

# Veterans Make a Fresh Start

By Brigid Brett

Colin and Karen Archipley's relationship with their trees is almost the same as tribal Africans have with their cows. They seem to know each one intimately—which avocado tree is bearing more and which seems to be particularly sensitive to the Santa Ana winds or the sudden bite of cold.

"Taste this." Karen picks a tiny green fruit from a small tree growing along the fence near the greenhouse and hands it to me. As I bite into the tart, tickly flesh of the pineapple guava, she and Colin watch intently to see if I like it.

It's my first visit to Archi's Acres, their small farm in Valley Center, San Diego County. On the coast, about 30 miles away, is Camp Pendleton, where Colin was an infantry sergeant with the marines of Lima Company 3/1. After three deployments to Iraq, he now has a new mission: to grow their small farm into a thriving business and to help other veterans build skills and find some healing on the land that Karen calls "our little piece of Tuscany." Her description is apt; the surrounding sagebrush-covered hills bear a strong resemblance to those in the Tuscan countryside, and at dusk the light has the same golden quality.

In the greenhouse you can feel the warm breath of hundreds of basil plants. Each one seems to radiate health and well-being, like rows of well-tended newborns in a nursery. I snap off a plump green leaf and chew it while Colin shows me the rolling tables he's designed.

Like most of the produce on the farm, these basil plants are grown hydroponically, using organic tea nutrients and pure filtered water, and the water is contained and recirculated into

the Nutrient Film Technique (NFT) growing tables. All the lettuce, avocados, tomatoes and herbs on Archi's Acres are grown using sustainable and bioorganic techniques and sold at local health food stores and farmers' markets. About 99 percent of the farm's produce is sold, and there is a growing demand from local grocers who want to support returning veterans. But that will take another greenhouse. To help make that happen, Colin works long hours and Karen, a mortgage broker,



PHOTOS BY KEVIN REDMAN

Archi's Acres achieves much more than fine produce.

does double duty, working by his side doing farm chores and selling on the weekends.

Karen and Colin found the farm the summer before he left for his third deployment to Iraq, when Colin led his marines into Fallujah and Haditha in the most intense house-to-house combat since the start of the war. Karen didn't know how it would be when he returned, but she had a feeling that it would be healing for him to work on the land and have time to adjust slowly to the civilian world.

She couldn't have been more right: after four years back home Colin still suffers from severe headaches, sleep problems, anxiety, and the effects of mild traumatic brain injury; all common symptoms of Iraq combat veterans.

"If I hadn't had this peaceful place to come back to," he says, "and Karen's support, I honestly don't know what would have happened. There are so many guys who are struggling, who are completely lost. In the military, structure is everything, and when you get out, suddenly it's all gone." He clears his throat. "Organic farming requires a huge amount of structure too."

Many of the men Colin served with have reenlisted because they couldn't find work in the civilian world and didn't know what else they could do to support their families. Colin says that if it weren't for Karen and the farm

program, he'd seriously consider reenlisting too.

Their personal experience with the challenges facing veterans returning from combat led to the creation of Archi's Acres Veterans Sustainable Agriculture Training (VSAT). The program, a collaborative effort with the San Diego Veterans Affairs Healthcare System's Compensated Work Therapy (CWT), is designed to help returning veterans transition back into the private sector as well as give them employment opportunities and professional training in sustainable agriculture. As a transitional program, it is limited to 90 days, although exceptions are made based on a number of factors.

Over the next month I meet the other veterans who have found their way to Archi's Acres. One Thursday morning I watch Jeff, a former army ranger and Gulf War veteran, sort and wash lettuces that will be sold at the farmers' markets in Hillcrest and Little Italy. There's a gruffness to Jeff that evaporates as soon as he starts talking about his experience on the farm. He tells me his life had been rapidly unraveling



Above: Much of the farm's produce is grown hydroponically.

Below: Colin and Olaf, a navy veteran, harvest basil in the greenhouse.



before he came to work here nearly a year ago. He'd been struggling with alcohol addiction for so long and things had deteriorated so badly that he came close to jumping off San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge.

