

# Scaling Up 2023: High Country Food Hub Business Meeting & Keynote Address

January 30, 2023

## Welcome by Ambrook Financial

On Monday, January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Blue Ridge Women In Agriculture (BRWIA) held “Scaling Up 2023 for over 100 regional producers! The annual producer meeting was kicked off with a welcome by Maika and Atticus from ambrook, sponsor of the Scaling Up event.

**Ambrook Financial** provides financial management software for farms. This mission is to make sustainability profitable for agriculture. ambrook provides free resources on their website including:

- a [Funding Library](#) - a list of grant and cost share opportunities.
- [Project resource recommendations](#)
- [Research](#)

Key themes Maika and Atticus touched on included the importance of:

- **Resilience** - of community, food systems, familial, financial etc...
- **Informed producer decision-making** by using information to more effectively manage and grow their business. Through their software, Ambrook strives to help producers:
  - Cut down on the time needed to do bookkeeping for tax purposes.
  - Use insights from the data producers have put into the software to better inform their decisions looking forward.
- Ambrook did a shout out to one of their first customers, “Against the Grain”, that has used the software to grow their business with insight.

## BRWIA 2022 Highlights & 2023 Changes, and Blue Ridge Collaborative Regional Alliance For Farmer Training (CRAFT) Winter Workshop Series

BRWIA management provided slides of progress with 2022 initiatives and goals for 2023.

### Key highlights from the BRWIA Recap and Goals for 2023:

**Welcome** Liz Whiteman- Executive Director

- Given the COVID pandemic, the last time BRWIA had an in person annual meeting with producers was 3 years ago.
- 2023 producer-focused workshop include (link)
- Overview of BRWIA and their initiatives. Founded 20 years ago (happy anniversary!)

### Goals:

- Increase demand for local food
- Ensure equitable access to high quality local food
- Provide producers the support they need

### 2022 Growth & Success – Taylor Cambell, Food Hub Manager

- Our weekly sales average for 2022 is almost \$2400 more than in 2021.
- 11 new customers added each week on average
- Circulated over \$700,000 back in to community

- Producers from 18 counties
- Over 5,000 products
- 2.8 million in sales, 2.3 back to producers
- *Food Hub isn't yet breaking even, trying to address*
- Different sources of funding: grants, LocalFAM,

### **Double Up Food Bucks Program**-Liz Whiteman

Doubles value of EBT

- \$81,522.15 in sales
- 53 new DUFEB/EBT customers in 2022

### **Satellite Program** – Katie Cavert Ferrell, Community Relations Manager

- Pick up Locations include (besides Boone Food Hub):
  - Deep Gap
  - West Jefferson
  - Banner Elk
  - Blowing Rock
  - The Pineola Inn
- *Over \$181,000 in sales facilitated through over 2000 orders through satellite locations!*

### **Local Food As Medicine** (LocalFAM)-Jess McClelland, Producer Programs Coordinator

- 27,955 lbs
- Funding provided by Impact Health and FarmsSHARE, among others
- \$1500 a week to spend on produce, May-September 2022
- *New funding requirements for participating in LocalFAM include: Food Safety Plan*
- *Produce AND meat and/or eggs: food Safety Plan, Allergen control program for pack, hold and transport*
- *Eggs: Allergen control program for pack, hold, and transport*

### **Local Food Connect** – Taylor Campbell, Food Hub Manager

- **New App** – extension of the website – “Local Food Connect” – improved interface, all existing info moves auto to the app

**ACTION:** Producers – please try out the new Local Food Connect app. There are video links in email Taylor sent out or she invites you to come to the Food Hub to sit with BRWIA members to walk through use of the application.

### **Food Hub Advisory Committee**

- **ACTION:** Producers, please submit your nominations for producer names to represent on the Advisory Committee. Names should be submitted to Taylor Campbell. She can also provide more details about this role and time commitment.

### **Rate changes for 2023**

- Almost at capacity for freezer storage.

- ACTION Producers, please reach out if you need more space and will put you on the wait list for space.

### Opportunities to Connect with Customers

- Wednesday tabling at the Food Hub [\(sign up link\)](#)
- King Street Farmers Market [\(application available in February\)](#)

### New Team Members-Liz Whiteman, Executive director

- Welcome to Courtney Wheeler as Outreach and Events Coordinator
- Courtney oversees social media, newsletter.
- ACTION: Producers, please contact Courtney If anything you want her to include [courtneyw@brwia.org](mailto:courtneyw@brwia.org)
- ACTION: Producers please tag BRWIA in your posts by using **BRWIA @highcountryfoodhub**

### Plans for the Future:

- Scaling up **LocalFAM program** – more recipients, food pantries, more funding for producers
- Betsy Lawson Willis Female Farmer Education Scholarship program in Spring 2023
- On-farm individual producer meetings
- 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration including farm to plate dinners, parties and more!

