



“My name is Mark Kastner, and I’m a pretty sophisticated individual; educated, but prefers to go under the radar as ‘Farmer Mark’. Hillcrest Farms is a chemical free, four-season farm in Eaton Rapids. And just like my wife Gayleen and I, it’s evolved over the years.

I was raised by nuns in the catholic school who led me to believe that there were no problems in life. Well of course, I had a pretty tough life. I was the oldest of ten kids, and my father was on the road all the time, so I didn’t have a lot of guidance there. He died when I was 17. But I did have a wonderful grandmother – she was a very compassionate person, and a chef in her own right. I got loaned out to her farm between Okemos and Williamston every year, and it’s her who taught me about chemical free, fresh food.

I went to MSU to study Business – a major in Accounting with a minor in Economics; I also had a scholarship in Food Science, but I gave that up after Organic Chemistry – life’s too short. My first job at Michigan State was growing plants in a small greenhouse behind Ag Hall for the Plant Pathology classes. My boss gave me a little section of the greenhouse to do my own experimentation, and I learned a lot from that. It reinforced my instinctual belief that chemicals and plants were not to be mixed, even though that was the wave at the time. In fact, my boss ended up dying from all the chemicals he used in that greenhouse. So, I got the hell out of there.

Well, the worst thing that ever happened to me was also the best thing. When I was a Junior at MSU I ran out of money, so I took a term off to work and get some funds together. I was drafted to Vietnam. That experience...it made me humble. And pretty remorseful at some of the things that I did. That as a soldier, I obviously had to do. But it still didn’t change the fact that the enemy was

somebody's father; husband; brother. When they flew me back, they herded a shitton of us into a cargo transport with no heat. My seat was a lawn chair that was strapped to the floor. Thirty-two hours later we landed in Oakland, and I was out of the Army in thirty-six hours. I didn't want to go home and see my family because I was kind of messed up. I was traumatized. When I finally went back, my mother loaned me the car for one day to try and get re-enrolled in MSU, find a job, and get a place to live. And I did.

I ended up living – little did I know – in the drug district of downtown Lansing. I rented an apartment and got a job as a taxi driver. Didn't know Lansing, so that was an education. A few months later, I found myself working for General Motors. MSU didn't want us returning vets co-mingling with those kids; they didn't really want us around. I still needed a foreign language to graduate, and well, my job at General Motors was hanging fenders on cars; I had my notecards and between hanging those fenders, I conjugated French verbs – I did two years of French in one year. And to this day I cannot parlez-vous.

I got into the corporate world – I did real estate and had some of my own rentals. But even for all those rentals, I landscaped them. Working with plants just stuck with me. When Gayleen and I ended up in Haslett, I had four gardens on one acre of land. Built a greenhouse there, and that's how I learned how to grow in an unheated structure like that. I really started farming in 2008 during the recession when we didn't have any money. I had seen Dr. John Biernbaum at an organic conference, and that translated into protecting the soil –sounded like hoopouses to me. I had some guidance with these six hoopouses when I got started, but a lot of it was done with trial and error. And of course, reading.

Allen Neighborhood Center is good for the community because it spreads the word about good, local farming. It's a subject that corporate America just does not want to get out, and it's important information that I believe in. I first got involved with ANC in 2012 or 2013 when I started selling at the market. I also started selling to Veggie Box, the multi-farm CSA. Veggie Box is a wholesale outlet where we get credit, and where there's transparency about where things are sourced. It's morphed so much over the years and is hugely successful. Every time there was a new idea at ANC, I was the first in line – I'd do anything that would promote that market. My philosophy is that if you take care of the market, the market will take care of you.

I've had a bunch of teenagers work here over the years – eighteen or twenty of them – and they've all moved on to successful lives. I've had a few of these kids say I'm like their grandfather, so I took on that role. I get on them about making smart decisions and taking initiative. We do payroll here – file the quarterlies and all that – and I try to instill in them the importance of setting aside some kind of savings for their future.

My kids are respectful: they respect one another, they respect me, and they respect what we're trying to do. And they've got creativity. Teenagers, I mean, they're just fun to be around. They come here, and they know everything. And then a year later, well, maybe they know something a little bit different. It's fun to see them grow, and they teach me a lot – I can't wait for them to come back next summer. For all of these kids, and hell even for me, working here is like therapy.”