

THE BALLOT

2023 VAFMA Board Election



OFFICERS

M. Omar Faison

Assistant Vice President, Virginia State University
Candidate for President

Ricky Kowalewski

Market Manager, Lynchburg Community Market
Candidate for Vice President

Michael Reilly

Co-Founder, Executive Director,
Virginia Foodshed Capital
Candidate for Treasurer

Meredith Ledlie Johnson

Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change
Initiatives Coordinator, Family Nutrition Program
Candidate for Secretary

REGIONAL DIRECTORS

Debbie Edwards

Director, Blacksburg Farmers Market
Candidate for Blue Ridge Regional Director

Stephanie Ganz

Food Industry Writer
Candidate for Capital Regional Director

Erin Mann

Owner, Erin's Elderberries, LLC
Candidate for Central Regional Director

Amy Jordan

Market Manager, Hampton Blvd Farmers Market
Candidate for Coastal Regional Director

Deb Matthews

President, Loudoun Valley
Homegrown Markets Cooperative
Candidate for Northern Regional Director

Megan Marshall

Director of Food Access, Project GROWS
Candidate for Shenandoah Regional Director

Carolyn Cooper Wright

Cooper Family Farms, Save-A-Seed, RCD Council
Candidate for Southside Regional Director

Lindsey Felty

Market Development Manager, Appalachian
Sustainable Development
Candidate for Southwest Regional Director

M. Omar Faison



M. Omar Faison

Assistant Vice President,
Virginia State University

Candidate for President

M. Omar Faison is the Assistant Vice President for Research at Virginia State University (VSU). In that role, he works to expand the research enterprise at VSU and facilitate internal and external partnerships for VSU faculty. In parallel with his service as AVP, Dr. Faison also served as Interim Dean for the College of Graduate Studies (2017-18) and Interim Executive Director for VSU's Center for Agricultural Research, Engagement, and Outreach (2018-19). Prior to becoming AVP, he served VSU as Chair of the Biology Department (2009-13) and Director of the Office of Sponsored Research (2012-15).

Dr. Faison earned his undergraduate degree in Biology from Hampton University (1994) and PhD in Neurosciences from the University of Virginia (2002). He received his post-doctoral training at Virginia Commonwealth University before joining the faculty of VSU's Biology Department in 2004. Dr. Faison has published and presented in the fields of developmental neuroscience, cognition, and student academic performance and has received grant funding from the National Institutes of Health and National Science Foundation. Coming from an agricultural family, Dr. Faison is passionate about local foods and local food systems and the concept of farmers as entrepreneurs. Dr. Faison is married to Dr. Jennifer Wolstenholme and they have 3 children, Kyra, Omar, Jr., and Haley.

Ricky Kowalewski



Ricky Kowalewski

Market Manager,
Lynchburg Community Market

Candidate for Vice President

Ricky Kowalewski has always been a fan of farmers markets. When he was younger, he sold eggs during the summer at the farmers market his grandparents attended in Southern Arizona. While studying Business Administration at Seton Hill University, he secured an internship with the Bloomfield Development Corporation as their Saturday Market Intern and was hired as Program Coordinator at the end of the internship. Running the Bloomfield Saturday Market and creating the first Bloomfield Winter Market opened Ricky's eyes to how large of an impact farmers markets can have on a community. In June 2018 he was hired as Assistant Market Manager at the Lynchburg Community Market and was promoted to Market Manager in May 2019.

Michael Reilly



Michael Reilly

Co-Founder, Executive Director,
Virginia Foodshed Capital

Candidate for Treasurer

Michael Reilly is co-founder and executive director of Virginia Foodshed Capital, a non-profit whose mission is to provide financial stewardship for small-to-mid-scale organic farms and food entrepreneurs in the local foodshed, including both urban and rural areas. It does so through a 0% loans program and financial education.

The organization began in 2018 as a Slow Money program in the Richmond/Charlottesville area but expanded statewide in 2019.

Michael started his career in banking and then worked for 15 years as an executive in the broadcast TV business before turning his attention to entrepreneurship and local food advocacy.

Michael serves on the board of the Virginia Association for Biological Farming, a statewide network of organic and sustainable farmers and gardeners. Michael is also on the board of Grow Ahead, a nonprofit that teams up with farmer organizations throughout the world to support climate resiliency initiatives through crowdfunding. Michael also serves on the board of Market Central, which helps run the Charlottesville farmers markets. He is on the planning team for the Charlottesville Food Justice Network, and he serves on the steering committee for Virginia Interfaith Power & Light, a collaborative of faith communities dedicated to advancing climate justice throughout the state.

