

Max Delsignore: It's good to have you here for another great community conversation on the Northern New York Community Podcast. I'm your host Max Delsignore. We are fortunate to have Dani Baker with us on this episode. It would be safe to say that much like her current livelihood, her experience in philanthropy has been organic. Dani will share details on her upbringing and professional career, the creation of the agritourism destination on Wellesley island, and the many layers of giving back. But before we visit with Dani, let's take a minute to thank our sponsors, WPBS-DT and the Northern New York Community Foundation. These interviews are made possible because of these two local organizations. Their support has created a platform to feature and share profound stories about why giving back in the North Country really matters. Go online to learn more about each organization. Head to www.wpbstv.org to catch up on the latest programming at WPBS. And then go to www.nnycf.org to see what the Community Foundation has to offer. Okay, let's begin our conversation with Dani Baker. Dani, it's great to have you here.

Dani Baker: It's great to be here.

Max Delsignore: So now you were not a North Country native. Can you tell us just a little bit about where you grew up and a little bit about your family?

Dani Baker: I grew up in Northern Westchester County near New York City. But I am kind of a part-time North Country native because we spent our summers in the in the foothills of the Adirondacks where both my parents worked at a resort hotel. So I grew up there summers and I fell in love with the North Country through that experience. And when I was 27 and finally took a stab at independence, I moved to [Quintin 00:01:43] County and through work ended up in Jefferson County in 93. And here I am.

Max Delsignore: What did you love most about the Adirondacks growing up as a kid and the time you spent here?

Dani Baker: Just spending time outdoors. We had a big white pine forest right near the little cottage where we stayed. There was an ice barn. They cut ice from the lake and, don't tell anybody, but they cut ice from the lake stored it under sawdust in a barn under a lot of shade, like it was on the edge of a ridge. And then they put it in the water for the guests.

Max Delsignore: Really?

Dani Baker: This is before the health police, I think. Yeah, they'd chop it up and it would be in these big glasses of water and iced tea also for the guests. So we would play in there and go berry picking. And then there was a golf course. And across the road on a little ridge, we'd walk on the path and collect golf balls. Did you ever unstring a golf ball?

Max Delsignore: No I never ...

Dani Baker: Well, if the top is cut, you can peel it off. And there's like a rubber band that circles it countless times and then right in the middle is a colored rubber ball with liquid inside. Once you get it going, because there's a lot of cement or glue that holds it, but once you get it going you can kind of do like this. And the rubber ball unwinds by itself.

Max Delsignore: [inaudible 00:03:06] unspool it.

Dani Baker: We'd do that. I don't know. I knew all the good berry patches.

Max Delsignore: So where'd that love of the outdoors come from?

Dani Baker: Well, that's where we were. You didn't want to stay inside, unless it was a rainy day. And even in Northern Westchester, the house that my parents bought when I was about five had just been built on what had been a corn field. And then down the hill there was woods and there was a pond in the woods and all this stuff. And I just wandered around. I was kind of a loner, as a child. So I spent a lot of time just wandering around and observing nature and immersing myself in it.

Max Delsignore: Adventurous. Or curious.

Dani Baker: Curious, yeah. One day, I found some corn in an indentation of a rock and I brought it home. I thought the Indians had left it. I thought that was where they ground their corn and here was the last remnant of it.

Max Delsignore: You had a piece of history there.

Dani Baker: Of course it wasn't, but ...

Max Delsignore: Still that curiosity as a child and being outside. Interesting the connection to the Adirondacks too. Did you know after completing college and your courses of study that, "I need to get back there. This is where I love to be. And I just ... I remember I had such good memories of being up there."

Dani Baker: We moved to White Plains, which was a city for high school. And then I chose, because I was naïve about my own needs, to go to college in a city and then I went to graduate school in a city. And none of that was really good for my mental health. So when I got to the point where I started to ... I wanted to be a happier person, I thought of the mountains, where I was always happy and so I happened to know one person who moved up to the area, so I didn't go up without knowing anyone at all. And so, that's what I decided to do. And it was a good choice. And I've been in the country ever since.

Max Delsignore: Haven't left.

Dani Baker: I'm just a country girl at heart.

Max Delsignore: What do you remember about your parents or family? Or even friends. And the way that they would either give back or help others in any of the communities that you've lived in.

