

The roof is buzzing

Beehive was installed last spring atop JJCL

By BAILEY CLINE

The Graphic Printing Company
The learning center has a new perk for those interested in safely watching bees or buying local honey.

It's on the roof.
Jay County beekeeper Josh Gibson installed a honeybee colony on top of John Jay Center for Learning last spring. He first considered the idea of keeping honey bees above the building in fall 2022.

Protected against the wind, the sunlit space is "out of sight, out of mind" for those who want to avoid bees. It's also only a short distance from the Salamonie River.

"I thought, 'It's a perfect place,'" Gibson said.

A few promising conversations later, he placed a colony on the roof in spring 2023.

Gibson, who has been beekeeping for four years, started offering "John Jay Honey From the Roof" branded honey last year. As the name suggests, it derives from the honeybee colony buzzing away above the building. Profits from the product are split between John Jay Center for Learning and Gibson's business.

See **Buzzing** page 2B

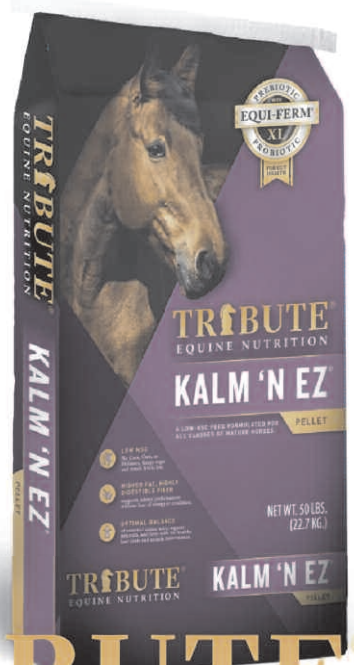


The Graphic Printing Company/Bailey Cline

Gabby Gibson, 12, and her dad Josh Gibson look at frames removed from the honeybee hive on top of John Jay Center for Learning on April 14. Josh Gibson placed a colony of bees above the facility last year. Protected against the wind, the sunlit space is "out of sight, out of mind" for those who want to avoid bees. It's also only a short distance from the Salamonie River. "I thought, 'It's a perfect place,'" Gibson said.

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Buzzing ...

Continued from page 1B
Located near a window on the top floor, the man-made hive is also available for safe viewing during the learning center's regular hours. It has become an educational opportunity for students to learn about the world's pollinators.

'I think it helps get rid of the stigma, the fear, when they can stand ... looking out the window and see the activity going on.'
—Josh Gibson

The idea

Gibson got the idea of rooftop beekeeping from "Bees in the D," a Detroit-based podcast about beekeeping in the big city.

"I've seen some of these places in Detroit, they are literally putting them right by windows," said Gibson, who works as an alternative school teacher for Jay School Corporation at John Jay Center for Learning.

He had removed a swarm of bees from the roof previously. At that time, he noticed a hive would be mostly protected from the wind if situated near the side of the top floor. Sitting in direct sunlight — bees are hearty enough to handle the heat — the hive would also be protected from developing an infestation of hive beetles, which damage honey comb, honey and pollen and cause bees to abandon their hives.

That, paired with its discreet location and vicinity to a water source, led Gibson to tug on the ear of Rusty Inman, executive director of John Jay Center for Learning.

"(Josh) sent me a link to an article about urban beekeeping," said Inman. "He asked (later), 'Could I put bees on the roof here?'"

"I was more than happy then for Josh to do that," said Inman, who sought approval from his board of directors and gave Gibson the OK to move forward.

The hobby quickly rubbed off onto Inman. He borrowed equipment and took some extra bees off the hands of a friend in order to set up a few colonies at his home, which now help his wife's garden

thrive. He's also developed a love for beekeeping.

"It's very satisfying to pull that stuff out of (the hive) and pull the cap off the frame and spin that honey out," Inman said. "It's amazing, it's just God at work right there, it's pretty cool."

