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Vanessa Lu

Karen Hutchinson loves food.

She hands over a Caledon-grown head of garlic and describes its virtues, notably its flavourful taste. She loves the countryside and the riches of the land.

But she worries about family farms disappearing when it's hard to make a living and the land is more valuable for development.

For the 49-year-old Hutchinson, it's been a roundabout route.

"When I was younger, all I wanted to do was go to the city and work in the city," she said.

She followed her dreams, studying urban planning at the University of Waterloo before heading off to Toronto. She lived in many neighbourhoods from Riverdale to the Annex before settling in Etobicoke, where she and her husband, Rich Miller, bought their first house.

Though she liked life in the city, she was eventually drawn back to the land where her family has farmed for three generations. Now she is



Karen Hutchinson, a champion of the local food scene in Caledon, enjoys raising chickens and children, including Kate, 10.

Glenn Lowson for the Toronto Star/Glenn Lowson for the Toronto Star

trying to become the fourth.

“I think maybe you have to go away to appreciate things,” she said sitting at a picnic table on a sunny spring afternoon behind the Inglewood General Store. “I have more of an urban perspective. Urban and rural have so much to share, and food is the logical place.”

An avid viewer of the cooking shows on the Food Network when her kids were babies, Hutchinson became increasingly interested in how food got from the farm to the kitchen.

And that’s become her focus, because what we eat affects everything from the environment to development and even the viability of the family farm.

She and her husband, an IT specialist, and their children Katie, 10, and Alex, 14, live at Sheffield Farms, which sits on 100 acres.

Her father and uncle once ran a dairy farm, but now they’re growing hay as a crop and considering what to add next, possibly heritage wheat. They have a few chickens and may add other animals. A farm market is another possibility.

“We need to make sure farming is viable for any city kid, any suburban kid, any country kid,” Hutchinson said. “We need viable family farms, where families can earn a decent income from just the farm operation.”

As executive director of the Caledon Countryside Alliance, she is trying to do that just — and she believes the timing is right as the “eat local” movement grows. Her group has organized special dinner menus in restaurants featuring Caledon-grown food. It also helps bring shopkeepers and restaurant owners together with local farmers.

Hutchinson, along with partner Jennifer Clark of Eat Local Caledon, is doing her part, from mapping out farms where people can buy locally raised meats and produce to organizing school workshops that include planting a garden and cooking.

She also came up with the Caledon Crunch — an event in which 4,000 schoolchildren at seven schools all munched on a locally grown apple at the same time last September.

“We’re one generation removed from cooking skills. Cooking is not reheating in the microwave,” Hutchinson said, explaining why it is so important to teach kids about where food comes from and how to appreciate it.

Her group also helped started two farmers’ markets in Inglewood and Bolton. Farmers’ markets can help increase farm income, and committed residents who are willing to pay a fair price can boost the local economy.

With a bluegrass band playing in the background, they organize learning sessions at the market, from how to make to strawberry salsa to the lost art of canning.

“This is not just a job. It’s her passion,” said Clark.

Hutchinson is the first to say she has not singlehandedly brought about changes in Caledon — that has involved many people, from the farmer to the chef and many volunteers in between — but her quiet manner has helped.

“She’s an incredibly humble person who knows how to get things done,” said Caledon Mayor Marolyn Morrison. “Karen has looked at the big picture, but recognized that in order to make a difference in our community we have to bring it down to the grassroots level.”

Beyond making farming a viable career, Hutchinson believes fighting hunger must be a priority.

“I don’t think, in a country like Canada, we should have so many hungry children and families. We need more nutrient-dense foods. People need to have access to healthy food.”

That’s next on her plate.

*Do you know a Dreamer and Doer we should profile? Email us at [vlu@thestar.ca](mailto:vlu@thestar.ca)*

## **Eight ways to make a difference**

**Eat with the seasons – choose food grown close to home**

**Shop local – farmers’ markets, u-picks, farm stands, local shops**

**Cook fresh – reduce consumption of prepared foods**

**Eat more plants – fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, legumes and grains**

**Grow your own – try the 100-yard diet, start with simple herbs**

**Savour the harvest – dry, freeze, can, jam, pickle**

**Choose local alternatives – use honey and maple syrup to sweeten, and local sources for high-emissions foods like meat, dairy and eggs**

**Avoid waste – reduce and re-use leftovers to avoid refrigerator rot**

*Source: Eat Local Caledon*