

Kwanalu farmers offer support for agriculture interns

Mooi River farmers Peter and Sandy Ward, members of Kwanalu, are providing young aspiring farmers a unique opportunity by offering them mentorship and real-life job experience on their farm. Over the past two years, they have taken in seven young students from Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) in Pretoria. As a mandatory part of these students' agricultural degrees or diplomas, they are required to work as an intern within the sector of their choice during their third year.



Peter and Sandy Ward with interns

“The students are expected to source and arrange their own internship placement and although there are some prospects for organised placements through AgriSETA and other NGO’s, there are definitely far more students needing placement than there are opportunities for them,” said Peter. Peter and Sandy heard about the need for placement positions through the Milk Producers Organisation (MPO) who run a scheme placing students on dairy farms.

“It is an especially difficult task for students who have not grown up on farms and have little or no contacts in agricultural communities. They really are between a rock and a hard place, as their future is at the mercy of whoever decides to take them in,” he said. This is where Peter and Sandy come in. In exchange for a small salary (funded through AgriSETA) and lots of hard work, the students are provided with serviced accommodation and the opportunity to gain real work experience.

“We try to expose them to all aspects of the dairy as well as general farm work. Over and above working with the animals, they learn about tractor driving, irrigation, field prep and working with different implements,” said Peter.

“Most of the students we get are from towns or cities and so have had little or no exposure to farm life. I think this is why we can empathise with them – we too had to learn as we went along as we were not always farmers,” explains Sandy.

Unlike many farmers in KZN, Peter and Sandy do not come from farming stock, nor did they study or intend to work within the agriculture sector. “I was a businessman turned dairy farmer after Sandy bought a single cow in 1989 for our own milk. I had to travel in-between Johannesburg and the farm for 10 years while Sandy built up our farming business. We understand the passion in these young men and women to choose dairy as a career. We are happy to help them and to be contributing in some small way to the changing South Africa,” said Peter.

Future farmers

“But it is not just about us helping them,” he added. “We really value the interns in our operation, even though they are not practically experienced, they are very quick to grasp concepts and they work hard because they are motivated to finish their studies,” he said. In fact, Peter was so impressed with one of the interns, Philani Mntungwa, who grew up in Pietermaritzburg, that he has employed him full time (as a dairy supervisor) and enrolled him in the Future Farmers Programme; an integrated learning scheme that places aspiring farmers in positions on farms overseas.

“I love my job here and enjoy working with the animals. I am also looking forward to the new adventure and being exposed to different methods of dairy farming. I hope that one day I will be able to do something for myself,” said Philani.

Kwanalu’s CEO Sandy La Marque encouraged more KZN farmers to get involved in internship programmes as a viable way to contribute towards job creation and reform in the agricultural sector. “Philani has been given an amazing opportunity and has clearly proven his worth. It shows that the system can work, provided more of our farmers come forward to actively take part,” she said.

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