that are
already starting to show promise for the Hub. They can fix 100 to
120 pounds of nitrogen in the soil for the year, meaning richer soil,
stronger crops—and less fertilizer—next year.”

Cover cropping is just one of the two major endeavors the Hub is
undertaking in its first year. The other is grain. Working with Cor-
2014 Growing Season at the Hudson Valley Farm Hub

Grains Research:
These projects are designed to help farmers respond to the emerging market demand for locally grown grains in the food and beverage industry.

Small Grains
The Farm Hub has planted multiple varieties of barley and wheat as part of a field trial to study best growing practices and appropriate varieties for the region's climate.

Heritage Grain Crops
Buckwheat is the first variety planted for a research project on cover cropping strategies for organic grain production.

Cover Crops
Cover crops are used as support in market crops, as well as to benefit the surrounding ecosystem.

Cover crops are planted on a rotation with market crops to prepare the soil for the next growing season. They provide natural fertilization, soil stabilization, pest control, weed suppression, and organic matter enrichment.

The Farm Hub is experimenting with different blends of rotational cover crops as an ecological alternative to chemical inputs.
“This was the place where you could come and see our souls laid out on the table.”

For the Hudson Valley and New York State, losses like this are deeply historical and have vast economic reverberations as well. The fields of the lower Esopus Creek in Saugerties, Kingston, Ulster, Hurley and Marbletown, on down to New Paltz, have been significantly farmed since the 1650s. By 1875, there were over 2,300 farms in the Rondout Valley alone.

New York is all but going to battle for its soil—and the roughly 648,959 acres of farmland it has left. Scenic Hudson, the Poughkeepsie-based regional organization dedicated to farmland preservation in the Rondout and Hudson Valley, identified the Rondout Valley as a priority farmland conservation area in their recently completed Foodshed Conservation Plan—not only essential for securing fresh local food for the Hudson Valley but for the millions of residents of New York City, too.

“The land in this valley is special because of its inherent fertility created by geological processes,” says Nick Cipolone, a fifth-generation Hudson Valley farmer and president of the Rondout Valley Growers Association (the second since its inception in 2003), in reference to the glacial ice that covered much of the area some 15,000 years ago. “We need to continue to nurture it and protect it to ensure future generations the opportunity to farm as we do.”

Ask any farmer—you won’t find soil like this just anywhere. “The topsoil here is anywhere from 10 to 30 feet deep, with no stone,” Gill says. “It’s just beautiful soil—and it holds nutrients value.”

According to the Foodshed Conservation Plan, the value of the land goes well beyond agricultural. “Hudson Valley farms also maintain our scenic working landscapes, rural heritage and quality of life, all of which help drive a multibillion-dollar tourism industry and fuel greener economic growth. Conserved farms safeguard wildlife habitat and environmentally sensitive areas such as meadows, woodlands, wetlands...”
and streams and protect local aquifers and other drinking water supplies,” says their recent report. The Hub promises long-term conservation of the wooded areas, farmland, the Esopus Creek and the unique advantages (irrigation) and challenges (flooding) related to it.

**Endangered Species**

But as vulnerable as farmland is in this country, the farmer is, perhaps, even more so. The job of farmer was recently listed in an online article (Salzryn.com) as one of about 12 occupations on the brink of extinction, along with newspaper delivermen. The 2012 American Community Survey indicated that only an estimated 11 out of every thousand persons in the Ulster County labor force over 16 years old worked in agriculture (934 persons). Even more concerning is the average age of farmers in the Hudson Valley—57 (on par with the national average)—about half of whom have no plan for a successor.

The most effective course seems to be the one the Hub is on—inspiring and supporting new and struggling farmers with a long-term vision they can build on. LEP’s Pickering-Cole describes the Hub as an incubator where new and struggling farmers, after an extensive application process (and a two- to three-year commitment) can come to gain every level of support.

“These aspiring farmers will have full immersion in a major farm operation, plus access to infrastructure, equipment and business assistance without the financial pressures or risk associated with keeping an individual operation growing while they are learning skills and developing their business plans,” says Pickering-Cole.

The Hub’s incubator program will be aimed at those aspiring to farm on a mid-size or wholesale level scale in the Hudson Valley. And the Hub stands to bolster farmers for all the challenges presented by the global food system, non-farm development pressure and climate change, which requires new farming methods and innovative infrastructure.

Despite enormous government efforts from the Department of Agriculture’s Farm Service Agency (FSA) and those from nonprofits like the Carrot Project and Scenic Hudson Land Trust, however, there is still not enough incentive for young new farmers to get into the business to begin with.

According to the National Young Farmer’s Coalition, 78% of farmers ranked “lack of capital” as the biggest challenge for beginning farmers; owning land, expanding acreage (via buying or leasing) or retaining land they already own can be an insurmountable uphill climb.

Here, too, the Hub promises support. Once they graduate, so to speak, the Hub will continue to work with its farmers to facilitate access to land or management opportunities. “We want to encourage farm ownership in the Hudson Valley where there is long-term potential,” says Pickering-Cole.

**Greener Acres**

For the most part, the Hub and the supporting LEP behaved like any smart newcomer—listening and observing, releasing careful, purposeful statements, holding seminars and gatherings, and giving—generously.

In the spring, the Rondout Valley School District received a $726,000 grant for innovative agriculture and food science from the LEP, setting a course for a greener future for a whole region of students.

Once an integral part of school curriculum, agriculture studies are all but gone from secondary school education. Today, 1% of the population is farmers. 1% of the people are feeding the whole country. Without engaging the next generation, this number isn’t likely to rise. With this grant, the Rondout Valley district plans to create an educational greenhouse for students to explore biology, earth science, botany and the environment in a hands-on setting—with access to the Hub for collaboration and further learning.

“We talk a lot about sustainability, but nothing we’re doing will be sustainable if children don’t have a meaningful relationship to where their food comes from.” says Bob Dandrew, director of the LEP. “Engaging kids in every aspect of food production—farming, research, processing, distribution—helps them make better choices about what they eat, and it also makes them smarter consumers.”

The Hub isn’t just good for students. It’s good for business, too.

“This appears to be one of those once-in-a-lifetime blockbuster moves which will mark a major turning point for Hudson Valley’s agricultural economy,” reported the Hudson Valley Business Review recently. “As surely as the building of the Ashokan Reservoir a century ago to export a needed resource to New York City proved a watershed moment in Ulster County’s subsequent history, this carefully considered investment, executed properly, could be the historic cornerstone move in accelerating the transformation of a large monocultural form of cultivation harvested by migrant workers into a more intimate relationship with the huge metropolitan market to its south.”

As much as this is a project for the Hub, this is a project for the people.

“It takes hard work and dedication to remain economically sustainable. We need a community interested in local food and dedicated to supporting their local farms so that we remain economically viable and therefore sustainable and available for future generations,” says Cipollone.

There are many early markers of success—for starters, the insta- able appetite the public seems to have for knowledge about the project. As of mid-July, just days before the Farm Hub stand’s reopening day, drop-by traffic stopped in at a slow, steady rate. People were curious to learn more—and the new stand will serve as an access point for information about the Hub’s activity. But along with a handful of questions about crop rotation came a dozen more about whether locals can still get their eggplant and peppers and, when, most importantly, Loretta would be back.

Change is afoot. Optimism abounds. But some things remain. For the hundreds of Gill Farm loyal customers, there is hope that sweet corn, and the Gill family presence, are among them. *

[localedinomiesproject.org/initiatives/farm-hub](localedinomiesproject.org/initiatives/farm-hub)