The outcome

Gibson realized the hive on John Jay's roof could be an educational tool for students. He's had a couple classes watch from the nearby window while he removed frames from the hive and checked out the bees' progress. Students — as well as anyone watching from the window — are able to safely look at the hive's workers, drones and queen.

"I think it helps get rid of the stigma, the fear, when they can stand ... looking out the window and see the activity going on," he said.

Although John Jay Center for Learning is sold out of honey from last year's harvest, it's only a matter of time until Gibson can begin harvesting another batch. (Half of the profits go toward the building fund.) He fed the hive a few months ago and checked on its status again April 14, noting its population had increased considerably since last year.

Once ready, beekeepers may harvest honey through Labor Day. After that point, beekeepers typically treat for varroa mites — a parasite that can decimate a hive, Gibson explained — as a preventa-

tive measure and leave the colony honey to last the bees through the winter.

Inman also talked about a vibrance and heartiness in the flowers downtown last summer he hadn't seen before. He believes the bees on John Jay's roof played a part in that. (Bees can travel within a 2-mile radius from their hive to pollinate flowers.)

"I just thought that the downtown flowers were extra beautiful, and the bees had a lot to do with it," he said.

Future plans

Gibson shared hopes to install a hive on top of Portland Fire Department's building sometime soon and plans to pick up a new colony later this month.

The conversation for that project started after fire chief Mike Weitzel noticed John Jay's honey for sale at Bizzy Dips bakery and coffee shop, which is located inside the facility.

Weitzel noted some work that needs to be completed on the roof prior to the installation. Still, he expressed support for the addition of a hive above the building.

"I was just thinking it's beneficial," he said, pointing to his background in landscaping. "I always understand the importance of pollination and how beneficial the bees are to our society."

As for the future, Gibson said he would love to see the beekeeping hobby expand more into the downtown area with other local beekeepers.



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Pictured at left, Honeybees walk around a frame removed from their hive April 14 at John Jay Center for Learning. The colony has been utilized for its honey as well as an educational experience for students.

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Corn, soybeans trending down

By RAY COONEY

The Graphic Printing Company

Corn and soybean prices have been trending down since their recent peaks in 2022.

That pattern is expected to continue this year.

With a surprise in the way the 2023 crop was handled, corn prices are expected to be down about 30 cents per bushel this

year with soybeans taking a nearly \$2 drop. That's leading to a darker picture overall.

"It seems like the financial picture is deteriorating a little quicker than what we would have anticipated six months ago," said Ben Brown, senior research associate with the Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute at the

University of Missouri who focuses on U.S. farm policy, commodity markets and farm finance. "Part of that is prices. Prices have deteriorated a little faster than what we maybe would have anticipated. And I think there's maybe further deterioration still to go in row crop prices."

He explained that farmers stored more corn and

soybeans than usual from the 2023 crop. They've carried those products into lower prices, which reduced the average price for the year.

It also means they're carrying more grain into this year, leading to an increase in the supply side of the economic equation.

"I think if we come in with another very strong production year ... that could spell trouble for crop prices," said Brown.

Corn prices for the 2023/24 season were already at \$4.75 per bushel before being lowered by 5 cents based on upward adjustments for corn ethanol and feed and residual use.

Corn prices are expected to come in at a national average of \$4.39 for 2024/25, Brown said. Soybeans are projected at \$10.73, down from \$12.68 for the previous year.

"Even with that drop, soybeans are still expected to have a higher per-acre return over corn," said Brown, "and that's why we've seen a roughly 4-million-acre shift to corn over soybeans."

Recent peaks were above \$8 for corn and more than \$17 for soybeans in 2022.

While prices will be down, so are input costs for fertilizer and fuel. Still, that's not enough to make the outlook bright for farmers.

Brown said projections anticipate an overall decline in farm income this year as compared to 2023.

Rainy conditions during the first half of this month — there has been nearly 6 inches of rain in east central Indiana already in April, well above the monthly average of 3.44 — are unlikely to have a major impact on planting unless the pattern continues. (There's a chance of rain ranging from 40% to 60% Friday afternoon through Saturday night.)

