

Career profile: This farmer is a teacher and a historian, too



Todd Price, director of Historic Wagner Farm in Glenview, Ill., says growing up on a farm taught him lessons about loyalty, accountability and practicality. (Marco Buscaglia/Tribune Content Agency)

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CareerBuilder

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Clad in a pair of jeans, a plaid shirt and a baseball cap, Todd Price does not look like your average museum director, a fact he's quick to acknowledge. "Yeah, it's not a shirt-and-tie atmosphere," says Price, the director of Historic Wagner Farm, located at Lake Avenue and Wagner Road in Glenview, Ill.

Price is also quick to point out that Historic Wagner Farm itself, which is owned by the Glenview Park District, is more than a historic site. "We're a working farm," he says. "We embrace the museum aspect of who we are because we want to do things that teach people what it was like to run a family farm, but we're on the working-farm side of the equation. People can come here and learn because they see us working the farm every day."

Price, who has been with Wagner for 16 years, says he and his staff often worry about non-museum issues, like whether or not it's going to rain. "There are weeks we really need it for our crops," he says. "If you're a museum, you're not really concerned too much about the weather."

Still, Price knows he's not feeling the pressures of the typical American farmer -- such as his brother, who runs the family farm in Clarinda, Iowa, where Price grew up, the same farm that belonged to his grandparents' grandparents. "His livelihood depends on the weather. If Mother Nature deals him a bad hand, that's how it goes," Price says. "None of the people who work here are paid on what's produced on the farm. We're paid on teaching the experience."

Price reflects on his parents and the family farm back in the challenging 1970s. "That was a really tough time for farmers," Price says, citing high interest rates and the U.S. grain embargo on the Soviet Union. "People who had farms in their families for forever lost them for no reason of their own doing. Both my mom and dad taught full-time during the day and were full-time farmers with livestock and crops. They put everything they had into that farm."

Price says growing up on a farm taught him lessons about loyalty, accountability and practicality. "If a typical summer day for some people was getting up and getting on your bike and going to the pool, mine was getting up and walking beans, which is walking the crops and picking out weeds," Price says. "Those kinds of jobs helped the family. It wasn't considered above and beyond. It's just what was expected. That's how we grew up."

The real thing

Price readily shares the fruits of his long experience at Wagner Farm and beyond. The farm sells -- and its staff explains -- its food at the Glenview Farmers Market each Sunday from June through October. "We're going to tell you how it was raised and we're going to tell you a little bit of the history," he says. "We want you to meet your farmers and form a relationship with them. We want you to know Augie, who's selling you blueberries from his farm in Michigan. We want people to ask how the crops are doing this year. We want them to know how and where they're getting their food."

Price says it's important that Wagner focuses on information and relationships but he doesn't shy away from the farm's primary purpose: food. "Whether it's meat or vegetables, we focus on providing food," he says. "This has been a functioning farm since the 1830s. None of it is made up. And every animal is here for a reason."

As we walk past the barn, Price gestures to the door. "We have a barn cat in there and she has a job to do," he says. "No one gets a free ride."

That authenticity makes a big difference with visitors. "People aren't just reading something off a wall or looking at a display behind glass," Price says. "I tell the kids who come see us that they're going to do the same chores the Wagners did. I tell them they're going to feed the chickens, milk the cows and then they're going to go to the farmhouse and make their own meal."

Food for thought

Price acknowledges that the farm's functioning status on 18 acres of land nestled among homes, stores and schools is occasionally controversial. "We have protesters because we teach something that people consider controversial -- where your food comes from -- and it's taught by a publicly funded farm that has been approved by the people of Glenview," says Price.

Wagner will raise 18 sheep and 14 pigs for market this year. "We don't slaughter them here, but we can't deny what's going to happen to them. We're not a petting zoo. We're a working farm," he says. "American agriculture is at this weird crossroads where we don't have the manpower and we can't get the help, so we have to rely on technology and science. I welcome the questions. I want to help inform people. That's important to me, and it's part of the mission of this farm."