## Keynote: Clarenda “Farmer Cee” Stanley, Green Heffa Farms

The keynote address for the meeting was given by “Farmer Cee”, owner and operator of [Green Heffa Farms](#). Through her insightful and entertaining presentation, Farmer Cee shared valuable guidance for building and branding your business.

[More about Farmer Cee](#), her heritage and approach to farming:

- Green Heffa is a certified B Corporation and first with black woman CEO
- Grew up on maternal grandmother’s farm - 7th generation farming, 5th generation farming *without force*. From blackbelt region of Alabama known for rich black soil and larger areas in history of black landowners and farmers.
- Student to indigenous farming. Wanted to surround herself by what appreciates (land)
- Background in environmental fundraising, operating national campaigns. Traveled all over the world speaking with extremely wealthy people with important roles in the world running companies, making decisions. Many were interested in agriculture.
- Wanted to know more to help her help others. Learned money doesn’t buy happiness, nor does it equate to values (lack of money doesn’t necessarily either)

### Farmer Cee’s take on her Farm and Business

- Wanted my farm to be a happy place – medicinal plants and herbs, didn’t want to always be struggling to grow the way I wanted to grow. Didn’t want to owe anyone.
  - **Key point:** “we grow slow so we don’t owe”!
- **Farmer Cee’s 4 E’s as principles for her farm business:**

- Economic empowerment
- Environmental consciousness
- Equity
- Education

As stated on the Green Heffa website *“We believe we have a responsibility to our family, our community, and to our fellow Earth neighbors.”*

- **Farmer Cee shared that:**

- a lot of people don't appreciate farmers for being entrepreneurs, business people
- she didn't want to justify who she was or chase the “wrong customers”
- she “doesn't sugar coat because diabetes of the spirit is a real condition!”

- **Farmer Cees 5V's for deciding how to grow her business and brand**

1. Be clear on **Vision** for what want to create –

- Vision is “what we want to create” – not variable, foundation.
- There are tradeoffs to consider for the vision of your business - whether for size of business, number of employees, providing care for employees etc...
- Farmer Cee has 3 employees because she can create the environment conducive to growth.

2. **Values** reflected in profitability goals –

- Need to ask what is important to you, be truthful with yourself!
  - Farmer Cee shared for her is, as example, her vacations. She wants to be able to order what she wants, have hot water, some creature comforts...
- Values may sound alike but in practice they can be very different, they develop credibility with customers.
- **Tip:** Farmer Cee creates vision boards for her farm every year.
- Growing up on a farm is different than building a farm – building one you understand all the operational workings, considerations.

3. Invest in your **Visuals** –

- Your visuals reflect your “story”.
- Farmer Cee shared that “Green Heffa” doesn't produce beef but people assume they do given name and graphic of cow.
- How do you convey who and what you are to your customer base?
  - Farmer Cee sells directly to consumer – that is the biggest portion of her customer base but she also sells to Weaver Street markets, online nationally through Thrive market. Also has several other wholesale customers.

- **Key Idea:** make your look distinctive by focusing on whose eye you are trying to attract.
    - Everything needs to align through marketing, social media, all touchpoints that reach consumer. This includes in professional photography, current photographs. Tell a story with every post and ensure alignment. This should include rules for how you use logo, always same colors.
    - **Suggested Action:** have several farms come together share cost of getting in a professional photographer for a day.
4. **Voice** and visuals should match up.
- **Farmer Cee emphasized that “HOW you are talking is secondary to WHO you are talking to”**
    - Don’t have to use latest lingo or emojis or sound all “marketey”.
  - **Key point:** what gets you heard is being authentic to your voice and what you’ve put out as your visuals.
  - **Cee shared the story of the “Green Heffa” name and importance to her and her brand:**
    - Cee was raised on maternal grandmother’s farm. Her grandmother’s name was “Charity”. While a good Christian woman, every now she’d get a little mad. Her meanest insult was “ol’ mean heffa”! That was as strong as it got! 😊
    - Cee’s farm name is a spin on that but instead of “mean heffa”, she chose “Green Heffa” to spread “green” instead of “mean”.
    - Cee has a tub in the middle of one of her farm fields – this is in alignment with her voice. Part of her voice is being organic, authentic, bold (flavors, herbs use in blends), functional, they taste good!
    - She ensures Green Heffa teas are delicious! Customers “don’t want to drink something that tastes like “tree urine”!”
    - When Farmer Cee speaks about brand and talks with customers, she always makes sure customers hear the *same* voice because she is building a rapport, building credibility. Cee wants Green Heffa to be the customer’s only herbal tea – “take all the space in your cabinet - “I got you”!”
  - **Key Point** – “If you haven’t invested time in knowing your customer, they are not going to see you or hear you. Living in our society we are bombarded every day and being programmed to only take in small bits of information – 7 sec videos on social media. So what you put out has to be memorable!”
5. **Validity** – *if you do the V’s above right, the validity will be shown in the data* – the results – your revenues!
- **Famer Cee emphasized the importance of understanding your data:**
    - Is your audience increasing,
    - Is your email subscriber list growing. (Farmer Cee shared that she makes way more money sending email than posting on social media. “If social

media shuts down websites, you have no right to the audience. The email list instead is YOURS.