Dani Baker: Well, I remember one incident with my mother. We were in [inaudible 00:05:19] shopping for food or something and we were in a parking lot and there was an old woman digging through a garbage, looking for food. My mother said, "I'll be right back", she went out of the car and she gave the woman some money. So that was a very dramatic memory that I have of helping. My mother was pretty involved with volunteering in the community. We didn't have any money to give away, but she gave a lot of her time. She was a girl scout leader for ... Right up through my high school years. And she was involved with the PTA and she even got involved with politics a little bit. I think it was a school board election and she had a reception at our home for a candidate. She was pretty involved with the community. That was a role model, even though I haven't done as much along those lines as she did.

And then Lou [Sarinoff 00:06:21]. Now this was a friend of ... My mother had befriended his wife-to-be back when they were both single and in their 20s. Anyway. My mother kept touch with Stephanie and then Lou over the years. And he was a self-made, very, very wealthy man, who ended up one of the owners of Time Warner. I don't know how many millions of shares of stock he had, but ... And he was a benefactor for our family. He would give us ... He gave us shares of stock to help us pay for our college. All three of ... Me and my two siblings. Their family would give us their appliances when they had replaced them, which were perfectly new to us, but ... So we had a new refrigerator. When we bought that house, they gave us money to put wall-to-wall carpet in it. I just had that role model of someone who was just a kind, giving person, just because of the friendship. I don't know. That was a real role model for me, I will say.

Max Delsignore: Did any of that experience impact your decision to pursue studies in psychology and the career that you chose?

Dani Baker: I don't know. That's a hard one.

Max Delsignore: Is there a different reason to choose that profession?

Dani Baker: My mother encouraged me. I was going to be ... I was a declared math major when I went to college. And I was pretty good in math. I was placed a year and I didn't have a good experience in linear algebra, which the second semester my freshman year and that's when I decided to do something else. I was taking sociology at the time, which I fell in love with the grand theories. And then my mother encouraged me to do something ... Like I told you, I was kind of a loner, she encouraged me to do something where I'd be working with people. So it was between social work and psychology. And a professor of mine advised me to ... He was an expert on stratification, social stratification and he advised me to go for the higher level degree and also to go to an Ivy League school if I could

because of that whole social status thing. I just followed his advice and that's what happened.

Max Delsignore: First question is the why. So, what led you to come back to the North Country and to see the farm in particular [inaudible 00:08:53]?

Dani Baker: I came back to the North Country in 1978. That's when I moved to Quintin County. And I worked for ... I'll answer your first question now. I worked for an association for retarded children and I was the program manager there, running a day treatment for adults. Developmentally disabled adults. That really taught me how dedicated people who work for not-for-profits are. I mean, you don't make a lot of money. And you work above and beyond the call to serve your clients. And I think that's universally true of not-for-profits. I don't think the people who work there ... They deserve all the credit for how they give of themselves. And so I was part of that for a period of time.

I came out here in 93 and I worked for the prison system. And then I was thinking about retiring and I'm a really active, energetic person. And I was really terrified of having a lot of idle time with no structure, so I thought, "Well, if I have some land, I can maybe get a couple of horses. I could do a little landscaping", so when we came to see the property on the island, the first thing ... Well, first I looked at the topo map and I saw 80 feet of elevation on one the ridges and I thought, "Oh. This is ...". I wanted something with some difference. I didn't want flat. And when we got to the property, right on the road was a rocky ridge and I ran right up it. And it was like being on the top of a foothill of the Adirondacks. And I just fell in love with the land right away. And of course, the house was a money pit. It was an old farmhouse. I was depressed for two years over that, but ...

Max Delsignore: How difficult was it to start the farm?

Dani Baker: I had gardened as a child. My father had a heart attack when we were preschoolers. And so in those days, in the 50's, they told men take it easy for the rest of your life. So he didn't do any physical labor. My mother was a five foot tall, petite woman. I was the oldest and the strongest, so I got to ... New house on a cornfield. So I got to pitch work over all the flower beds and garden and dig all the holes for the landscaping trees. I grew up doing that and I really enjoyed it. And whenever ... In the rest of my adulthood before the farm, whenever I had a plot of land I could something with, I had a small garden or a big garden depending. Anyway, for me to have a vegetable garden was really nothing.

Max Delsignore: It was the added elements that you wanted to build out that took a little bit more time.

Dani Baker: Well then of course we did a garden in the first year. And we sold some stuff. It was like, "Oh. This is easy." So then we doubled the size of it or quadrupled it, I don't even remember, right away and put in more stuff. My partner wanted

animals, so we got the chickens and the cows and the pigs and the goats and the ducks. And we had turkeys at one time. And then I had the seven-year itch and I wanted to do something new. And I took a class about permaculture and I thought, "That's it. I'm going to have an edible forest." So that's my baby currently

Max Delsignore: So 102 acres of approximately for the farm. And your partner, David Belding, right?