Price also places a priority on providing farm food to others. He set up a program that allows Illinois residents on the state's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to double the fresh fruits and vegetables they purchase, thanks to community donations and assistance from Glenview State Bank. "We want this to be for everyone, not just the people who can afford it," Price says. "This was our community standing up and donating to a common cause. This is people saying we care about Glenview and we care about our surrounding communities."

An unexpected path

Before coming to Wagner, Price worked at the Living History Farms in Urbandale, Iowa, which highlighted Iowa's agricultural history, and The Farm at Prophetstown in Battle Ground, Ind., which replicated the working farms of the 1920s. Price says both jobs were unexpected. "I went to school to be a teacher. I wanted to get as far away from a farm as possible," he says. But after successful stints at both museums, Wagner realized he wanted to run a farm in an urban setting.

"Look at where we are. This isn't a farm setting. We're right by the expressway and there are cars driving by on Lake Avenue all day. And if you stand on top of our barn, you can see the Sears Tower. That's pretty amazing. This is exactly what I wanted," he says. "When I interviewed for the job, this place was so raw, like it was just waiting for something to happen."

That "something" was Price, a series of new programs, increased accessibility to the farm, a supportive park district and a staff Price says is filled with "wonderful, creative people who are

extremely dedicated to the work they do." In 2002, Price's first year, 4,800 people visited Wagner. Today, the farm averages 130,000 visitors a year.

In addition to interactive exhibits, the farm offers opportunities for more hands-on farming experience, including a 4-H Club, drawing children mostly from surrounding suburbs. "It's pretty incredible," says Price. "These kids get a first-hand look at farming. A lot of them will purchase a pig or sheep and raise it here. They come here to feed it, get it some exercise. They're really into it. And they know at the end of the summer, their animal will go to market, where they'll sell it and receive the money. It's real-world experience."

As we walk through the farm, we run into one of Wagner's 4-H students, a boy from the North Shore who is taking his sheep out for a walk. Price acknowledges that this isn't necessarily how family farms work. "I can't say we were always taking our pigs and sheep for a nice stroll, but how cool is that that these kids get to experience that?"

Solace in the suburbs

Despite all the hustle and bustle of a working farm, Price says Wagner isn't just for the active user. In fact, he says there are opportunities for the passive user as well, pointing out the chairs in front of the barn. "Last night I left here a little bit after seven and all of the chairs were totally filled. There were people on blankets having picnics, people who just want to be on a farm, even if they can see cars going by on Lake Avenue," he says. "People like it here because this is a farm. Take a deep breath. You can't deny that you're on a farm."

Although he's tasked with various administrative duties, Price says he always tries to find time to work the farm itself, a role I can tell he values as he explains some of his small but significant activities. "When it's time to make hay, you go out and cut the legumes and you close your eyes and roll them between your fingers to see if it's the right moisture level. You get on your knees and dig in the soil to see if it's moist. You rub it on your hands and you smell it," he says. "It's the land. You have this deep relationship with the land. On a farm, the land is a member of your family."

Given his many roles -- fundraiser, educator, administrator and more -- I ask Price if he considers himself a farmer. He stops for a moment and looks down at his hands for what I thought was a moment of indecision but turned out merely to be a pause. I'm not sure what he sees in those hands -- those early mornings running beans back in Clarinda, the legacy of more than 150 years in family farming, his contributions to furthering an understanding of farming in three states -- but it's only a few seconds before he looks up. "You know, my brother and I laugh sometimes about the differences in what we do. When his crops are ready, he'll be up all night harvesting them. When our crops are ready, I'm the guy who sees a family walking around the farm and says, 'Hey, come here. Watch what

I'm about to do. I grew up a teacher, I grew up a historian, and I grew up a farmer. All of those pieces are right here," he says, pointing to his chest. "Yes, I'm a farmer. Absolutely."

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