

# Craig Tower goes back to school to become a farmer in mid-life

Craig Tower is a no-time-like-the-present type of guy. When he puts his mind to something, it gets done.

So when he decided he needed to find a new career path at age 54 after 30 years working as an electrician both in the military and civilian life, he literally went back to school.

"Craig Tower is a shining example of the new 'non-traditional' student," explained Robert King, PhD and the Director of the Agriculture and Field Studies certificate program at Monroe Community College near Rochester.

"He's much older and has already enjoyed a very rewarding professional career in a vastly

different field, and he's experienced a lot in his life that his younger fellow classmates haven't yet. So he brings an entirely different perspective and enthusiasm into the program and it's been interesting to watch how they are all learning from one another."

Tower was born and raised in Rochester, attended school there, played sports, was a life-guard, and then enlisted in the Navy's submarine program in 1981, where he remained on active duty until 1993. He married and started a family while stationed in Connecticut, beginning a lifelong commitment to volunteerism with the American Red Cross.

He lived in California

for 11 years after leaving the service and in 1998 purchased his grandfather's property and farm in Webster, and returned to New York in 2003 to "work the place." He and his second wife are currently working full time and cleaning up their 12 acres of land, preparing to organically produce apples in the near future, and planting more fresh tree stock.

All while becoming a student again in mid-life.

He attends classes along with 18 other students enrolled in the program, goes on field trips to farms and ag-related businesses, and in addition to working his own new farm, he has been trying to gain additional work experience



Bob King and Craig Tower



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through a summer USDA program, although his busy schedule hasn't cooperated.

It's a challenge he has to work around, but he likes what he sees already.

"So far my experience in the agricultural program at MCC has been an eye-opener," he said.

"The world of farming to me was dirt, rows of plants, fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and lots of water, with a distrust of GMOs and a misguided understanding of the term 'organic.' That changed with the first class."

He had no real agricultural experience other than digging holes at his grandfather's nursery. He has worked in a dairy plant for three years as a mechanic/engineer, but had no idea of the complexity of the ag industry. But he knew as a green thumb and self-professed lover of dirt, he wanted to find out more and somehow be a part of it.

"I enrolled in the program as a result of my desire to learn more about hydroponics and aquaponics and a need to be better at farming," he said. "I wanted to grow apples first, and now I want to grow sustainable crops and be profitable doing what I love to do when I am older."

"I want to 'grow it, store it and eat it,' for better health and better living for me, my family, my neighbors and ultimately my community."

Tower began the journey down his new career path by searching online, but it wasn't focused on agriculture initially.

"I was looking for professional development, first, and to advance my present career path," Tower explained. "I was looking for something to get my foot in the door and take a college course. I looked at a couple of places, but then I saw the Agriculture and Food Studies Certificates program on the MCC

website; it seemed like a neon sign. It looked tailor-made for my situation and only got better as I read about the two-year course of study."

Now one semester into the program, his only regret is that he didn't start looking sooner.

"I don't know why I waited so long, maybe it had something to do with being out of a classroom environment for so long, or feeling out of place in classes with younger people, or not thinking I would ever complete a course of study," he said.

"But I've discovered that the other students want to learn what I want to learn."

And we can all share experiences and perspectives and learn it together."

As the elder statesman of the program, his advice to anyone, regardless of age, thinking about what to do with the next phase of their life: there is no time like the present.

The magic of this course of study is that it's wide open," Tower said.

"There are so many ways to go from here. I had a dream and an idea of what I wanted to do, and what I have seen in one semester has shown me how much more there is, besides my little piece. Opportunities are out there!"