Dani Baker: Yep.

Max Delsignore: This has been your venture for ...

Dani Baker: 12 years. In the twelfth season.

Max Delsignore: 12 years. What's the future hold?

Dani Baker: I've got to tell you. This is very relevant to our discussion. I mentioned working for the ARC back in the 80's. And the program was changing under my feet. We were expanding and the state had all of the power to choose clients wanted to have medically impaired people who needed pretty much total care. And this was not what I wanted to do. So I wanted to have people who could walk and talk and go potty by themselves and maybe had behavior problems. I was a psychologist after all. Who you could shape. You could maybe help them become more adjusted to society and actually advance themselves, so it wasn't the population I wanted to work with, so I quit.

I had a little ... It took some time before I was able to decide what I wanted to do next and get another job and I had this mantra at that time. First of all, I was 35 when I quit the job, and at that time I said, "Salary and benefits is no reason to stay, if that's all it is, there's no reason to stay at the job." So I had this mantra that I said: I wanted to become independently wealthy by my own efforts, in my own lifetime, so I can spend all my time doing good work for nothing. That was my mantra. Because for me, the farm is spending all my time doing good work for nothing. And because I saved a lot of money, basically from my employment, I can also do good works monetarily. I'm really proud of myself for basically fulfilling that mantra goal that I set.

Max Delsignore: It's quite amazing.

Dani Baker: And it wasn't in the midst of a hypomanic episode.

Max Delsignore: But nonetheless, here we are.

Dani Baker: That's right.

Max Delsignore: How does the farm, if you could, how does the farm give back to the community?

Dani Baker: One of our ... Part of mission statement is education. And we do a lot of education. We do tours and we have school groups come and college groups. I do workshops. So we're educating the community about how to raise healthy food in a way that's kind to the environment. So we're giving back in that way. And then we're producing a quantity of very healthy food to feed people. Also, we're on an island and we have a windmill. We produce our own power. And actually, right now, we're in the process of ... We're tied to the grid at the moment, but we're going to be doing some additions so that we can actually switch it to off the grid and get power ... Utilize the power we're producing off the grid. If there were some emergency where, let's say, the power grid went down for some reason, whether it was a natural disaster or a man-caused disaster, we could actually pump water for our neighbors, we could keep our food fresh and frozen in our refrigerator and our freezers, so we could share that. I feel like ... I'm planning ... We're planning to be a help to our local community even more, if we had some sort of crisis where that kind of help is needed.

Max Delsignore: And one time, in a previous discussion that we had, you said that there is a hope long-term that maybe either another couple or family might be able to take on what you and David have put together.

Dani Baker: Yes, but we have to become profitable.

Max Delsignore: Before anything.

Dani Baker: Well, if it's going to continue, it has to be profitable because ... Even if someone's well meaning who wants to take it over, if there's not a way to make a living at it, it's not realistic and it won't continue. We can do it. Dave works off the farm and I have a pension. That's how we can afford to be farmers at the moment.

Max Delsignore: To transition, you've also dealt with some personal tragedy in your life. Your son, Marc, committed suicide when he was 22.

Dani Baker: 21.

Max Delsignore: 21, excuse me. You give back to community projects, programs, in many ways to recognize your son.

Dani Baker: That's right.

Max Delsignore: How did losing a son impact your giving?

Dani Baker: Well, I had one child and he's dead. So I have no heirs. There's nobody to leave anything to. I live very frugally. There's nothing I want. And I saved quite a bit of money because I did have a good salary working for the prison and I thought that I would not be eligible for any kind of financial support when my son was ready for college. So I invested money, so that I'd be able to pay for him to go to a private school or four years. Well, when he died. He had flunked out of two or three schools along the way. I didn't have a reason to use that money any more. So that was the nest egg that I decided I was going to give away. I wanted to commemorate his life in some way. For me, having his name on things that ... Mostly structures, that had some meaning to him or in our relationship ... It just has a lot of meaning for me, so that's what I started doing. And one of the first things I did, I think, was fund a timer for the School of a Thousand Islands because he was ... When he was young, he was a race ... He raced. He swam races. That was meaningful. He always cared about the environment. I've helped, now more than one, environmental agency, preserve land or educate people about conservation.

Max Delsignore: Can you share a little bit about the reading room at the Depauville Library too?

