

# The Beez Kneez

From Kickstarter to pedal power,  
a zany, successful business.

By M.E.A. McNeil

*Crazy* is the first thought that comes to mind when the women in bee outfits and wacky antennae on their helmets round the corner of a Minneapolis street on their bikes, pulling little trailers full of honey jars. Learning what they are up to makes it plain that they are crazy like a fox.

Kristy Allen and Erin Rupp started The Beez Kneez, LLC,<sup>1</sup> in 2010. Kristy describes the venture as “a humble idea that has succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.” Beyond selling honey, they provide education classes and operate a community beekeeping center. Their infectious enthusiasm has enlivened the larger beekeeping community – even long-time commercial people. Their wild dreaming is far from over; their stated mission is to “revive the hive”. Be careful what you wish for: They have found themselves thrust into bee politics from the city to the state level.

Their paths seem star-crossed: Both were dedicated to bees as models for sustainability, and, as human examples, both were dedicated bicycle commuters. Erin graduated in Environmental Studies and Geology from Macalester College in St. Paul, MN, and became involved with environmental education. She worked with youth farming programs and the Bell Museum of Natural History at the University of Minnesota, where she taught about insects. The curator of education there, Kevin Williams, is a beekeeper who whetted her interest in bees. She took the UM Beekeeping Short Course at the Spivak Lab and began keeping her own hives, which she moved to Foxtail Farm, a teaching CSA in Osseola, WI, about 50 miles northeast of Minneapolis.

Kristy’s journey was more circuitous: She graduated from UM in Global Studies and proceeded to navigate the globe, volunteering on sustainable farms. She spent a year at Heifer International’s ranch in Arkansas working with the vegetable crop, livestock and experiential education.

During that time, she visited her aunt and uncle, Eileen and Ed Menefee, commercial beekeepers with 1000 hives at Bar Bell Bee Ranch, north of Grand Rapids, in Squaw Lake, MN.<sup>2</sup> She describes her first look into a hive as “amazing. I was fascinated with the connection to the food system. That’s what hooked me.”

Soon after, she was off for the mountains of Ecuador, where she managed an organic production and demonstration farm. That is a story in itself: La Finca Urkuwayku is a project of Steven Sherwood, a plant pathologist and research fellow at Wageningen University in The Netherlands, and his wife Miriam.<sup>3</sup> Kristy helped build water catchment basins on their land, which had some beehives on it. She went to meetings of aged local beekeepers “that went on and on forever. They would talk romantically about bees and how they listen to them. They had a few hives, and they were self-sustainable.”

Back in Minneapolis the following summer, she worked with the 100 hives at The Sioux, Mdewakanton, Shakopee Community Wozupi (Dakota language for garden), a five-acre vegetable CSA.

Meanwhile, five years ago, when they had been married just two years, the Menefeas suffered the loss of 90% of their bees. “We had to figure out a way to recover,” said Eileen. Their answer was in the growing local food movement; they began promoting their raw honey at fairs and farmers’ markets, where they found ample opportunity to educate a curious public about all pollinators.

Kristy joined her aunt and uncle to work their bees, and she jumped at the offer to sell their honey at the Minneapolis Farmers' Market. The Menefees had been bottling in their garage, using plastic to hedge against breakage. But Kristy asked for hers in glass jars, and she soon came up with a professionally designed label.

“Our little part in getting her started was just a taste. Kristy was so determined. Our sales of raw and unprocessed honey have gone through the roof -- up 40%, so we don't sell wholesale bulk anymore. We sell directly to grocery stores and to the consumer. We have gotten a bigger building and an extraction room. We still sell half of our honey as processed, because people want to be able to pour it.

“It's a phenomenon. The information put out by people like Kristy and The National Honey Board has been awesome. Everyone who buys honey gets the [NHB] booklet. The University of Minnesota education programs are so important, and people love it.

