

# LEARNING FROM LANDOWNERS

A conversation series with Keep It Colorado

## Saving the Palisade Peach and Protecting Farm Workers

Evan and Kim Ela had stayed several times at the organic peach farm their friend Thomas Cameron owned and operated since the early 1980s. When an opportunity arose to purchase some shares in the farm, Evan took it – but he also saw another opportunity: protecting the farm and its infrastructure so that it would always remain in agricultural production. The Elases pooled together five families to purchase the property and form the Buzzards Roost Partners LLC, named for the prominent butte that overlooks Rancho Durazno. Today, Thomas's daughter, Gwen, is farming the land. This second-generation farmer – she learned the ropes from her dad – is intentional about growing organically. But Gwen is also making the mission her own: Her innovative approach is about responsibly supporting and serving the migrant workers the farm relies on to succeed.

### Perfect peach-growing conditions

Rancho Durazno farms 40 acres of orchards in Palisade, near the foothills of the Grand Mesa on Colorado's Western Slope. Bordered on two sides by Bureau of Land Management lands, the farm also sits next to about 34 acres of non-irrigated desert habitat through which a variety of wildlife pass, from coyote, fox, mule deer, elk, bear and mountain lion to birds of prey, and farm infrastructure. The farm itself lies immediately below the Palisade Rim and Plunge Trails, popular hiking trails and among the few public dirt trails available on that side of the valley.

The fruit trees are irrigated by the Colorado River and, because of where the farm is situated, close to De Beque Canyon, the trees are protected from spring freezes. "These are perfect conditions for peach production," says Gwen, who has farmed the orchards under her dad's tutelage for 10 seasons.

"There is a pretty small area in Colorado where it's possible to consistently produce peach crops. If land is not available in that 20-square-mile area, there are no peach farms," says Gwen. While the cold-hardy peaches make up about 85 percent of the crop, the 400,000 pounds of fruit produced here also include nectarines, sweet cherries, plums, pluots, melons and apricots.

Access to land is critical to sustain Colorado's fruit-growing industry. But because of the increasing development pressure in the Western Slope region, available farmland is getting harder to come by. Ironically, the area's popularity stems from the abundance of peach farms and wineries. "Tons of people are moving here. They love living among the orchards and vineyards, with access to the outdoors and jobs in Grand Junction," says Gwen.

Protecting the farm was key to maintaining a critical quantity of peach-farming acreage needed for the industry to sustain. And creating that protection in permanence would require a conservation easement.

**Landowner:** Buzzards Roost Partners LLC

**Partner land trust:** Colorado West Land Trust

**Location:** Western Slope

**Topics:** Organic orchards, next-generation farm, worker equity, Fair Food Program

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### **Tax credit incentives support agricultural economy**

The Elases' vision when they chose to protect the land under easement was to preserve an agricultural economy that has served the community and the state of Colorado for more than 100 years. To Evan, part of what makes the area special is a unique infrastructure built in the early 1900s to irrigate nearby farms and keep the water rights attached to the land acres. While the terms of the easement protect the land from being subdivided and ensure that at least 15 acres always stay as orchards, they also protect the water needed to irrigate those orchards, dedicating it for that purpose.

In exchange for donating the conservation easement to Colorado West Land Trust (then Mesa Land Trust) in 2009, the Elases and the other investing families received Colorado state tax credits in addition to a federal tax deduction. By selling some of the tax credits, and starting an additional fund the partners could contribute to, Evan and his friends made infrastructure improvements and planted more trees. Later enhancements included a composting toilet, fence removal and updated irrigation, as well as a yurt.

"If you develop these lands, you'll never get it back," says Evan. "We hope people will look at what we've done and think it's a good model for preserving the agricultural economy here."

### **A critical worker base**

While Evan's vision of permanent protection was coming to fruition, other developments were taking root that wouldn't surface until about a decade later. Thomas's daughter Gwen was, perhaps unwittingly, preparing to continue the family's operations. Today, she's the lead farmer.

