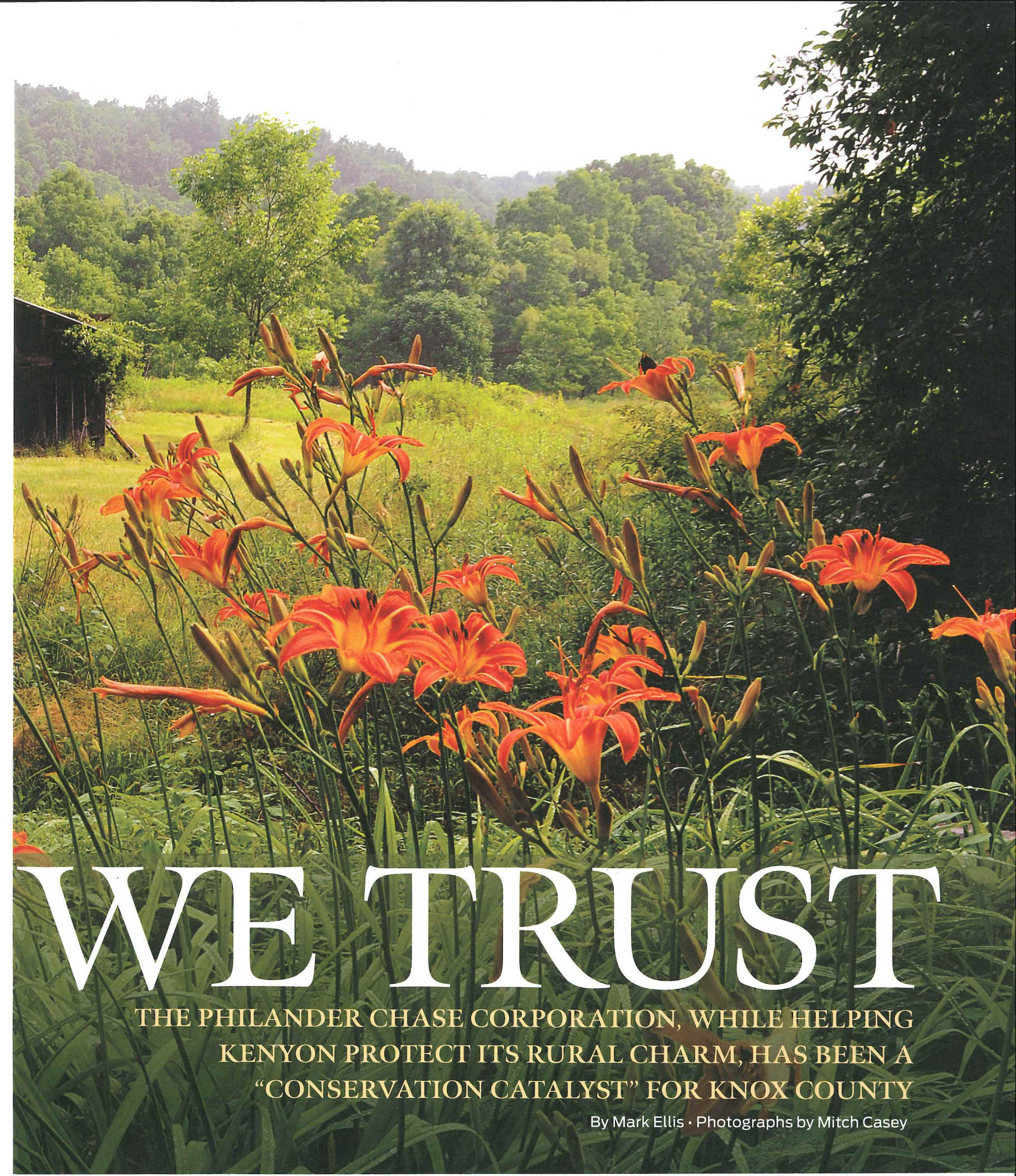


INLAND



WE TRUST

THE PHILANDER CHASE CORPORATION, WHILE HELPING
KENYON PROTECT ITS RURAL CHARM, HAS BEEN A
“CONSERVATION CATALYST” FOR KNOX COUNTY

By Mark Ellis • Photographs by Mitch Casey

The porch swing at the Dudgeon family farmhouse looks north along a road that rises with a gentle hill, dividing emerald pastures and wooded fields. Not far beyond the crest, where the road meets State Route 229 in Knox County, sits a jumble of prefabricated homes.

