

BONTON FARMS: TRANSFORMING LIVES THROUGH THE DIGNITY OF WORK

by Roy Maynard



It's never about Daron Babcock—especially when you're talking with Daron Babcock. The founder of Bonton Farms, a ministry based in a small, forgotten inner city Dallas community, Babcock always redirects praise and even questions; he wants to talk about the people in the community, not about himself.

"These people saved my life," he said at Texas Public Policy Foundation's Policy Orientation 2020. "These are my friends. My family."

The broader story is one of redemption. The Bonton community, once a neighborhood with high crime rates and little hope, is now an oasis of peace and opportunity. Its residents include former prisoners in inmates, the homeless (and recently homeless), former drug dealers and addicts, and mostly, people just trying to get by on streets more accustomed to random gunfire than routine police patrols.

That's getting easier because the Bonton Farms project has taken root, and the fruit the ministry is now bearing is getting attention.

As Babcock likes to explain, it didn't happen because of big government coffers or grand government plans. The success of Bonton Farms hap-

pened one person at a time, through meeting one need and then another, and establishing strong relationships based on respect and faith.

"Bonton Farms worked in spite of government programs," says Babcock. "Not because of them."

The truth is, Bonton Farms fought City Hall more often than not. Permits and permission were hard to obtain; sometimes, Babcock and his workers went forward without them. As a result, lives have changed, and a community has been reborn.

Beginnings

When Daron Babcock was 32, he lost his wife to cancer. He acknowledges this was the first real adversity he'd faced in his life; he'd been a successful high school and college athlete, and a successful businessman. He had no idea what to do.

"I turned to drugs and alcohol," he admits.

It was a dark time. His two sons watched their father's life descend.

"It was a crisis; a faith crisis, and a crisis in every regard," he says. "But my family and friends never let me go. They wouldn't give up on me."

Soon, he found his faith, and with that, an increasing sense that there's a world beyond business and finance, with suffering people he was called to minister to.

He began volunteering in Bonton, a troubled community with a long history of crime, poverty and neglect. He met former prisoners who opened his eyes, he explains.

"I tell people that sometimes you see things you can't unsee; what I saw in those men was that they'd been through so much more than I ever had been, and they were still standing," Babcock says. "I was able to walk with these guys, through their journeys. And that blessed me."

Trips into Bonton weren't enough, he knew.

"I realized that to be a part of their lives, I had to be here," he says. "And so eight years ago, I moved in."

Bonton Farms

The needs in the Bonton community were overwhelming.

"I had no idea what to do, where to start," Babcock says. "So I started meeting and talking with people. Every one of those conversations ended with one

thing—jobs. I'd ask what they needed, and they all said jobs."

With his background in the corporate world, Babcock knew that resumes must be built on work—any kind of work.

"So we started picking up trash," he said. "We were mowing yards and fixing roofs—anything we could do to help our neighborhood get on the right track, and use that work to build resumes."

But Babcock was confused when some of his workers—people he knew were sincere in their desire to better themselves—wouldn't show up some days. He soon learned that health problems—including diabetes and kidney disease—often prevented his people from coming to work. Babcock found that Bonton was in a food desert.

"The food we had was just what they sell in the liquor stores, and if that's all you eat for long enough, you're going to get sick," he says. "Bonton is in the middle of Dallas County; we're like a donut hole. And in that donut hole, we suffer from more than double the rate of cancer and stroke and heart disease and diabetes and childhood obesity than the county we're in."

continued >>



And that’s where the farm project—and its adjacent farmer’s market—came in. It’s a place where locals can get fresh produce and eggs; it’s also a place where they can find jobs and learn skills; and it’s a place where the community can come together, in peace.

The Lessons

“There’s a huge misperception about people born into places like Bonton,” says Babcock. “That misperception is they don’t want to work. Nothing could be further from the truth.”

He tells the story of his friend Willie, who was on one of those first trash-collecting crews. Babcock’s instructions were simple; pick up the trash and leave the bags on a certain corner. Willie couldn’t seem to follow even those simple directions.

“When I asked him why, he said it was because I always pointed,” Babcock says. “He couldn’t see. He never told me that because he was afraid I wouldn’t let him participate. These folks want to work so badly that they’ll lie and hide disabilities and disadvantages just so they can have these opportunities.”

That’s why a jobs program alone—or a skills training program alone, or a life skills program alone—

won’t turn lives around, Babcock believes. People must be taken as a whole—and loved as themselves.

“We now serve men and women who are coming out of incarceration, homelessness, domestic abuse and human trafficking,” he says. “It doesn’t matter what you’re coming out of; you’re no longer locked up or beaten or high anymore, but you’re also no more prepared to go out and flourish than if you were. So we’re the bridge between what you came out of and where you’re going.”

Government assistance hurts more than helps, he says.

“Government entitlements paralyze a person—not only them, but the kids who grow up with them—because they create a cycle of dependence,” Babcock says. “We have to change that. We need to remove barriers, and the sense of security that government assistance can give is a kind of barrier.”

Most importantly, Babcock contends, is that people must be met where they are.

Programs don’t change lives, he says. Relationships do.

TPPF’s Right on Work initiative aims to build a coalition of companies, organizations, and individuals working together to support innovative and targeted workforce programs, like that of Bonton Farms. We are proud to partner with programs like these which demonstrate the real-life effects of the policies advanced through TPPF initiatives. Bonton Farms is successful, in part, because of TPPF’s legislative efforts to promote workforce development programs that truly transform lives. ★

For more information about Right on Work and TPPF’s work on this issue, visit www.TexasPolicy.com.



Roy Maynard is the Senior Writer at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. Roy has written articles and worked as an editor for many other publications. Roy’s passion for writing pales in comparison to his dedication to hiking. Roy hiked a portion of the Appalachian Trail last summer and is looking forward to completing the trail at the end of June.

