

Case Study

Central City, Nebraska, Farm to School

Helgoth Melons, Pumpkins and Produce, St. Libory, Nebraska

Background

Helgoth Melons, Pumpkins and Produce is a family-owned third generation farm that began in 1954. It is located in St. Libory, Nebraska. The farm has always grown fruits and vegetables. They produce sweet corn, potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, melons, cucumbers, squash, pumpkins, cabbage and more. The Helgoths also raise corn and soybeans.

Chuck and Shelly Helgoth are the owners, and their four sons help during the season. Their oldest son, Broderick, 21, eventually plans to take over the farm. The Helgoth's business is diverse. They sell at the local Farmers Market every day through the



Helgoth Farms Stand at Farmers Market

season – Sunday through Saturday – and also have a popular roadside stand in St. Libory. Their Pumpkin Patch, complete with a 9 hole farm-themed miniature golf course, is popular and has been quite successful.

Shelly Helgoth said it is getting more and more challenging to meet the local food demand, which has been increasing over the last few years. “Once people get ‘hooked’ on locally raised and fresh food, the demand just seems to continue,” she said.

Raising fruits and vegetables is hard work and not for everyone, but the opportunity is certainly there for people to make a living if they are willing to do the hard work. The Helgoths sell their product at a fair price and love what they do. But Shelly makes clear this work is a lot of “blood, sweat and tears.” She says it’s all worth it for them. The family business helps their sons understand the value of owning and operating a business, and it creates opportunities to supply locally grown fresh food to their neighbors.

Shelly also points out an irony, “We’re so busy during the season that we don’t even have time to eat our own fresh food! We fall into bed at midnight and then are up again the next day picking, packing up the truck and hauling either to the stand or to the Farmers Market.” Saturdays are particularly grueling since they need to be at the Farmers Market by 4 a.m. to get their trucks unloaded and ready for the crowd.

Involvement in Farm to School

The Helgoths were approached by Joyce Rice, the Food Service Director at Central City schools, about four years ago. Joyce asked them about selling their fruits and vegetables to her for use in school lunches. Central City is about 30 miles from St. Libory, so the Helgoths agreed to deliver their produce to the school.

Joyce wanted to feed students at the elementary, middle and preschool (500 students) good, healthy and fresh food. She was dissatisfied with the food the students were eating and decided to do something about it. That’s when she contacted the Helgoths.

The Helgoths sell to Joyce at wholesale prices, and the cost of the food to the school system has actually



Joyce Rice unloading Helgoth produce at the school and more at wholesale prices.

come in less than when they purchased like products off the truck. And the school children benefit because their food is fresh and “actually tastes like food.”

Joyce orders so much food now that the Helgoths are no longer able to make that delivery. They just don’t have the time with their other commitments. So Joyce picks up her orders and delivers them to the school with the assistance of the other cafeteria workers. She purchases peppers, sweet corn, onions, tomatoes, eggplant, pumpkins, melons

The Helgoths receive Joyce’s order about a week in advance, but so much depends on the growing conditions and the amounts available at pickup time. So Joyce is flexible about what she gets and adjusts her menus based on what is available each week. But the kids love eating fresh food – their consumption of fruits and vegetables increased by nearly 200 percent since she started buying locally according to data that Joyce has tracked since starting this program.

The Helgoths are now selling to four school systems in Nebraska, all within the general area of their farm: Central City, Wood River, Grand Island and Centura schools. Shelly calls the Farm to School program at Central City a comprehensive one since Joyce is so committed to providing fresh healthy food to the students.

“It’s a lot of hard work for the kitchen people,” she said. “However, Joyce has gotten them involved, and now they embrace the opportunity to feed the children in the schools better food. They find both pride and satisfaction in that.”

Providing food to the four schools in the area doesn’t bring in a great deal of additional income, but Shelly Helgoth feels the pride and satisfaction. She feels that her fresh local food will have a long-reaching impact on the children’s health as it builds interest in eating healthfully as they grow. And that can only improve the local economy for even more small businesses.

