Community First

BY VIRGINIA GARRISON

Who would expect a 79-year-old Wall Street retiree to become an organic farmer delivering 34,000 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables to five East End food pantries? That’s the question Joan Ehren posed in her nominating letter for John Malafronte, her friend and neighbor—and this year’s Press News Group Community First award winner.

“He deserves it,” Ms. Ehren said recently. “I can’t think of anything better than giving good food to people in need.”

Mr. Malafronte, who lives in Settlers Landing, East Hampton, was instrumental in founding the Food Pantry Farm, a three-acre patch at EECO Farm on Long Lane in East Hampton that provides hundreds of people from Southampton to Montauk with nutritional food all year round. The Food Pantry Farm has been expanding its growing season over the past four years, most recently with the addition of a hoop house in which organic vegetables can be grown throughout the winter. Food pantries in Southampton, Springs, Amagansett, Montauk and East Hampton reap the benefits of the nonprofit pantry farm, which even provides them with fresh flowers.

Mr. Malafronte moved full time to East Hampton after retiring in 1999. Wanting to stay active, he volunteered with Meals on Wheels, LIV and the East Hampton Ladies Village Improvement Society—“I was the token male,” he joked. He was directing a show at LIV in which Annie Bliss and Lauren Jarrett of EECO Farm were interviewed and asked them afterward if he could rent a piece of the farm, “and they said yes, and that’s how it started.”

“I was curious,” he said. “I tried it at home, but the deer beat me out of it.”

As he learned more and more about how to tend to his own patch, Mr. Malafronte became more deeply involved with EECO farm. When the economy tanked in 2008, and the food pantries had more and more people to feed, Peter Garnham suggested that they do something to help.

“They can’t afford to buy fresh vegetables,” Mr. Garnham told Mr. Malafronte of the pantries, and asked him, “Do you want to get involved with this?”

“I had always wanted EECO Farm to expand into that capacity,” Mr. Malafronte said, “but I thought that this was a wonderful opportunity.”

According to Ms. Ehren, Mr. Malafronte provided “seed money” to rent land and buy basic farm necessities. “The Food Pantry Farm was up and running, and in the first year John and Peter did all the work themselves,” she said.

“We’re basically a farm within a farm. We lease land from EECO Farm, but we are our own corporation,” which is a nonprofit with 501c3 status, Mr. Malafronte explained. Mr. Garnham is the general manager. Darcy Hutzenlaub, the farm manager, plants crops using biodynamic principles, following the moon tides with great success, Mr. Malafronte said. “Ira [Bezoza] and I are basically into the financing; we’re constantly worrying about
not having enough money,” he said, to ensure that the pantries can stay well stocked. Bruce Warr rounds out the four-person board of directors.

“They all do the work, but there’s been a lot of emphasis now on getting money to do this,” Ms. Ehren said. “As one member of the board recently said,” she wrote in her nominating letter, “John is the glue that continues to hold us all together.”

With a little help from its friends, the Food Pantry Farm last year delivered “a little over 17 tons,” or 34,300 pounds of fresh vegetables to the five local pantries. Mr. Malafronate said EECO Farm and some commercial farms also contributed to that hefty figure with their own donations.

According to Ms. Ehren, Mr. Malafronate not only attends to fundraising and helps with planting, but also “hails all of this stuff off in his own car.”

“It’s a lot of work,” Ms. Ehren said. “The Food Pantry Farm does more than provide people in need with food,” she wrote in her letter to the Press News Group in support of her friend and neighbors “It communicates to people that they matter and that the community cares and is concerned about them.”

“Without John’s exceptional organizational skills, his sales ability, high energy, feistiness ... and never-ending enthusiasm, this exceptional community project would never have been successfully implemented,” Ms. Ehren wrote.

“When you have the ability to grow food and satisfy people, that’s the joy in being able to retire,” Mr. Malafronate said.

“It is probably one of the greatest joys I have, is doing this, and being able to satisfy some of the needs of the food pantry,” he said. “I honestly don’t think food pantries get the recognition they deserve.”