

NEWS

An Army vet found new purpose in family farming. How many other soldiers can his family's farm help?

Jacob Pucci The Fayetteville Observer

Published 6:00 a.m. ET Apr. 19, 2021 | Updated 9:39 a.m. ET Apr. 19, 2021

PARKTON — While still serving with the U.S. Army Special Operations Forces, AJ Meneses showed up at home one day with two piglets and three lambs.

And thus, much to his wife's chagrin, began their lives as farmers.

That was 2016 and AJ was still two years away from retiring from a 24-year Army career, meaning Saira, who wanted a few chickens in the garden outside their Robeson County home but little else would now be tasked with helping raise farm animals.

Neither recommends taking such an unannounced start to agriculture, but it's worked out for them. Now spanning nine acres, Purpose Driven Family Farm has become their full-time careers and with the coronavirus pandemic causing a surge in demand for their meats, eggs and vegetables, big plans are in store for this small farm.

Being a member of a counter-insurgency force in the Middle East tasked with combating terrorism is not the usual starting point for most farmers, but for the long-whiskered, pipe-smoking AJ, 48, it was where he developed his passion for farming.

As part of his service, he would teach native people skills, such as agriculture, as a way for them to earn a living in hopes of deterring people from joining terrorist organizations.

As AJ neared the end of his time on active duty, Saira would ask him what he wanted to do "when he grew up." He'd tell her farming. She'd tell him to wait and think about it. Then he brought home the piglets and lambs.

"I was conned into farming," Saira, 36, said with a laugh.

Learning to love the farm

Saira remembers her surprise when not long after the first unforeseen animals, she saw an Army friend of theirs, who was preparing to deploy to Hawaii, pull up to their house with four chickens in a cage in the back of a truck.

They now have dozens of chickens at any one time, raised for both eggs and meat. Both their chickens and turkeys — they raised around 25 turkeys for Thanksgiving last year, plus another 15 they processed into ground turkey — are fed organic feed and allowed to graze on grass.

More: After 75 years, Buddy's Bar-B-Q in downtown Fayetteville has closed

While your average broad-breasted turkey will reach its mature weight in around five months, these heritage birds can take up to seven months to mature and are far smaller, topping out at around 12 pounds.

That's due in part to allowing the animals to graze, as well as not intentionally overfeeding them as a way to bulk them up faster. While it would make more economic sense to follow such conventional practices, for the Meneseses, the animal's welfare comes first.

"We want to be the best stewards we can to our animals and our land," Saira said.

A higher calling

That philosophy carries over to people, as well. Farming isn't easy work and it's not always fun, but working with the animals is cathartic and rewarding and for some of the nearly 20 recently retired soldiers they've had come to the farm as volunteers, struggling to find direction after years of defined structure, it's been a lifeline.

The farms works with North Carolina State University's Soldier to Agriculture program, which allows transitioning soldiers an opportunity to try their hand at agriculture and potentially find a new career post-military.

They've even invited medic units from Fort Bragg to the farm so they can learn basic veterinary skills.

Their goal, they said, is for Purpose Driven Family Farm to become a farm incubator for the area's military community.

Adapting to the pandemic

After the demand they saw in 2020, they can use the extra help. In the early stages of the pandemic, when supermarket shelves were scarce and meat shortages rampant, people began turning out more than ever to farms like the Menaseses.

"We had to grab on to these horns, because this bull is about to go crazy," Saira said.

They rushed to build a website to allow people to order online. They participated in a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program based in Robeson County, but couldn't keep up with the demand.

They offered contact-free pickups at their farm and were offered a spot at Dirtbag Ales in nearby Hope Mills. Saira laughed remembering how suspicious it must've looked to be selling meat out of coolers from the back of an SUV in a parking lot. The brewery soon gave her use of one of their buildings and a table.

"Last year we were forced to grow at a faster pace than we expected," Saira said.

Not only was the pork sold at Dirtbag Ales, but the pigs were raised on Dirtbag Ales. AJ and Saira would go to the brewery to pick up the spent grain left behind in the beer-making process and feed it to the pigs.

On this particular afternoon, the Duroc-Yorkshire crossbred pigs were feasting on the sweet, bready grain left over from a crisp kölsch. Other times they'll drink the whey left over from making goat cheese at Ithika Acres Creamery in Raeford. If they're lucky, they might get some feta cheese, too.

In exchange, AJ and Saira will sell their cheeses at area farmers' markets.

"Seeing how every product ties into other products is exciting," AJ said. "We get to share a story of sustainability."

The future of the farm

In 2019, they added Mangalitsa pigs, a long-haired breed whose well-marbled meat has been called the "Kobe beef of pork." They have a few plans for that prized meat, including a line of pre-seasoned roasts, bone-in tomahawk chops and sausages, including Portuguese sausage popular throughout Hawaii.

AJ, a Los Angeles native who spent much of his Army career at Fort Bragg, and Saira, a self-proclaimed "Army brat" whose father was part of the 86th Airborne Division an airborne unit and moved to Fayetteville as a teen, had been living in Hawaii with their children Rebekah and Michael, before deciding to move back to North Carolina.

In Hawaii, AJ raised tilapia and catfish in a small aquaponics operation in their backyard. He plans on eventually outfitting a tobacco barn on the property that was built in 1917 with large tanks to raise the fish.

That project is still a few years from fruition, but the family is always looking to the future. They added seven acres to the farm in 2017 and would likely jump at the chance to buy more surrounding property should it come available.

That kind of growth has been made possible through a number of grants, including most recently, a \$2,500 grant from the Chicago-based Food Animal Concerns Trust to improve roads, trails and drainage on the property. Similar grants helped finance solar panels and a greenhouse, where they grow a variety of herbs and vegetables.

The name of the farm comes from the bible study book "The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?" In it, author Rick Warren talks about finding purpose and passion in life and building wealth not in money, but in people.

For the Menaseses, their wealth comes from giving their animals as good of a life as possible, treating their land responsibility and lending a helping hand to transitioning veterans seeking a new path.

Jacob Pucci writes on food, restaurants and business. Contact him by email at jpucci@gannett.com or follow him on Twitter at @jacobpucci or on Facebook. Like talking food? Join our Fayetteville Foodies Facebook group.

Support local journalism with a subscription to The Fayetteville Observer. Click the "subscribe" link at the top of this article.