

Native Entrepreneur in Residence (NEIR) Graduate Gains Momentum, Serves Native Community



Vian, OK – It all started with an innate passion for helping others, and Oklahoma resident Richard Tyler has it.

A perfect example of Tyler’s passion is the 10,000sf aquaponic facility he constructed in 2015 to address the need for quality food in Vian’s predominantly Native American community. Officially titled Native Oklahoma Aquaponic Harvest (NOAH), the building houses an 8,000-ft greenhouse and a 1,700-ft store, which gives Tyler the ability to grow and provide pounds of lettuce, spinach, kale, grains, tomatoes, and most importantly - fish, to those who need it.

The greenhouse’s patented aquaponic structure is what makes it special. Aquaponics combines raising fish and soilless plant growth in an integrated system. The fish provide a natural fertilizer in the water, and the plants then filter the water. According to Tyler, the benefits of this system are numerous: “It’s a secure way to grow food. The food absorbs more nutrients, the temperature is controlled and withstands extreme weather conditions, and significantly lessens the need for pest control.” He also noted that any discharge water is given to other local farms for their food crops and hay. The launch of NOAH marked the beginning of soilless farming in Oklahoma, and is also the state’s largest commercial aquaponics farm.

Tyler’s vision didn’t happen overnight, however. The idea of his aquaponic greenhouse originated in 2010 when he noticed hungry families living without fresh and healthy food. Emotionally moved, Richard started a food bank to help his community, all while envisioning that he could one day efficiently and sustainably grow vegetables and fish together.

So to start, he built a small, simple greenhouse and was able to sustain up to 70 families within its first year. His services grew quickly, and in 2011 the small greenhouse became a nonprofit organization known as the Vian Peace Center. As the organization progressed, its services expanded and alongside food distribution, provided a substance and alcohol recovery program, a backpack program, and Christmas present delivery for children of families in need.

Despite its progress and growth, public demand grew right along with it. 2013 was a challenging year for Tyler and his community. That year, a large national corporation laid off over 17,000 people in the Vian area, and Tyler went from serving 125 families to over 780 in a month. The increase hit his finances hard, and he withdrew all of his savings to ensure he could take care of them. At the end of the year, Tyler estimated that volunteers handed out 280,000 pounds of food to the hungry.

Upon witnessing massive job losses and more and more people unable to feed their families, his desire to build a sustainable farm grew. With the help of volunteers and a generous donation, the Vian Peace Center expanded into a 5,000sf building the following year.

However, it still wasn't enough. Tyler was determined to make his aquaponics farm happen. Without any funds to launch it, he turned to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Farm Service Agency to receive guidance regarding loans. The help from those organizations, along with assistance from aquaponics company Nelson and Pade Inc., programs such as the New Mexico Community Capital's Native Entrepreneur in Residence (NEIR) program, and finally – funding from the Farm Service Agency, the aquaponics farm became a reality.

“The New Mexico Community Capital was one of the few who believe in us. The NEIR program provided the solid foundation. They helped us with their advice and solid information to help us grow. I cannot even express in words how much they mean to us,” Tyler said.

Today, NOAH is a thriving farm and a full-fledged farmers market that supports its Native American community through partnerships to provide fresh meat and cheese along with its local produce. For example, NOAH is currently collaborating with both the Modoc and Quapaw tribes to provide bison.

“We take everything and reinvest it back into the community,” said Tyler. In 2016 alone, NOAH provided over 1.3 million pounds of food to its community.

More significantly, Tyler recently established a new partnership with the University of Oklahoma, stipulating that NOAH is to be the source of all locally grown food for the university over the next five years. Tyler is also spreading his work overseas, and currently collaborates with people in South Africa, India, China, Germany, Russia, Colombia, BC, Uganda, Israel, and Egypt.

According to Tyler, "It truly took a community to build this farm."

To learn more about NOAH and Tyler's mission, visit www.noahfarmok.com.