'... the financial picture is deteriorating a little quicker than what we would have anticipated six months ago.'

—Ben Brown, University of Missouri

Through April 15, 1% of the state's corn crop had been planted. But the five-year average is just 2% for the same time of year.

While Indiana has been wet, other areas of the corn belt have experienced extremely dry conditions. Missouri, for example, already had 26% of its corn crop in the ground as of April 15. The average for the state for mid-April is 10%.

"Everybody south of I-70 in Missouri I think is done planting corn, and in some cases beans already," said Brown. "It is very dry."

"It's an east vs. west scenario again. The east is too wet; the west is too dry."

Looking at external factors, Brown noted that Brazil seems to have another strong crop and will continue to supply the world with cheap corn and soybeans. There are issues, however, elsewhere in South America where Argentina is dealing with a leaf blight. A relatively warm winter has created the environment for the blight, which is carried by grasshoppers.

"We're still monitoring the situation," said Brown. "No one seems to know how big of an impact it's going to have yet."

Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe, Ukraine is expected to see a reduction in its exports as it works to meet its own domestic needs through its continuing war with Russia. But Russia has had record crop seasons leading to exports that have filled the gap, Brown said.

Looking at the livestock sector, Brown said the cattle industry continues to be robust with tight supplies coming to the market. One potential challenge is avian flu, which has been detected in cattle. He said the disease does not impact the safety of the meat, but that it could still have an impact on consumer sentiment.

The outlook for pork is improving, with input prices falling and commodity prices improving a bit. The breeding herd also declined a bit this year. Overall, the outlook is for a \$1 return per hundred-weight this year compared to a \$9 loss last year.

"So still not great for the pork industry, but better," said Brown. "And we anticipate that 2025 will finally be the year that the hog industry breaks out and has some profitability back to it."

USDA reports showed steady prices for poultry Monday.

Addressing the March 14 tornado that caused extensive damage in Randolph and Delaware counties, Brown said such events generally have a localized impact. Such storms can drive area prices down if a particular business is hit.

Another issue could be caused if storage capacity is down because of grain bins being damaged.

"It depends on timing of the year," Brown said. "It depends on the damage that's done. But a lot of times it's very localized impact rather than national."



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The Graphic Printing Company/Louise Ronald

Wyatt St. John, a program technician with the Delaware County FSA, sits behind some of the paperwork in his desk. "We like the color orange," said his coworker Sissy Adkins. "We're swimming in it."

FSA offers assistance with various programs

Most employees at local offices have a background in agriculture

By LOUISE RONALD
The Graphic Printing Company

Some who work in agriculture do so from behind a desk. Some work for the Farm Service Agency, which links local producers with insurance, loan, incentive and other support programs offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. FSA has regional offices in Jay, Randolph and Delaware counties. (The Muncie office covers Blackford County.) Of the dozen individuals who work in those offices, most grew up on farms or had grandparents or other relatives with farms. Some were active in 4-H or FFA. Only one had no childhood connection with agriculture at all.

"I had no farming background," said Sissy Adkins of Marion, a program technician with the FSA (in the Muncie office since August 2023). "I have a whole new appreciation for the American farmer... They know what they're doing." Adkins has seen changes in the agency over the past decade. "When I started, there was more of a male presence," she said. Eleven of the 12 area FSA employees are women. Muncie's Wyatt St. John, who lives in New Castle, is the only man. That doesn't bother St. John. "I don't really care," he said. "It's just where I work." St. John's own family was involved in construction, but he had relatives who farmed. "I always wanted to be in farming, I just didn't know how to get into it," he said. "I don't have the money to do that and I didn't marry a farmer's daughter." At Grace College in Warsaw, St. John became interested in the business side of agriculture, which led to his joining the FSA immediately after graduation. See FSA page 7B

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The Graphic Printing Company/Louis Ronald

The team from the Jay County FSA office in Portland. Pictured from left are Sherri Bost, Natasha Loesch, Jamie Kirkpatrick and Kristie Neighbors.

