

GRAVITY HILL  
FARM

**D**avid Earling loves Titusville. Growing up in the tight-knit community overlooking the Delaware River between Trenton and Lambertville, he knew all his neighbors, and his young life was shaped by the stories they told about the land and its history. Even as he pursued a career in finance in New York City, Earling always knew he wanted to return to his roots.

So ten years ago, when the house next door to the one he grew up in came up for sale, he jumped at the chance to buy it. He and his wife, Maria Nicolo, came down on weekends and holidays, slowly fixing it up and thinking about the future. Then, in 2004, a Titusville farmer Earling knew decided to parcel off some acreage on Pleasant Valley Road, and Gravity Hill Farm began to take shape.

Within a year, Earling and Nicolo had given up their high-powered city lifestyle to embark on a second, joint career as farmers and community builders back in central New Jersey. They put up deer fencing and a small greenhouse, built a barn, bought a tractor. For Earling and Nicolo, a central goal was to create a life in which their two children—John, now 6, and Rose, 3—could have the kind of direct connection with community and the land Earling himself had enjoyed. “We wanted our kids to be rooted in the farm,” Nicolo says.

To help them get started, the couple hired a young farmer, David Zaback, to be Gravity Hill’s farm manager. (The farm’s unusual name refers to a local phenomenon, just down the road from the farm, where if you stop your car, put it in neutral and take your foot off the brake, the car will roll uphill. Apparently there are a few such locations in the Garden State; no one knows why.) For Zaback, a former employee of Cherry Grove Organic Farm in Lawrenceville, it was an opportunity to build his skills as an organic vegetable grower in an area where he couldn’t afford to buy land of his own. In consultation with Earling and Nicolo, Zaback planted a few acres of organic veg-

**“It’s important to have different models for sustainable agriculture, and one of them is going to have to be a system where young people can farm on land that they wouldn’t ordinarily be able to afford.”**

—Maria Nicolo

etables—heirloom tomatoes and lettuces are a specialty—and began selling them at area farmers’ markets and to restaurants.

The innovative arrangement has already started to draw attention within the sustainable agriculture community, but the Gravity Hill farmers tend to downplay the broader implications. “We’re still so new, we definitely don’t have all the answers,” Nicolo emphasizes. “We’re still figuring this out. For us it’s as much about family and politics and community as it is about the business.”

To make the farm fun for their own and other kids, Gravity Hill has also added animals—four llamas, two alpacas, a miniature donkey and several dozen laying hens, at present count—and they’re continually seeking out ways to become more involved in the local community. They’re strong supporters of nascent school-gardening efforts in the Hopewell Valley, and are currently planning a new structure to include a full kitchen for special events and workshops. “We want to be a real force in the community, a place where people can interact and learn, where we can talk about what we grow and how and why,” says Nicolo.

In articulating that vision, Gravity Hill seeks to connect the area’s older farming culture with a new enthusiasm for local food. By all accounts, they’re making pretty good headway.

**Gravity Hill Farm**

David Earling and Maria Nicolo, owners

David Zaback, farm manager

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