Michael earned an undergraduate degree from Yale University and a master's degree from Columbia University. He lives in Charlottesville with his wife and four children.

Meredith Ledlie Johnson



Meredith Ledlie Johnson

Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change
Initiatives Coordinator, Family Nutrition Program

Candidate for Secretary

Meredith Ledlie Johnson manages Policy, Systems and Environmental Change Programming for Virginia Cooperative Extension's Family Nutrition Program. These programs are designed to ensure that all Virginians have access to enough healthy, culturally appropriate food in their communities through increasing access to farmers markets, gardening, and healthy retail outlets. Meredith holds a Masters degree in Social Work with a concentration in community organizing from Hunter College, CUNY. Before living in Virginia, Meredith worked as a farmers market manager for Greenmarket in New York City and as an urban park advocate with New Yorkers for Parks. Meredith is excited by the possibilities offered by the local food movement to strengthen the resiliency of Virginia's families and communities.

Debbie Edwards



Debbie Edwards

Director, Blacksburg Farmers Market

Candidate for Blue Ridge Regional Director

I relocated to SW Virginia 6 months ago from Delaware where I grew up and raised my children because the mountains have been calling me for as long as I can remember. Prior to becoming the Director for the Blacksburg Farmer's Market, my varied experience consisted of bank management and small business lending. I also served the local Chamber of Commerce as a both a volunteer and an employee where I was the Director of Membership for 3 years, and in my most recent position, I was the Executive Director for a local Association of Realtors. Additionally, I have owned several small businesses and I am a certified personal trainer, yoga teacher, and holistic health coach. Lastly, I have served my local community as an Assistant Governor for Rotary; an Honorary Commander at the Dover Air Force Base; sat on the Board of Directors for a couple non-profits; and have participated in many fundraising activities over the years.

Stephanie Ganz



Stephanie Ganz

Food Industry Writer

Candidate for Capital Regional Director

Stephanie Ganz is a Richmond-based writer and farmers market devotee. She studied culinary arts at Johnson & Wales before cooking professionally for the better part of a decade. Now, as a freelance writer with bylines in Bon Appetit, Eater, and The Kitchn, Ganz writes about the people and stories behind the food industry.

Erin Mann



Erin Mann

Owner, Erin's Elderberries, LLC

Candidate for Central Regional Director

My name is Erin Mann and I am a small business owner of Erin's Elderberries, LLC, in Warrenton, Virginia. I am an FBI Intelligence Analyst turned Stay at Home Mom Entrepreneur! As a small food producer I have learned a lot over the last 3 years, and one thing I have truly taken to heart is the passion I have to see other small food producers and makers not only survive but thrive. They play a very important role that many do not see or understand until they have to, and my goal is to help their communities see it before they need it. Thanks to my prior career I am very much a rule follower, and with that I found it very hard to start up my business "the right way". I could have easily given up on understanding the complicated system that can be food laws, but I didn't, because I had to do it the right way. So when starting out at a local farmers market, I sought out resources that I could afford that would help me further my understanding of how it all worked. VAFMA was something I merely stumbled upon and quickly learned it was a valuable tool, and also an affordable one at that for someone like me! I can truly say it has been a resource I have used many many times.

Having the chance to come on board an organization like this is truly exciting, not only because it would afford me the opportunity to help others, but also give a little back to something that has given me so much as a small business. I feel I can bring a unique perspective from not only a vendor/producer standpoint but also one of a market manager in a small town just getting their footing in their own farmers market, and I thank you for taking the time read this and considering me for your Board.

Amy Jordan



Amy Jordan

Market Manager,
Hampton Blvd Farmers Market

Candidate for Coastal Regional Director

Amy Jordan, Co-Founder and Market Manager at We Dig Tidewater LLC, which operates Hampton Blvd Farmers Market, Harvest Market @ O'Connor Brewing Co. and East Beach Farmers Market—all in Norfolk, VA.