FSA ...

Continued from page 6B
“I always imagined being more manual in my work,” he said. “I would love to be out in the field more. I’m just wired that way. I like to be outside and getting my boots dirty and stuff like that. You don’t really get that side of it (in the desk job), but you get to build relationships with people who do.”

St. John hasn’t given up on his dream, though. He and his wife hope to have a hobby farm later on.

It seems that working at the FSA — or any of a number of government agencies dealing with farms and producers — is one way to stay involved in agriculture when one’s dream turns out to be unrealistic.

Kendra Muhlenkamp of rural Portland works in the Randolph County office. Her dream?

“Actually staying home on the farm was what I really kind of hoped,” she said, “but nowadays, it’s really hard to be a one-income family, so doing something farm-related, at least, gives you that chance to still be doing farm stuff.”

Her Randolph County colleague Alyssa Hartley, also of rural Portland, grew up with horses and dreamed of making it big in the horse industry someday.

“I knew my dream wasn’t something that could be reality,” she said. There’s “just not a whole lot of opportunity.”

Hartley went to Wilmington College to study ag education, but switched to ag business when she realized funding was drying up for agriculture classes in public schools. She worked a number of jobs before joining FSA.

She finds it rewarding to connect farmers with USDA programs. “Realizing how much support they have and letting them know they have that” is, to her, the best part of the job.

“It’s not easy being a farmer nowadays,” she said. She likes being able to tell them “they don’t have to do it all themselves.”

Kristie Neighbors, a program technician in the Jay County FSA, also studied ag education and taught agriculture and biology at Randolph Southern in Lynn for a short time.

“It wasn’t the best fit for me,” she said.

She was working in banking and wondering what to do next when she heard about the FSA job from Natasha Loesch, who works with her now in the Portland office. (They attended Purdue University together.)

“I honestly didn’t know (the FSA) existed,” Neighbors said. “I didn’t even know this was a career path available to me. ... I was unsure (of the job) because I didn’t know what they did. ... Now, I’m always thankful that (she told me about it) because I love this job.”

Loesch herself had to search FSA on the internet when she first heard about it from her husband’s aunt, who works for the Bartholomew County agency. Loesch, who lives near Union City, was working on a hog farm at the time and does not regret the shift to desk work five years ago.

“I think the impression from the outside is (the FSA) is just office work,” said Abigail Armentrout, executive director of the Delaware County FSA.

Armentrout grew up on a dairy farm in Michigan. She was 20 years old when her father sold his cows.

“I thought my days of being involved in agriculture in any way were done,” she said.

She studied elementary education at Michigan State, but was disappointed with the politics and funding issues in public schools. See FSA page 8B

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Tractor accidents, grain entrapment and injuries from ornery livestock are just some of the dangers agricultural workers face every day. In fact, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health says agriculture is one of the most hazardous industries in the United States.

Farms are dangerous places, and while carelessness can and does contribute to many incidents, accidents also take place during routine, seemingly safe activities. These farm safety guidelines can help lower the risk of injuries.

- **Know farm equipment.** Read and follow all instructions in the equipment operation manuals. In addition, attend local farm safety workshops to learn more about specific equipment and products.

- **Conduct routine safety checks.** Look around buildings and grounds for obvious hazards, such as fire hazards and hazardous materials, including farm chemicals that are not stored correctly.

- **Practice cleanliness.** Maintain clean and neat work areas with tools stored properly and out of the way after use.

- **Be mindful of your clothing and hair.** Many accidents involve a power take-off system, or PTO, which is a common component of large rotary mowers, tractors and forage choppers. Clothing can easily get caught in an engaged but unguarded PTO stub. It’s easy for laces or coveralls to become wrapped around a spinning stub shaft. The PTO driveline and other protrusion points also can be dangerous if people do not pay attention.

- **Use rollover protection structures.** ROPS can be used on tractors and other equipment to prevent injuries. In addition, wear seat belts and employ other safety equipment as advised.