“My husband has been a beekeeper for 40 years. Every time he looks in a hive he is excited. He's continually fascinated and wants to learn. That's when you find a true beekeeper, and that's what happened to Kristy. She just ran with it.”

Or pedaled with it; as a dedicated cyclist, Kristy painted her bike and dressed in bee black and yellow, attached pipe-cleaner bee antennae to her helmet and began selling honey door to door.

The Menefees had given Kristy her own bees, which she placed at Foxtail Farm. The 16 acre plot, owned by Paul and Chris Burkhouse, provides weekly CSA boxes for over 300 members as well as training for new organic farmers. Erin Rupp had been keeping bees for several years, and the short-lived irony is that she and Kristy had their hives at different entrances to the farm, coming and going to tend their colonies unbeknownst to one another.

When they at last met, they talked bees, as beekeepers do, but their discussion turned to the need for pollinator education. Kristy was already planning to establish urban hives through Beez Kneez, and Erin wanted to create experiential learning by bringing people into hives – something that she could not do at the museum. “Our work is aligned,” said Erin.

Erin and Kristy launched their pilot year in the summer of 2012, originally calling it Community Bees on Bikes. They established hives at host sites at Twin Cities area schools, parks, community gardens and urban farms, reaching over 150 children and adults with their in-hive classes.

“Barriers have fallen,” said Kristy. By the first year, they had 20 hives – half in the city, half in the country. By last year, they had 50 hives, with city hives located in three Minnesota parks, two schools, the Bakken Museum and many urban farms and gardens.<sup>4</sup>

“We want to source honey locally more and more,” said Kristy. “The problem is that the country bees are not making as much honey as the city bees. Of our 30 hives in the country we were able to harvest off only two. Of the 20 hives in the city, all but two had about 40 pounds, even when we left ample for overwintering.” (Cities generally have 10° warmer temperatures and season-long backyard forage, which may contribute to the difference.) Next year, they hope to increase to 75 hives and reach a goal of 100 the following year.

### **Building a Honey House**

What they needed was a headquarters and honey house, so they turned to Kickstarter, an internet crowdfunding platform that midwives innovative projects. The idea is to give donors an opportunity to support a dream that they would like to see manifest. It's an old paradigm: from Michelangelo to Mozart to Mark Twain, creative people have long been funded by large and small contributions from patrons or subscribers. As intriguing the possibility, Kickstarter is not free money: Fewer than half the projects started reach their funding

goals – short of which they get nothing, and the money remains in the pocket of the benefactor manqué. So Kristy and Erin put it out there on the site, busked for backers, and came up with \$40,000.

They went to work renovating a building rented to them by Redesign, a nonprofit dedicated to the development of “healthy, diverse, sustainable neighborhoods”. With many hands, they added a wall, floor, ceiling, hot room, and plumbing in one hectic month. They opened in September, 2013, with space for meetings and classes as well as the extraction room, and are open Thursday through Saturday.

Starting with a broken four frame extractor, Kristy designed a pedal-powered mechanism in partnership with Karl Stoerzinger, an innovative bicycle mechanic. They now have four bike driven extractors, and last year, 30 beekeepers paid to extract their honey there -- while saving on spin classes. Kristy worked with The University of Minnesota Bee Squad last summer, and the Squad hosted their extraction party at the facility; they brought their own electric extractor -- although their boss, Marla Spivak, pedaled out her own frames.

Erin and Kristy have begun to label local honey by zip code and have dedicated themselves to delivering raw honey by bicycle year around. Their wares are sold at ten Minneapolis stores – including co-ops, bike stores, salons and cafes. In addition, nine eateries use their honey in their offerings.<sup>5</sup> “Honey is heavy,” said Kristy, “And I learned very quickly that West St. Paul is 10 to 15 miles away”, and sometimes steep. So they have limited their radius to about four miles, delivering three days a week – not a small commitment, considering Minnesota weather from the sub-zero polar vortex to mosquito season. A delivery box for people who can’t be at home “to greet the beecyclist” is one of their wares. They also sell beeswax candles and Beez Kneez shirts, designed by local artist Guy Wagner, together with their honey at the Kingfield Farmers Market.