- **Key Point:** *Farmer Cee studies her data* – who is retained, who is a repeat customer. She pays attention to how many units are sold of certain products – what is moving. Which products are more profitable, who is buying what, understand when they are most likely to purchase e.g. when to send email to get maximum response rate. For example, she knows to time for certain mid-morning time-period after consumer gets settled in at work.
- **Tip:** “You should be able to say in one sentence what makes your farm product different than another”. Critical to invest strategy into marketing.

### **In the Audience Q&A, Farmer Cee shared more great tips for business planning!**

1. **Question** – Do you sell the same for a direct product as your wholesale consumer does?  
**Answer.** Yes. Though wholesale customers may put it on sale at times. Farmer Cee has an MSRP – means won’t undercut wholesale customers.
2. **Question** (Holly) – What was your biggest challenge as a farmer, how did you move through it?  
**Answer – Farmer Cee shared:**
  - “not sure if it was melanin or estrogen’. She continued by sharing “Being a single black woman farmer in the south and growing medicinal plants and herbs....that is a lot of “hmmm” for a lot of people.
  - Aside from that, growing at a pace that can manage which has resulted in turning down a lot of opportunities because that would have incurred debt. With debt comes stress – not the life she wants to live.
  - Being able to find resources to scale up. Helps that she is a professional fundraiser. Farmer Cee takes advantage of private and public grants, and corporate partnerships (e.g. with Gaia herbs, Patagonia workwear).
  - Trying to grow a brand that doesn’t require her to sell her soul – sometimes has been offered “golden” (on surface) opportunities that would compromise some part of herself to make happen.
3. **Question** (Madeline, Lavender House) – How do you do good ecommerce and balance time?  
**Answer – Farmer Cee shared:**
  - that she got into e-commerce because she has some social anxiety. She also knew that she could make a lot more money if she could create a channel to broaden audience that didn’t require her to physically be somewhere to earn money.
  - Her farm’s first product was a digital product – a course she created. Had successfully gotten a hemp license. Her mother left her a 20 acre tree farm. Has another product focused on fundraising for farmers e.g. how to acquire gov. grants.
  - First *physical* product launched in Feb ’20 – during COVID people were looking for plant medicine. Was selling direct to the consumer.
  - She learned when she got into the wholesale space about UPC codes and EDI systems for electronic payment, how to package on the pallet. Was a tremendous learning curve.

- Wouldn't have been able to do without team members to focus on the production side. 60% time as CEO, 40% on production. 100% being a farmer. First product didn't grow one plant that she sold.
- Demand for product exceeds production – she buys from other farmers that meet standards she needs.
- Doesn't go for balance but instead for harmony. There are days when she is outside all day either because it is “all hands-on deck” or because she doesn't want to be on the phone or answering emails. She gives herself that grace. If she isn't happy growing medicinal plants, something is out of balance. She spends time where needed e.g. on the administrative side. Informative websites are key in e-commerce because the consumer goes there – algorithms help you and send people to your website.

4. **Question** (Pete F.A.R.M. café) – What is your advice for someone learning the ropes of grant-writing and fundraising?

**Answer** –Farmer Cee shared:

- **TIP:** Read the grant closely as “they tell you exactly what they want. Read what their objective for their grant is and recycle that language to your objective. Make sure you understand what their top priorities are.
- **TIP:** Look at different types of grants that address aspects of your business. When you look at your operation, there are a lot of fundables. You can go after grants for: water stewardship, energy, technology, education.... Look at entrepreneur grants, grants in a certain region or certain target customer. Don't limit yourself to the obvious. Look at grants specific to your industry but also related. E.g. if in poultry farming, might also look at grants for animal rights, cage free production, feed – look outside of the box. Use any identity you have e.g. grants specifically for women business owners.
- **TIP:** Plan ahead to know and get ahead of the grant schedule.
- Most grants are annual and come around the same time each year. If you can get ahead of it – before grant has opened – you can take to program officers, run ideas by people. Don't wait until grant open to start formulating ideas. Plan accordingly.
- Now is a wonderful time to start VAPG (value add producer grants), beginning farmer grants are coming up. Conservation innovation grant (CIG) just ended. Sam.gov. register in these two sites. Go after federal, state, county. Take advantage of NRCS resources – every plan you are eligible for. CPA plans. (conservation).