According to Evan, "Thomas wasn't sure if his kids would be involved in the farm. We're tickled to have Gwen. Ideologically, it's great to have another generation coming in to continue farming. But we also like her. She's good. She's doing it."

An important practice Gwen has maintained is hiring migrant workers as the majority of the workforce. Like most sizable fruit growers, Rancho Durazno uses the H-2A visa program to hire temporary agricultural workers. Under H-2A, employers are required to pay for transportation from the workers' country of origin; provide housing with stringent standards related to safety and quality of living; and pay a minimum wage that's higher than what the state offers.

As an employer Gwen must give priority to locals first, but she gets few calls from locals seeking work, compared to hundreds of calls from around the world from workers who know she has the visa and would like to fill those spots. Her program is so good that the same crews, primarily from Mexico, return year after year. "We have a great retention rate," she says.

The visa program isn't the only thing that keeps these workers coming back to Rancho Durazno. Gwen has built a program that creates equity for a critical worker base.



**"Gwen and her dad have formed a close relationship with the migrant farm workers. It's a family relationship, that's how they maintain the worker base. They have a different approach - it's about being inclusive, and sharing." - Evan Ela**

## Fair Food Program: Benefits for all

Rancho Durazno is a member of the Fair Food Program, a Florida nonprofit. What started as a way to combat human-rights abuses such as wage theft, underpayment and human trafficking in Florida's tomato fields is now a sought-after opportunity for growers like Rancho Durazno. The program ensures socially responsible operations that benefit workers, farmers and buyers alike.

Workers benefit from increased pay by the Fair Food premium, which buyers cover. Following an annual farm audit, workers receive the protections and benefits required by law. They also benefit from the work of a new health and safety committee as well as an anonymous 24-hour hotline. (As a bonus that's particular to Rancho Durazno, most workers can communicate in their native language with Gwen and her family, who all speak Spanish.)

Participating farmers get marketing benefits by appealing to buyers who want to purchase from socially responsible growers. They can also access the program's educational resources about evolving state and federal laws related to agricultural workers, and get help implementing the changes. For instance, Senate Bill 87 created new overtime pay thresholds, and required more frequent breaks and sunshades, which came with new responsibilities the program's lawyers help farmers understand.

Buyers also get benefits as Fair Food Program members. While they agree to buy from Fair Food-certified farms, and are charged a premium for each box of product, they get assurance that the workers receive that pay directly, people in the supply chain are treated well, and farmers are following the law. Their membership also serves as a marketing tool to broadcast their support of agricultural worker welfare.

"They are not the only social responsibility certification out there for farm workers, but one of the few with real teeth that holds farmers and buyers accountable," says Gwen of the program. Rancho Durazno was the first participating grower in Colorado, and Gwen says she hopes the program will continue to expand.

Evan sees the value in Gwen's approach. "Gwen and her dad have formed a close relationship with the migrant farm workers. It's a family relationship, that's how they maintain the worker base. They have a different approach – it's about being inclusive, and sharing."

## Overcoming barriers and looking ahead

As she looks to the future, Gwen hopes that her industry attracts more young farmers and farmers of color. She acknowledges that there's much work to do to make land more affordable. And, she adds, "The land has to be available in the first place. There are lots of barriers." One critical step is having landowners who are willing to lease to farmers who will actively farm. The other essential step to making land available is protecting those lands with a conservation easement.

Gwen says her dad is 95% retired now, but he's still very involved and she gleans valuable expertise from him every day. "When you're a farmer, your work is your family and your home and your whole life. He's been doing this for 50 years," she says – but jokingly adds, "But the more I take over the more he does."

For her part, Gwen seems to fill the role naturally. She's easily following in her dad's footsteps while forging a path of her own – and making way for others to join her on the journey.



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- Gwen Cameron



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