After earning a degree in business at James Madison University, Amy has spent most of her adult life following entrepreneurial pursuits in hospitality, food and marketing. For thirteen years she co-owned and operated an inn in Vermont, which she and her business partner had purpose-built, and where she was also the resident baker and served as marketing committee chairperson for the chamber of commerce. After a move back to Virginia, she spent eight years as the Director of Marketing, Public Relations and Events for TASTE, a family-owned regional chain of restaurants/gourmet food stores. In early 2016, she started BowWowMeow Baking Co., making all natural pet treats, sold both wholesale and at farmers' markets. In 2018 she and her sister Michele started Hampton Blvd Farmers Market, a privately run, for-profit market, from scratch. Amy and Michele also completed the 2018 VAFMA Market Manager Certification together. When a second market, Harvest Market at O'Connor Brewing Co. began in 2019, Amy gave up her pet treat business to focus solely on growing the markets of We Dig Tidewater LLC with her sister Michele. They added a third, East Beach Farmers Market in 2020. Amy really enjoys the marketing and social media aspects of the business and loves helping new farmers and producers bring their product to market successfully.

Deb Matthews



Deb Matthews

Board of Directors, Loudoun Valley
Homegrown Market Cooperative

Candidate for Northern Regional Director

I have been on the Board of Directors of the Loudoun Valley Homegrown Market Cooperative for more than 10 years and served as its President for 3 years (some of which was during COVID). We kept our markets open by being flexible, working with VAFMA, working through problems we never saw coming and running markets that were safe and appealing to both our vendors and our customers. Additionally, I am a student of farmers markets. While on vacation, some people visit museums, historic sites, play golf or enjoy different activities. I go to farmers markets. When I go, I chat with vendors, market managers and even customers. I bring best practices back to our cooperative and share the frustrations and concerns other market systems wrestle with. I cannot say that I have gone to a market and not learned something of benefit for our market system. On top of this, I have had a 30+ year career in management and am well versed in logistics, planning and organizational management. I am great at building consensus among diverse groups of people and am always ready to listen and learn from folks who are wiser than I am. Farmers markets are my passion and I feel I would be a valued addition as the NOVA representative for VAFMA.

Megan Marshall



Megan Marshall

Director of Food Access, Project GROWS

Candidate for Shenandoah Regional Director

Megan Marshall is the Director of Food Access at Project GROWS, a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational farm in Staunton, VA. Her leadership experience involves implementation and design of community-centered nutrition security programs at the local, regional, and state level including a mobile market program, farm to school initiatives, farmers markets, and healthy food purchasing programs including SNAP-Match and WIC/Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program.

In addition to her role at Project GROWS, Megan serves as the Shenandoah Regional Lead for the Virginia Fresh Match Network, a network of over 90 local food retailers dedicated to increasing food access throughout the state of Virginia. Megan earned a BS in Public Health Promotion and Behavior from Oregon State University in 2017 and has had the privilege of working with many different communities to decrease barriers to accessing fresh foods throughout the state of Oregon and Virginia over the past 7 years. Megan is passionate about creating an equitable food system and believes that food, farming, and people are interdependent and essential for systemic change.

Carolyn Cooper Wright



Carolyn Cooper Wright

Cooper Family Farms, Save-A-Seed,
RCD Council

Candidate for Southside Regional Director

Carolyn Cooper Wright is a resident of Sussex County and has been since birth. She attended the University of Phoenix to complete a B.S. in Business Management. Carolyn currently works as a Paraprofessional at Sussex Central Elementary School (SCES). She joined Sussex County Extension VCE- (Virginia Cooperate Extension) to work on a grant-funded model, PROSPER as a Prevention Coordinator. Volunteers with Sussex 4-H often, especially during camps. Carolyn and her sisters own their family farm, Cooper Family Farms, that is located in Littleton, in the Courthouse District of Sussex County. Carolyn established a 501 (C)3 nonprofit organization, Save-ASeed (SAS) which plans programs, events and outings to address the lack of youth outreach and youth enrichment throughout the county and beyond. SAS also manages the beautification project in the SCES Courtyard. She also serves as administrative Support for the South Centre Corridors' RC&D Council where she assists with the updates and publication of the Buy Fresh Buy Local Guide.

Lindsey Felty



Lindsey Felty

Market Development Manager,
Appalachian Sustainable Development
Candidate for Southwest Regional Director

Lindsey Felty currently serves as Market Development Manager at Appalachian Sustainable Development. She has been part of the ASD team since 2016. Lindsey has a deep desire to continue to diversify southwest VA and promote the majestic region all while holding on to the Appalachian heritage. In addition to her work with ASD, Lindsey is also the owner of Barkery & Company and enjoys providing homemade and healthy dog treats to canines near and far.