He heard about Archi's Acres from Thomas, a veteran he met at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Thomas told him how the program had changed his life, and to Jeff the idea of quietly working outdoors sounded good.

"It's not just that this is a peaceful place to work," Jeff says. "It's that for the first time in a long time I feel like I'm giving back. After nearly a year here I'm now in a position to train others who come into the program." He rinses off another head of romaine, shakes the water from its bearded roots, and puts it carefully into a box. "This is the first time in a long, long time that I feel like I have a purpose."

---

## Veterans Make a Fresh Start

---

A few yards away, Rod tethers tomatoes, throwing lengths of twine up in the air as gracefully as a fly fisherman. His boom box sits on a low stone wall, set to Broadway hits on satellite radio. Nearby a fat black lizard crawls lazily over a piece of shade cloth.

Rod served in the navy during the Vietnam era and for many years has struggled with back pain and an overreliance on pain medication. Sometimes his back still bothers him, he says, but he feels himself getting stronger, and the kind of movement required of him on the farm agrees with him most of the time. So does being part of a community after years of being isolated.

“There’s a leeway we veterans give each other that can’t be found in the civilian world,” he says. “It’s hard to define, but it’s about the kind of acceptance and nonjudgment that you’re just not going to find anywhere except with other veterans.”

Rod, a Vietnam veteran, appreciates being a part of the farm community.

After their morning’s work is done, Karen loads the “gator” with lunch and drives it down to the barn. Her fresh guacamole, with its unexpected kick, is met with groans of approval, and even those who normally turn up their noses at salad help themselves to seconds. The secret, Karen says, her green eyes twinkling, is the ginger she squeezes into her vinaigrette. An electric cooker with Rod’s eye-watering chili sits on the table below the whiteboard where Colin has written the week’s schedule.

Except for Jeff, who served in the army, the other three veterans are all navy, and with Colin being the only marine there’s a fair amount of bantering and good-humored putting down of one another’s branch of service.

“So what do you think of the pasta?” Karen asks me.

“Mmm,” I mumble, my mouth too full of the flavors of the basil and tomato and feta cheese to say more.

Jeffery Scanlon, the Compensated Work Therapy manager and Colin’s partner at the VA in San Diego, has stopped by for lunch and to talk to the Archipleys about upcoming meetings with a local congressman and a grocery store chain. His expectations about the program have been surpassed, and

now his goal is to see it expanded so more veterans can be served. At this point the stumbling block is the lack of funds.

“What’s for dessert?” asks Jeff, when he’s scraped his chili bowl clean. Karen gives him a look. “Wheat grass juice.” She’s only half joking. Jeff has diabetes and she is determined to help him get it under control.

Colin, wearing his new black sweatshirt with its Veterans Shaping a Sustainable World logo, grins, then looks at his watch. There’s a farm to get back to, a grant to work on, calls to make. Colin’s a good leader, Thomas tells me after lunch. The skills he acquired and used as a marine sergeant—leadership, teamwork, strategizing, and discipline—have served him well, especially when it comes to running a farm and training other veterans in sustainable farming techniques.

A quiet man who wears his long brown hair tied back in a ponytail, Thomas has been in the program for over a year and lives in a trailer on the property. Two years ago he lost his marriage, his relationship with his young son, and his self-respect because of his addiction to alcohol.

“I knew I was going to die if I didn’t stay sober, and that I needed to stay sober so I could be a dad,” he says. He spent some time at an outpatient program at the VA in Amarillo, Texas, and then returned to San Diego where he was put in touch with Jeffery Scanlon, who thought he’d be a good fit for the CWT program, which was just starting at Archi’s Acres.

“When I first came here I had a lot of trust issues, a lot of fear. But somewhere along the line a lot of the fear left and a lot of the anxiety left, and at some point my focus went from me and taking care of me to taking care of this program and helping the next guy coming in.”

His ten-year-old son frequently visits him at the farm, and they’re figuring out what to do together this summer.

“I can’t think of anything more harmonious than spending my day growing plants,” Thomas smiles. “It’s work, but it’s the kind of work that leaves you full at the end of the day instead of empty.” 🌱

