



“My name is Matthew Romans, and I’m the Farm Manager at CBI’s Giving Tree Farm. I work alongside Luke Cole, the Assistant Farm Manager, and our other farm staff, Jake and Amanda.

Back in 2014, I studied with MSU’s Student Organic Farm Program and afterwards started working here as a farm staff in 2015. In 2016, I went through the Lansing roots Incubator Farm Program trying to start my own business, which is an experience I’m still grateful for – it’s not easy to understand some things apart from experience, and attempting to start a farm supplied several good lessons. What’s the Mark Twain quote? “A man who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in no other way.” Then in 2017, I was hired on as the new Farm Manager at Giving Tree Farm.

CBI – Community Based Interventions – is a nonprofit organization in the Greater Lansing Area that runs group homes for people with traumatic brain injuries or cognitive impairments. So, this site, the Giving Tree Farm, is a campus of CBI where these community members get to come during the day to receive vocational training and enjoy the farm’s natural beauty. Giving Tree Farm started as a community garden for the cognitively impaired back in the 90s; as more people volunteered, the site just kept growing and more land was put under tillage. Today we are working to create a beautiful, therapeutic space for our clients, while growing food that goes back into the group homes. The farm is, in its entirety, about 22 acres. We actively farm about 2 acres of that.

We have a variety of markets: LFA Farmers Markets, Old Town General Store, Red Haven, the CBI Group Homes, individual buyers, and Allen Neighborhood Center’s multi-farm CSA, Veggie Box. We

actually had our own CSA that we managed here for years. But in 2020, COVID gave us a good opportunity to shift things over to online sales. The reason being that we want to focus more on being a rehabilitative space than being production-orientated. What we're trying to do on these 22-acres is implement more permaculture design and create more shade for our clients to enjoy, as if they had a lovely state park to walk through. Luke and I were both nerding out about permaculture, but the more we pursued it and the further down this path we have gone, it has become so clear that it's actually a really good design system and holistic orientation for a rehabilitative farm like this. Rehabilitating the land and rehabilitating people – the two are tied together.

CBI's Giving Tree Farm first got involved with Allen Neighborhood Center back in the early 2000s. We wanted to make pickup of our CSA more accessible, and asked if members could pick-up at ANC on Lansing's Eastside. It happened to be the same day as BreadBasket, ANC's food pantry – which at the time was only bread – and so there was both sliced bread and these beautiful shares of produce. The juxtaposition of these two things being offered to two different populations is what pushed ANC to start a neighborhood farmers market: the Allen Farmers Market. Sue Houghton was one of four farmers who made up the Allen Farmers Market that first year in 2004 – they were all women.

It was a natural progression to then start selling in bulk to Veggie Box - it's pretty attractive to a farm like us. It provides opportunities for us to make significant sales and revenue all at once. I mean, in general, wholesaling can be nice; there's this simplicity in large, bulk orders. But even more than that, Veggie Box is the only wholesaler who helps us crop plan the year before through their crop bidding process. Veggie Box gives farmers the opportunity to plan their growing year with pre-planned, specific orders in mind. That security is nice.

I really appreciate Allen Neighborhood Center's vision and commitment to uplifting the Eastside, and helping local farmers. It feels really good to know that I'm selling food to an organization that has taken care of a lot of logistics to get food onto the tables of hundreds of people, including under-resourced folks. Those logistics can be difficult for a farmer to navigate, but Allen Neighborhood Center is built to do just that. In partnering with ANC, we get to see this amazing vision grow to maturity.”