“When they put all those houses up there . . . it just wasn’t something I wanted to see,” said Charles “Chuck” Dudgeon. That would not happen on his land.

Dudgeons have lived in the area since before Philander Chase moved Kenyon to its tranquil hilltop. Chuck’s ancestor Simon Dudgeon beat Chase by fourteen years, arriving in Ohio in 1811 from Donegal, Ireland, by way of New York and Pennsylvania. Dudgeon now holds 180 acres of the 700 that Simon Dudgeon once owned. Ohio recognizes Dudgeon’s property as a Century Farm, held by one family for one hundred years—only because there is no official designation for a two-century farm. “I hope it stays in the family,” he said.

One thing is certain: it will stay in farming. And Kenyon has had a part in protecting it.

The Dudgeons’ farmland, including another 130 acres on Grove Church Road that Chuck’s father bought in 1958, is covered by agricultural easements that were secured with a payment from the state of Ohio. But crucial matching funds also came from a

Kenyon entity called the Philander Chase Corporation (PCC)—the College’s nonprofit land trust.

The PCC owes its existence, in part, to a crisis: the specter of a recreational-vehicle park along the Kokosing River, right at the base of the Hill. But in working to preserve the rural landscape buffering the campus, the PCC has evolved into a greater civic force for natural beauty and the area’s agricultural heritage.

Created in 2000, with its own board of directors, the PCC spurs interest in land preservation around Gambier and helps steer land owners through a deed-restriction process by providing guidance and money for agricultural and conservation easements. Outright purchase by the PCC is another option.

Its mantra is “in perpetuity,” words that guarantee agricultural use or preservation except in cases of eminent domain. The words evoke the yearning of land holders to defy time and change. “Eternal,” said Spence Badet, summing up in a word the deal that brought his Hope Springs Farm into a conservation easement this year.

“[It will still be farmland] five hundred years from now. That’s heavy duty, very heavy duty,” said Lisa Schott ’80, the former director of Alumni and Parent Programs who became the managing director of the PCC in 2010.

Like many Kenyon students, Schott was captivated by the countryside around Gambier. Trees she saw then while looking south, one that blazed red in the fall and one that glinted yellow,

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Lifetime farmer Chuck Dudgeon and his wife, Rita, are at ease in a barn on land protected by agricultural easement.





became fixed in her mind. Before she graduated, Schott found her way to those distant sentinels. “I just wanted to sit under one of those trees,” she said. “I think where Kenyon gets such a hold on people is, obviously, the academic part, but I think a lot of that has to do with where we’re studying. Being in a natural setting of great beauty is profoundly important. I want to protect that.”

Asphalt, some farmers say, is the “last crop.” Ohio lost more than 6.9 million acres of farmland to development between 1950 and 2000 and now has about 14 million farmland acres. Working with farmers, state easement programs have preserved more than

54,000 acres since 1999, and the Chase land trust has had a hand in preserving 4,767 acres in Knox County. The pace has quickened over the last two years, as the PCC has doubled the number of easements to thirty.

The land trust typically works within a radius of about five miles of Gambier, although it ventured forth in the early 2000s to help Knox County create Wolf Run Regional Park. “I think the College is wise,” Schott said. “You want to protect your view corridors, and you want to protect your water. The Kokosing River is dear, and not only for the beauty’s sake. We want this buffer.”





“WE’RE IN IT FOR THE COMMON GOOD.”

