

# Founder of the Farmer Veteran Coalition Passes the Pitchfork

*Hands it over to newly appointed Executive Director Jeanette Lombardo*

By Natalie Monroe | July 1, 2020

It started as a vision in a strawberry field overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Three women who stood there alongside Michael O’Gorman had all lost their sons in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Fatalities were high in 2007, and the country was deeply divided. O’Gorman’s idea of starting a campaign to create viable careers and places to heal on our nation’s farms for men and women returning from war felt electric. “It felt positive, optimistic, and healing for all of us,” reflected the lifelong farmer.



In 2008, O’Gorman’s idea sprouted its first roots when he started Farmer Veteran Coalition (FVC) in the back of his pick-up truck.

“Our plan was simple: find a way to help these veterans, and then tell their story,” shares the Executive Director. “The story was told best with a picture. A young man or woman joined the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force or Coast Guard, many deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, some suffered debilitating injuries, and here they are with their pigs or chickens or tomatoes.”

It was a story of courage and resilience, transformation and optimism.

Farmer Veteran Coalition quickly grew into a national nonprofit that mobilizes veterans to feed America. Their mission is rooted in their strong belief that veterans possess the unique skills and character needed to create sustainable food systems and strengthen rural communities. They develop employment and meaningful careers for veterans by fostering the collaboration of the farming and military communities.

“It’s an absolute natural fit,” as O’Gorman puts it.

FVC recognizes that agriculture additionally offers veterans purpose, opportunity, and physical and psychological benefits. For many, this is the difference maker in their civilian re-integration.

A decade later, O’Gorman not only has built the Farmer Veteran Coalition - which itself has grown from a mere nine veteran members its first year to over 20,000 members nationwide today - but has led the charge on pioneering an entire military-to-agriculture movement.

“Michael is a visionary. He first built a worthy organization, then a wonderful community of farmer veterans linked through experiences and camaraderie, and now an entire cultural movement,” remarks Natalie Monroe, Communications Director for FVC. “Our country is better because of him. Tens of thousands of lives have been greatly impacted because of his unrelenting dedication to this project.”

But just as the seasons change and new crops are planted in the spring, so too is the organization setting new roots. After leading FVC since 2008, O’Gorman is handing over his pitchfork to newly appointed Executive Director Jeanette Lombardo.

“I am grateful to the selection team - four of FVC's longest and strongest supporters - for picking Jeanette, unanimously, out of more than 200 candidates they reviewed. It is a real honor to see her enthusiasm for carrying this work forward.”

Gary Matteson, President of the FVC Board of Directors and Senior VP of the Beginning Farmers Programs and Outreach at Farm Credit Council, acknowledges that “Michael has had a long-term vision and plan for success, and that vision is noble, humble, and necessary.” That plan includes this transition.

Raised by an Air Force veteran father, Lombardo grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania, on a family dairy farm. She spent decades in agricultural banking before becoming Co-Founder and Chief Strategic Officer for Global Water Innovations Inc. There, the company created innovative agricultural water solutions. She is also the Principal for California Food and Agribusiness Advocates with the mission of improving policy decisions for farmers in water, land use, crop protection tools, and international trade.

“My selection as Executive Director to the Farmer Veteran Coalition feels very much like fate to me,” Lombardo beams. “This role takes everything that I am and have achieved throughout my life, and utilizes it for the service of the two groups of people I admire the most – our veterans and our farmers and ranchers. I cannot think of any profession that would be more rewarding.”

Excited to leverage FVC’s growing network of partnerships, Lombardo anticipates working relationships with disability support industry specialists, ag employment recruiters, and women and minority agricultural and veteran associations. She is eager to support the expansion of FVC state chapters, and enthusiastic about meeting the organization’s members, partners, and donors.

All of this is right in line with O’Gorman’s beliefs and FVC’s founding principles. Every time a new veteran group popped up, he looked at every one of them not as competition but as potential partners. “We offered to help them. It’s really about supporting all of agriculture and helping all the veterans.”

For O’Gorman, the changing season signals a changing role. The Founder isn’t hanging up his boots completely. His ‘retirement’ allows for a renewed commitment to his passion: vegetable production. His new role as FVC’s Chief Agricultural Officer is a return to the roots he loves so deeply.

“I want to use my forty years of farming experience to help members tap into the demand for local produce and grow their vegetable operations. I will be doing webinars, instructional videos, social media posts and, most importantly, one-on-one consultations with members in vegetable farming.”

As he reflects on what this project has meant to him, O’Gorman sums it up: “Connecting veterans to agriculture was something that no one had tried in modern times. To take that idea and turn it into what FVC is today – with 20,000 members, support across the federal government, and a vast network of partnering groups now helping this effort – has been the *hardest* thing I have done.”

This from the man who built three of the country’s largest organic vegetable farms.

“Getting to work with the men and women of FVC on their own individual journeys to becoming farmers has made it the most rewarding.”

Monroe chimes in with sentiment shared by the entire FVC staff: “Michael absorbs the personal stories so deeply. We look on in admiration, knowing many farmer veterans out there will say ‘there was this one man who believed in me and my ability to change my life.’ Michael will never truly know the number of lives and communities transformed because of his heart; they are far too expansive to tally.”

And Paul Marshall, who manages the Homegrown By Heroes program, builds on that: “Michael has inspired more than 20,000 veterans to follow their new dream of becoming farmers. To have a sense of place in this world, and to serve their communities and country again. He has given veterans a national purpose. A great American mission. We all are a product of his legacy.”