- **Avoid extra passengers.** It can be tempting to take the kids for a spin, but do not allow additional passengers to ride on agricultural equipment.

- **Exercise caution when handling chemicals.** Take extra precautions when handling any chemicals, including pesticides.

- **Wear protective gear.** Wear appropriate gear and equipment as outlined by NIOSH or the Mine Safety and Health Administration. Make sure the skin, feet, ears, eyes, and hands are protected at all times.

- **Employ lock out/tag out control.** This is a process where one can work on equipment only after every energy source has been controlled, such as hydraulic, pneumatic, mechanical, and electrical, according to Rural Mutual Insurance Company. Turning off equipment and using certain controls or locks on devices can prevent equipment from restarting before it is safe to do so.

Farm safety should be a priority for owners, their families and employees so that agricultural injuries can be reduced.

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FSA ...

Continued from page 7B
While looking for a different career, she visited her father, by that time an executive director of a county FSA, and thought, "I could be happy doing what he does." She joined the agency's management training program in 2015 and loves her job.

"I love interacting with farmers and helping them," she said. Armentrout's direct jump into management was unusual.

Jay County FSA executive director Jamie Kirkpatrick got an internship with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, an agency that works closely with FSA, in Muncie during her senior year at Ball State University. When she graduated, Kirkpatrick got a summer job with another county agency after graduation, then a temporary position opened with FSA.

"That's how I began my career ... and I was there for 22 years," she said.

She's been in charge of the Portland office since October 2023.

Sherri Bost of the Portland office also got her start through an internship. A Jay County resident, she was studying accounting at Ivy Tech Community College in Muncie and needed to do a field study at any kind of office — it just had to involve some kind of accounting. The company would not be charged for her services. Her aunt suggested Bost call a woman she knew at the FSA.

Of course, Bost said with a laugh, a government agency is always ready to accept someone who will work for free. That led to some temp hours, then a job in the Anderson office. After a year, Bost joined the Jay County FSA, where she has worked for 37 years.



Photo provided

The Randolph County FSA team was joined by Julia Wickard, executive director of the Indiana Farmers Service Agency on the first day of cleanup after the recent tornado. Pictured from left are Alyssa Hartley, Kendra Muhlenkamp, Sierrah Love, Wickard, and Kaitlyn Spencer. They delivered free community meals and helped clear debris from the storm.

Randolph County FSA executive director Sierrah Love encourages high school and college students to explore internship opportunities.

"Don't count those things out," she said. "It's a way to get your foot in the door. You might love it. You might hate it. Nobody knows until they try."

Love herself will mark four years with the Winchester office in August.

"I made a goal when I first started," she said.

She told the previous executive director, "I want to be in your chair by the time I'm 25."

She's now 25 and has been in the position for a year.

Love grew up on a Randolph County farm. While a student at Purdue, she knew she wanted to do "something that could provide a service, that I could help somebody else with. What that looked like, I wasn't really sure."

She said the opportunity to continue building

relationships with producers and the community is "rewarding beyond words."

Program technician Kaitlyn Spencer joined the Winchester office in March. After studying animal science production at Purdue, she planned to do dairy work but ended up in the swine industry. When she became pregnant, she decided it was time to leave the hog barn.

Spencer has only been with the agency a short

time, but she's happy so far.

"I've always wanted to give back to others," she said. "Helping animals was always a big thing for me. Now, being able to help people fulfills that need even more."

Most of the eleven FSA employees profiled here (one Delaware County program technician was unavailable for an interview) went to college, but only a high school degree is required.

"You can start at the

bottom and work your way to the top if you're dedicated and motivated," Kirkpatrick said. "That's something you don't see very often."

As for the image of the job, the paperwork can't be denied.

"With any program, there's a lot of rules and a lot of paperwork. Nobody likes paperwork," said Neighbors. "Sometimes (the producers) come in a little grumpy, but we always make sure that they leave happy."

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