The designer and champion of the land trust was its first director, Douglas L. Givens, former vice president for development, now retired. He established a guiding principle: “We’re in it for the common good.”

The roots of the corporation that Givens commonly calls “P. Chase”—the letters that were fixed on his car license plates for years—reach back to 1825, when Kenyon’s founder bought two 4,000-acre pieces for about \$22,000. Most of the 8,000 acres were sold over time as the College swapped land for cash. Kenyon’s property had dwindled to about 450 acres by the early 1970s.

As the land trust went to work, Givens became fond of quipping, “We had 8,000 acres and we want it back.” The joke was not always appreciated, with its hint of an acquisitive college whose neighbors sometimes cast its way a wary eye. Givens was well aware that “ownership is not what we’re after.” An easement is much cheaper to obtain. “Purchasing is the most expensive protection you can have.”

The PCC became a goodwill ambassador for the College and an ally of farmers. “I set it up that we weren’t in it for us,” Givens said. “We were going to be a partner. We were going to be what’s now called a conservation catalyst. We were a facilitator. I wanted P. Chase to be under the radar. We weren’t out there leading the charge—but we were.”

The jolt that gave urgency to the need for land preservation came in 1987, when a local family announced plans for an RV park at the foot of the Hill. The image of trailers along the river was alarming enough for Kenyon to pursue legal action. That slowed the project while the College negotiated purchase of the land.

“For the first time since 1825, people here realized that the environment around us is vitally important,” Givens said. “The place was more than Gambier. It was the surrounding countryside.”

For several years the College set about buying land that was “strategically contiguous” to the first purchase, including the land that became the Brown Family Environmental Center. Kenyon owns about 1,200 acres now, including the 2012 addition of an eleven-acre farm just beyond



Nancy and Spence Badet reflect on Hope Springs farm, protected by a conservation easement.

Gambier that will be used as a sort of living agricultural lab for Kenyon students.

The Claiming Our Place campaign, launched in 1996, included a goal of \$1 million for land acquisition and preservation. Donors responded with about \$3 million. "The notion of protecting the place resonated," Givens said. "It mattered a lot. That led directly to the Chase Corporation."

Sensitivity to urban sprawl and the loss of farmland became a compelling issue in the 1990s. Ohio and Knox County launched land and development studies. The federal government expanded the Soil Conservation Service into the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program to provide matching money to help buy development rights to protect agriculture. Ohio voters approved the Clean Ohio Fund in 2000 and reaffirmed support in 2008.

The Clean Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program was part of the Clean Ohio Fund. The state promised to pay farmers 75 percent of the points-based appraised value of a farm, up to \$2,000 an acre with a \$500,000 ceiling, in exchange for a deed restriction that guaranteed agricultural use. Property owners had to come up with the other 25 percent—and that's where land trusts found a role, providing matching money as well as expertise.

Taking advantage of the Ohio program, the PCC "became sort of an agricultural-easement machine," Givens said. Interested farmers compete for the easements in a system created by the state that tallies points for, among other things, soil quality, proximity to other preserved land, and conservation planning.

Land owners must weigh a potential financial hit tied to the loss of development rights. They continue to own their land, retain gas and oil rights, and gain income tax advantages. "What it means is the next generation of farmer can buy the land at a cheaper price than having to pay the development price for the land," Givens said.

Dudgeon believes his property value has depreciated. "It's really taking about \$1,200 to \$1,500 of value from the land, per acre," Dudgeon said. The market price per acre now is in the \$4,000 to \$6,000 range. "It's just a number," Dudgeon said. "How do you put a dollar value on a lifestyle? You've got to do what makes you happy, and the money is not as important as the happiness."

But the deal has worked for Dudgeon. "For us, there was a huge tax incentive to do this."

He grew up on the farm on Grove Church Road. When he was seventeen years old, he returned home one night from a job at a Mount Vernon glove factory and his father asked him to commit to a lifetime of farming—or the place would be sold. "I started farming after school. The people I worked with in the town, they didn't have a real good work ethic. On the farm, you were used to working till the job was done. It became a habit, second nature."

