Group seeks to foster growth in agriculture industry

By JANA LOUISE CARTER

When it comes to agriculture, the industry in the Rochester area is strong. Surveys conducted just a few years ago found that the average American farmer was 58, while the average American computer programmer was 31. The food and agriculture workforce has only gotten older since those surveys. The LEAD program has been in place for a few years and is aimed at bringing younger people into the field.

LEAD New York’s current class at Foodlink’s food warehouse in Rochester.

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New York program has been trying to keep up with all of the above. The Cornell University-based program, now 36 years old, is recruiting its next class of young people to become tomorrow’s leaders in food and agriculture. Workshops are held at various locations across the state, the next class will meet in Rochester in November and Autumn in December.

Applications for the two-year program are available online now, and the deadline for submitting them is March 1. Tutors for the program, which has a series of three-two workshops around the state in the first year and visits to farmlands further afield in the second, is $2,900. This year’s class is going to Kenya next month. Larry Van De Valk, executive director of the organization, notes that these opportunities pay for some of the travel for their employer and there is some scholarship money for those who aren’t coming to LEAD New York through a current job.

Graduates speak highly of the program, particularly the network of peers they take with them and what they’ve finished. One recent graduate is Sam Feller, executive director of the New York Wine and Grape Foundation, who has been promoting it in recent newsletters for the foundation.

“I highly recommend the program to anyone who wants to develop their personal leadership skills and also desires to help advance the growth of our agricultural sector,” Feller wrote in the Jan. 7 issue of “The Press Deck” newsletter. “The program connects its participants to the greater agriculture community outside their specific industry, which creates valuable bonds that strengthen New York’s agriculture community.

Van De Valk said about some of the more recent initiatives is to look at what other states have going on. “We’re trying to get a mentor program going and make it more affordable.”

Anthony Colangelo enrolled in the current program which ends in April, thinking he would be spending quite a bit of time listening to lectures in hotel conference rooms. “I wasn’t like that at all. Especially early on, it was mainly focused on a psychological business line and how to build teams.” Colangelo said he started out working for restaurants and bars in New York City and then went onto a career in finance on Wall Street before moving to the Rochester area.

“When I found opportunities in agriculture, I had no idea what agriculture was all about. I was blown away by how much of a need there was for young people to get involved in agriculture.” Colangelo said.

Colangelo got a job working with Delmar Associates, a management consulting firm in Goshen that helps dairy farms improve and improve their finances. The firm’s founder, Denise Delmar, was a graduate of the LEAD program, too, and recommended it to Colangelo.

“What set Delmar Associates really specialize is in providing them with the tools to better communicate with their customers, other stakeholders about their business.” Colangelo said. “That’s part of the skillset that’s being taught in programs like LEAD New York.” Learning to listen to other perspectives was another skill set he appreciated.

Van De Valk said the network of peers and the program gain through the two years is one of the program’s biggest assets. In fact, he believes networking is what helped a group of early LEAD New York graduates start up to form a produce harvest cooperative to take the place of one that closed when Barta Eye sold off its vegetable processing plant in the area about a decade ago.

Thomas Faller, president of Farm Fresh First, said four of the six Farm Fresh First founders and nine of its current board members are graduates of LEAD New York.

Like many students, Faler was working in the industry—first as a processing company—when he was enrolled at age 29 in LEAD’s first class more than 30 years ago. “The biggest benefit for me personally was the opportunity to know the 30 members of the group much better,” Faler said. “It was social gatherings and on-field trips. It turns out a bunch of us went into business together.”

His company, headquartered in Oakfield, Genesee County, manages harvest and delivery of vegetables to the old Barta Eye processing plant in Western New York that is now owned by Bondurant. But Farm Fresh First also processes cherries from central New York, apples from North Carolina, New York, Michigan, and Washington state, and popcorn from Illinois and Nebraska.

Because the LEAD program is so time-consuming and involves a considerable amount of travel, applications must be accompanied by a letter of recommendation from both the applicant’s employer and from his or her family. Applicants come from all over the state, organizations and businesses such as the New York State Agricultural Society which helped fund the program, and Farm Credit East, an agricultural lender, have regularly sent employees for the training just about every year.

“Van De Valk said, “We think that’s one of the strengths of this program. We are able to pull together a diverse group of people who can teach each other. They learn from each other and from others. Typically a third set of farmers, one-third saw farms for profit or loss businesses, and a third are from government (and) non-profits.”

But some perspectives are still missing, he said. “We would like to see more from urban food perspectives.”

“There’s a real Renaissance right now in terms of downtown scenes and food businesses,” Van De Valk said. “There’s businesses in Rochester that haven’t sent participants much, whether packaging or food distribution businesses.”