Dani Baker: Sure, yeah. We moved to a different town. I was a single parent. And we moved to a different town. My son was entering 2nd grade and I go to the first teacher conference and they told me he was in the lowest reading group. And I knew he was a bright kid. I said, "Why is that ..." Well, he can't read and the other kids can. Well, I said, "Is he in remedial reading?". "No." "Well, put him in remedial reading." So the problem was that the curriculum was different in the old school system and they hadn't prepared kids for the level of reading that was expected in the school he entered for second grade. When Depauville wanted to renovate a room to provide remedial reading to kids, it was a no brainer for me to reach out to support that effort because I know how important it was for my son. I didn't mention ... By the end of the semester, he was in the highest reading group because he just needed that extra help. And I think a lot of kids are in the same boat and they need a facility for this to take place, so I was happy to fund this. It was just really meaningful. Anyway, that's the story about the Depauville library.

Max Delsignore: Can you share a little bit too about some of the projects you mentioned? Whether it to be to honor your son or just good community projects that you see as a resident. What compels you to give to support some of those programs or projects?

Dani Baker: Well, look. I went to write a will many years ago to a lawyer. I said, "I have this kayak I want to give to a girlfriend", and he said, "Dani, if you have something you want to give somebody, don't wait until you die. Give it to them now." And I thought ... I just totally overgeneralized that. I'm self-insured for a nursing home, so I have a certain number that I like to keep in savings, just in case I need to fund that. And beyond that, what am I going to do with it? So I just give it away. Why not? Rather than leave it in my will, that's silly. I'd rather decide where it goes than somebody else. So that's it. I've just been very fortunate in I

manage my own finances and I've been very fortunate to ... I won't call it lucky, but to have been ... I've been successful in my choices, and so I have extra. And I'll read an article in the paper ... Like, okay, the SUNY-ESF was looking for funding for a dormitory on Governor Island so that they could house students on the island that were working there. And of course that was an environmental activity I'm very interested in that. So I called up the development guy and he showed me around. And I thought, "Yeah, I'd like to do that."

The IRLC, Indian River Lakes Conservancy, needed money to produce a 42 acre island in one of the Indian River lakes that was going to be open to the public, but preserved forever. That was a no brainer. So I gave them a house. I had dabbled in some rental real estate, so I gave them ... Actually, I think it was a rental property that I owned. I really didn't want to deal with selling it, so I gave it to them. They sold, they got the money, they bought the island. That worked out.

Max Delsignore: How does it feel to help these organizations? Again, you have this affinity for non profits, as you mentioned before. So to be able to help them move ahead, how does it make you feel to be able to do this?

Dani Baker: Couldn't you tell by my enthusiasm when I just described that?

Max Delsignore: Still I just wanted to make sure I asked the question.

Dani Baker: I don't know. I just feel good if I believe in the project and it's going to be lasting. I like to do things that are going to be lasting because I have no heirs, so I like to do things that are going to persist, hopefully, long into the future.

Max Delsignore: You've said before giving to things that appreciate, right?

Dani Baker: Appreciate, right. Other than depreciate. The hospital, [inaudible 00:22:52] hospital, they have this wonderful program for active service men and women and now veterans to help them with post-traumatic stress disorder. Now, I'm pretty sure that my son had that from an incident that happened when he was in high school where two of his classmates died. I don't think he ever dealt with it. In fact, he's not the only one who killed himself. Another young man who was part of that friendship group killed himself. So I know there's something that went on there that was never resolved. It just ... if I had ... And the art therapy, for me, is such a wonderful medium because these are things ... My son certainly couldn't talk about it. These are things that people can't always talk about, but if they can express it through some other medium, then at least they can get it out in the open and examine it. I was lucky to be able to support that capital project there, particularly the art therapy room that they're going to be building.

That's another example. But there's so many ... I think there's three or four churches that ... One has a roof and one has an air conditioning system and one

has I don't know what that I helped. Again, they're all capital projects. The opera house, when they had their big capital campaign, that was a biggie for me then. After this meeting, I'm going to the SPCA to see how I can help them out.

Max Delsignore: What does the word "philanthropy" mean to you?

Dani Baker: First of all, I always had trouble pronouncing it. It means giving money to worthy causes.

Max Delsignore: Do you feel that you're giving has been organic? I know we've made the tie in the very beginning with the intro, but it seems very fluid when there's certain things that you see, you feel like that's an area where you can support. Will it always be that way too? Do you feel like that's part of your philanthropy and you see something good? Here's a chance to help somebody else?

Dani Baker: I like to be the one to take the initiative. I really don't feel comfortable when people ask me, as a rule. I'd rather discover the need and take the initiative and go to them and say ... Find more about it. And then ... It also has to do with what kinds of funds I have available at the time. When I ... When my checking account starts building up in excess and I start looking for a way to get rid of it.

Max Delsignore: How important ...

Dani Baker: Sorry, that's just the way it is. It's true.