He and his wife, Rita, reared six children in the house where Chuck grew up. "I was just a little over two years old when they moved here. That was the last move I ever made," he said with a rib-rattling laugh.

The five surviving children are at peace with preservation, Rita Dudgeon said. "When you build something up, it's your legacy, and it's rewarding to think that somebody else thinks it's important and they'll continue it," she said. "I'm really happy we did it."

For twenty-three years, Chuck has balanced work on the farm, where he tends a growing herd of cattle, with his job as a lab technician at Rolls Royce Energy Systems. Over time, he raised sheep with some success, hogs with considerably less success, and grain crops. This year he dropped crops to focus on beef.

His plan for the land is straightforward: "I'm trying to leave the land as good as or better than when I got it."

Kate and Eric Helt are certain the ninety-two acres they bought about fourteen years ago on Horn Road and call Dharma Farm are improved. "We farm organically, or biologically I like to call it," Eric said. "It's critical to the nutritional quality of the food. The

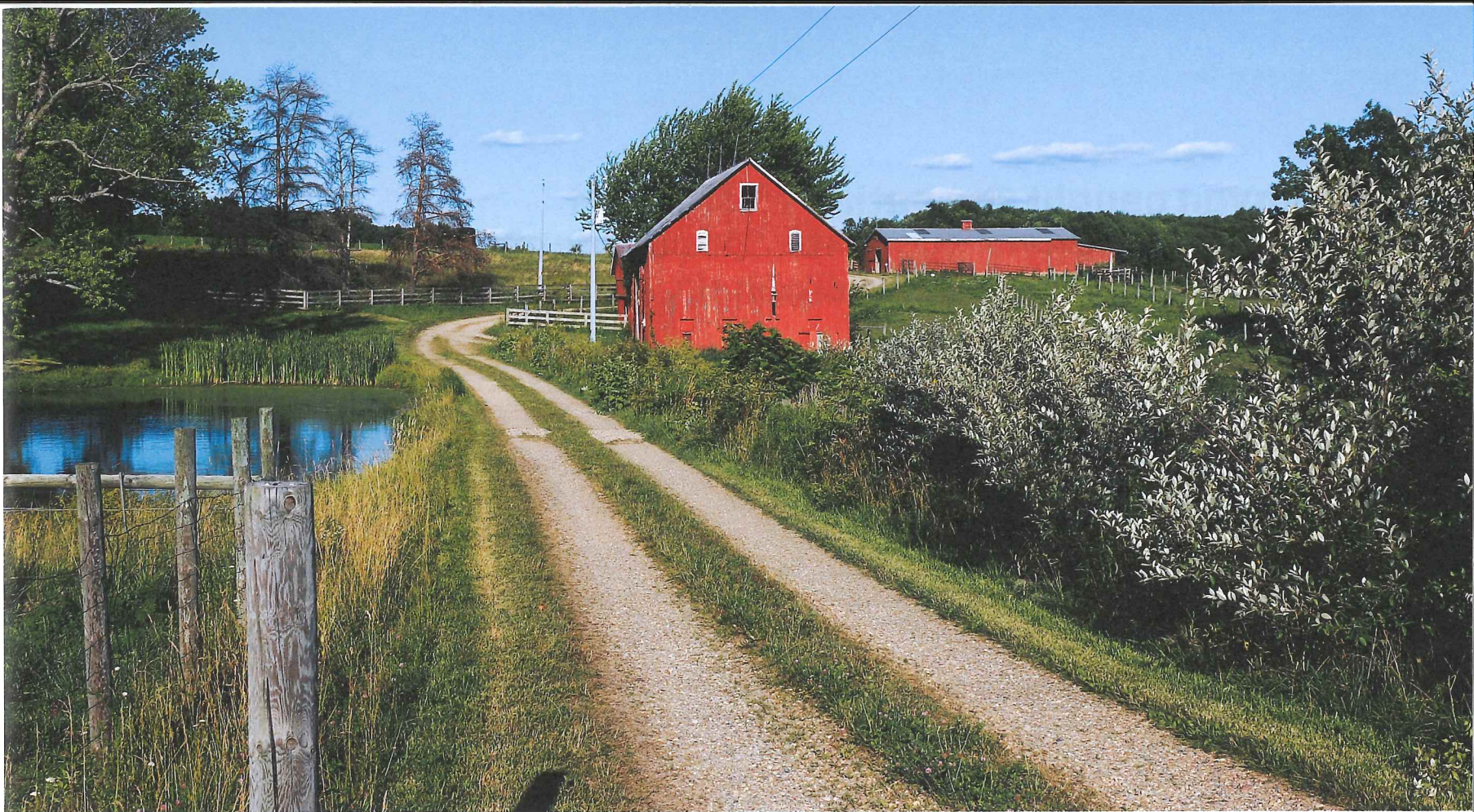
Kate Helt with one of two llamas kept on Dharma Farm to protect livestock from predators.