### **Education**

Experiential education is the theme of Beez Kneez classes. “The immersive experience is so powerful,” said Erin, who orchestrates the program. She suits up students and opens a hive, telling the story taking place on a frame. She finds that even fear can be a point of connection – with the anxious starting out at a comfortable distance from the pull of curiosity and the offer of a taste of honey. She describes hands-on exposure as a source of “empowerment and connection through food” that she sees as contributing to change in the way we as a culture think of food and its sources.

Reasonably priced or free immersive beekeeping classes for adults and children are scheduled May through October at a host site – community garden, urban farm, park or school. Courses range from beginning to such others as: Thinking Like a Bee and Focus on Pollination. Winter versions are taught at the Honey House, such as the Beez Kneez Kids’ Saturday and Supporting Your Hives through Community, which explores opportunities for networking. The Beez Kneez Bundle, through Minneapolis Parks and Recreation, is a hands-on series that follows the beekeepers through a season.

“The work with youth is awesome,” said Erin. Field trips for up to 35 children are scheduled for an hour and a half. Each child has a hands-on look inside a hive and visits stations on subjects such as bee forage and flower dissection -- varying by teacher preference to follow science curriculum. “It is exciting to teach with bees, because it offers a connection to so many things – math, history, sociology, biology, botany.”

The Beez Kneez coalition ranges wide. For example: At McKinley Community CSA, an urban farm operated by a North Minneapolis neighborhood, bee classes are taught for their Flower Team, a summer youth program. A day-long class for public school teachers, “Schoolyard Garden Sustainability and Support” was offered in coordination with Hennepin County Environmental Services, Minneapolis Public Schools Culinary and Nutrition Services and the University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardeners. The course offers teachers Continuing Education Units, with a bonus for bringing the lessons outdoors.

Support for projects has been wide ranging as well, with some, like Minnesota Parks and Recreation, offering sites: others offer free classes subsidized by grants, like McKinley, and the teacher workshop, both funded by the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (by recommendation of the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources).

### **Politics as the Art of the Possible**

“On a good day, this is getting to do what we love to do. It feels wonderful because it’s starting to speak to people. On the worst day our bees were killed,” said Kristy, describing an event in 2013 that added a new dimension to their work. That season, they had harvested 2000 pounds of honey by bicycle, and, as some wet supers were put back for the bees to clean up, they and other beekeepers, including the UM Bee Lab, discovered deadouts: a 24 hour bee kill of three colonies in a one mile radius. It was probably a legal pesticide application in the Kenwood neighborhood of Minneapolis that killed the colonies, “And who knows how many native bees,” said Kristy.

From the dead bees littering the ground around the hives, they sent samples to the The Minnesota Department of Agriculture and the USDA for testing. Fipronil was found, a broad spectrum insecticide that disrupts the central nervous system of an insect. It is used, often prophylactically, as a perimeter spray or a ground soak. To their surprise, the beekeepers were unable to discover the source of the application because that information is legally privileged in Minnesota – and in all other states with the exception of California, which allows public access. “All that traveling, I was trying to find out what to do with my life, and then I found out it could go away,” said Kristy. “That mobilized us”.

To organize public pesticide education and support for legislative change on access to pesticide data, they started Healthy Bees, Healthy Lives. Their first event packed the Beez Kneez space beyond capacity. “We are new to this work,” said Kristy, but they are creating awareness at nurseries and hardware stores and working with an organization called Pollinator Revival. They have tentative support from Minneapolis City Council members and some state representatives for legislative reform. An email from State Representative Rick Hansen, for this article, stated that he is “working on several pieces of legislation”. By press time, Erin and Kristy will have presented to the State Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture Finance Committee as part of a hearing on pollinators.

