

Connecting with community key for organic farmers

By ERICA QUINLAN

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JASPER, Ind. — Michael Hicks is a pro when it comes to living an organic lifestyle.

He lives and works in a farming village in Jasper and has traveled the country to find his personal philosophy.

For Hicks, the secret to being a successful organic farmer is to have a plan and find ways to connect with the consumer and the community as a whole.

“We’re trying to reclaim our birthright,” said Hicks, spokesman at Living Roots Eco-Village, concerning new, young organic farmers.

“Being a farmer shouldn’t be this hard, but it is ... Every season takes a lot of work. The first few years it’s going to take money, time and work. And the



Michael Hicks

community is a part of the success.”

When it comes to organic,

chemical-free foods, the demand is present. The key is to be there at farmers markets and community events, Hicks said. The more connections, the better.

“When you’re at a farmers market, be interactive and sell your stuff,” Hicks said. “Try to have fun. A frown-y face is not going to sell anything. You have to want to interact, want to connect.”

Those with introverted personalities still can be successful, however they should recognize that someone needs to be representing the farm, he said.

While being a community person is important, it doesn’t mean farmers need to be slick or good talkers. They simply must have the drive to succeed.

Hicks said he believes in holistic management when it comes to farming. That means

everything, from farmer health to soil health, is taken into consideration when management practices are decided.

Farmers are hard on their bodies, Hicks said. Taking care of the mind and body can help growers be less stressed and more ready for physical work.

Hicks said that the future of organic agriculture will involve a mix of old and new farming techniques.

“We’ve lost so much knowledge — about heirloom seeds, about old-time methods, about basic organic farming,” he said. “But it’s also about smart new technology, things like permaculture. There’s new stuff coming. We can take from the old and new and make a better system.

“There are a very small number of young farmers. Hon-

estly, we have to grow farmers. As a society, that’s where we’re at right now.”

Hicks acknowledged that there are many challenges associated with starting a farm. High land costs, insurance and taxes all make for a large investment.

“You have to have a basic understanding of what you have to put in to get anything back out,” Hicks said. “You have to know what you want and how much you need to make to support your family. It takes planning, and finance is the No. 1 thing people struggle with.”

While the challenges are many, the opportunities also are plentiful. Hicks encouraged those interested in gardening and farming to consider taking a leap of faith and to start growing.