toxins? You don't want to handle them, you don't want to breathe them, you don't want them in your water."

The Helts are gardeners and grass farmers. They tend pastures and raise hay for meat animals, including sheep, goats, and a handful of cattle. They keep chickens. With the money they received for their 2011 agricultural easement, they invested in a solar-power system.

"Because of all the work we've done to get the farm to this point, we wanted to make sure it couldn't be sold for development," Kate said. "Everything is preserved, which feels good. Farming forever."





“IT’S BEEN A GREAT SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY.”

The couple arrived in Knox County determined to become farmers and eat better food after careers in health care and small business. “We gravitated to this area because of the fine farmland, the hills, the beauty of it,” Kate said.

Pursuing an agricultural easement was “a no-brainer,” Eric said. “We would never sell it for development.” The deed restriction “really isn’t any sacrifice,” he said. “Because so much of the land around us is preserved, if you were looking for a farm, this would be a farm to buy. I think we can sell this farm for the same \$4,000 or \$5,000 an acre, and it would be more than that with the improvements. The downside is you can’t build another residence [on the property].”

They applied for the easement for eight years. The role of the PCC in helping prepare their application year after year was invaluable. “It’s been a great service to the community,” Eric said. “No doubt about it.”

The deal offered by the PCC to preserve Hope Springs Farm on Canada Road through a conservation easement was “a blessing . . . out of the blue,” Spence Badet said. “God bless them for that.” Badet, who has enjoyed a career as a quality-control expert, and his wife, Nancy, found their farm and the 1860s-era home on it in 1979. They reared two children there and did so without a television.

“It was an adventure for us,” Nancy said. “We soon learned that people used the words ‘self-sufficient’ a lot and that’s really bogus. Nothing in the country is self-sufficient. You depend on other people.” They invested in sheep and goats and relied on neighbors for advice and problem-solving.

The easement on their fifty acres is tied to the forty contiguous acres held by a neighbor. Selling their land to a developer never occurred to the couple. “It’s just wrong,” Nancy said. “It’s wrong to the neighbors.”

She tends a large garden. The sheep and goats are long gone. Old pastures revert to wooded acres, protected by the easement. “There’s an opportunity to at least hope that this place will look the same in one hundred years,” Spence said. “This is legal, and we can count on it.”

A fall retreat of the PCC board of directors will help sort out the future of the land trust, Schott said. “We’ve been very successful, but we have not defined our long-range plans and goals.”

One goal is more student involvement. “Education comes in different forms,” Schott said. Kenyon’s Rural Life Center has established a model for students to gain hands-on experience with the farming community. Students have worked with the Helts since 2001, and the head count is now 142.

“Those kids are energized and interested,” Kate Helt said. “The intent is to get them around their neighborhood. It’s so different from Kenyon.” And that may be the hidden beauty of saving what unfolds beyond the campus. ■