### **Local Stock**

“We have not treated our hives,” said Kristy. “We are committed to not treating. It’s a big question mark.” To address that question, they have started a new venture to foster locally adapted stock with Four Seasons Apiaries. Beekeepers Joseph Meyer and Yuuki Metreud will select from their own and Beez Kneez colonies to breed from queens that have survived at least two Minnesota winters, tested hygienic, been maintained without treatments, have good temperament and honey production – an objective if not beekeeping grail.

Eileen Menefee says that they plan to try a similar breeding plan in their commercial operation: “Our goal is to set aside bees that don’t go for almonds and are untreated.”

### **New Generation**

Marla Spivak, of the University of Minnesota, came across Kristy, dressed as a bee, at a pollinator party put on by Parks and Rec with the UM Bee Lab. Kristy spent the next summer working for the UM Bee Squad, a project that instructs and keeps bees in homes, gathers data and advises on bee health. “We are both working to raise awareness,” said Kristy. She was surprised when her mentor accepted her invitation to bike

200 miles to Duluth to the Minnesota Honey Producers Meeting -- but not nearly as surprised as the attendees to witness their arrival. “Marla didn’t wear a helmet with antenna, but we camped the whole way,” said Kristy.

The Menefees were there, and Kristy’s presentation at the conference was described by her Aunt Eileen: “Her enthusiasm had the beekeepers clapping. She is an ingenious and innovative young woman -- her humor, dressing up like a bee. She has more energy than any of us and went beyond. We need that younger generation in the beekeeping industry.”

Her Uncle Ed said, “The beekeepers thanked her for her enthusiasm. We are a lot of old stuck-in-the-muds, and she can translate that energy to bridge that gap. We need youth in this industry. It’s a hard industry to grasp. So many of us are failing, and we need to find new blood. I’m so proud. They are giving all this free publicity for beekeeping. It’s happening in my backyard and they are great.”

“And she’s concerned not only about the bees,” Eileen added, “But about our community, our exercise, our health.”

### **Onward**

“People like that we are silly,” said Kristy, “No dire end-of-the-world”. To that end, they are endlessly creative, offering a bee lesson for couples on a date, bee hive birthday parties, a discount for anyone who bikes to their events, a willingness to show up dressed as bees with an information table at gatherings. Somehow, with some fusion of ingenuity, wit, resourcefulness and ideology, they have created a business that now supports them both full time.

Here they come: “We are the Beez Kneez. We love bees, we love honey, we love bicycles and we’re on a mission.”

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<sup>1</sup> Beez Kneez Honey Delivery and Honey House: [kristy@thebeezkneezdelivery.com](mailto:kristy@thebeezkneezdelivery.com) | 612.990.9770. Education Program: [erin@thebeezkneezdelivery.com](mailto:erin@thebeezkneezdelivery.com) | 612.245.6384.

<sup>2</sup> Bar Bell Bee Ranch, 63333 CR 149, Squaw Lake , MN 56681, (218) 659-4469 , email: [barbellb@paulbunyan.net](mailto:barbellb@paulbunyan.net), web: <http://www.barbellbee.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Sherwood, Steven (2012) TED talk, Building Communities around Sustainable Agriculture, August 14, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeVcyYQzk\\_w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeVcyYQzk_w)

<sup>4</sup> Beez Kneez Urban Apiary Partners in 2013: Project Sweetie Pie, McKinley Community CSA, Growing Lots Urban Farm, Kuhl Beans, Sister's Camelot Community Garden, Blake School, Minneapolis Parks -- Longfellow Garden, Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden and JD Rivers Children's Garden.

<sup>5</sup> Beez Kneez honey is sold at: Seward Co-op, The Wedge, Eastside Co-op, Linden Hills Co-op, Oxendale’s Market, Lake Street Wine And Spirits, Freewheel Bike, Calhoun Cycle, The Apiary Salon, Head to Toe Salon. Cafes using the honey in their offerings are: Bull Run, Gigi’s Café, Alma, Verdant Tea, Peace Coffee, Verdant Tea, Alma.