Max Delsignore: No, it's good. It's true.

Dani Baker: When I was ... I gotta tell you. When I was young, my parents taught me to save, but they never taught me to save with a goal. It was saving for saving sake. And I saved half my salary when I was employed, when I had a good salary. I just saved it with no particular objective in mind, other than saving for my son's college, but that was just part of my savings. Now I have a goal for my savings, which is to find worthy causes and help them.

Max Delsignore: Do you think that's an important lesson that the younger generation needs to take note of? If you have an opportunity to help others just by saving a little bit, the impact behind what you're able to give to somebody can be so meaningful.

Dani Baker: If you say so.

Max Delsignore: So how important is some of these great lessons? You said saving is a big key for you and being able to have the resources to do what you're doing now is important to you and to these other communities.

Dani Baker: I want to say something else about that. May I interrupt?

Max Delsignore: Yeah, of course. Go ahead.

Dani Baker: When I was about to retire, I had to see a therapist because I was freaking out, not only about having so much leisure time, but what am I going to do when I can't save money anymore? Honestly. And she said, she's very wise, she said, "Well, Dani, there are other ways to conserve." That helped me accept that, yes, I can find other ways. So I conserve in my farming life and I conserve by helping conservation organizations and I'm sure there are other ways I conserve without actually ... And I save money because I don't live on what I have. And boy, when I hit 70 and I start collecting social security, I have no need for that. Just wait, community. And then when I'm seventy and a half and I have to start taking my RMDs, I have no need for that. I'm just going to have to look further for ways to dispose of it.

Max Delsignore: Well, even with the financial contributions and being able to give back that way, and the farm especially, you do spend a little time volunteering by serving on boards and committees, too. You're involved in [inaudible 00:28:01] ...

Dani Baker: I don't do any committee work there, but ... I was on the board of the IRLC for about six years and I still support them on a voluntary basis. And yes, I'm on a committee for the Opera House. And I'm ... I don't want to be on any more boards. I'm on a committee for the opera house and for the Art Museum in [Clayton 00:28:22]. And actually I just joined the development committee for the Nature Center, so I'm excited about that.

Max Delsignore: Very nice. So, what would your message be to the next generation coming up? What message would you impart about why it's so important to give back to your community and to the place where you live?

Dani Baker: When I was young, I didn't ... I gave back from working for not-for-profit, in that regard. But I didn't ... I wasn't that involved with the community nor did I have funds to be a philanthropist, but since I started doing it, both kinds of things, and the farm as well. The people you meet, the relationships you form when you're doing those kinds of things, are priceless. I think just for that, to get out in the community and volunteer in some fashion, and then getting to help when you're in a position financially to help with any kind of worthy cause. Even helping to raise money, that's very important. And that's more volunteering than donating your time rather than your financial assets. But I think that is so essential for the health of the community.

Max Delsignore: You mentioned before about building a legacy. The farm is part of that equation. What do you hope the legacy of Dani Baker is?

Dani Baker: Well, I certainly hope my edible forest garden will live on as a model for sustainable agriculture, sustainable perennial agriculture. That, I've actually been thinking of that as being my legacy because it's something I created directly. It's alive and it's growing. It's going to grow whether I'm there or not. But it still needs care taking. I hope I can arrange for some way that it will be cared for and it will be ... The lessons from it will continue to be disseminated to the general public. And then as far as the rest goes, if my son's name is here and

there and the elsewhere ... And now I've moved on. My mother's, there's going to be a trail named after my mother. And now it's Cross Island Farms. So I like the business to be recognized into the future. Maybe that will help it survive into the future as well, so.

Max Delsignore: Well, it's really remarkable, the scope of what you've done, particularly here in the North Country. The community certainly so much greater because of your generosity and the time you've put it into it. And I encourage folks to go to Cross Island Farms at Wellesley island to see you because it is pretty remarkable, the site. And to see the edible garden, it's really pretty fantastic. You should be proud of that great work.

Dani Baker: Thank you.

Max Delsignore: And thanks for coming here on the podcast to share your story. We appreciate your time.

Dani Baker: Thank you.

Max Delsignore: We're glad to have you join us for another edition of the Northern New York Community podcast. Remember, each interview can be downloaded for free anytime on your mobile device or listened to online. Type in "Northern New York Community podcast" when you search for us on iTunes, Stitcher, Google Play, or other podcast platforms. Also, check out our website featuring interview highlights, transcripts, photo galleries, and much more. Just go to www.nnycpodcast.com. Alright, thanks again to Dani Baker and thanks to all of you for listening to the Northern New York Community podcast.