



Flying farmer: One man's journey to reach new heights on the farm and in the clouds

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN Capital Press

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JUNCTION CITY, Ore. — Bryan Harper climbed across the wing of his 1943 T-6 warbird and slipped into the cockpit.

The engine went *pttt pttt pttttt* and started. The plane rested on a grassy airstrip on Harper's farmland. Harper was preparing to do a surprise "fly-over" for a friend's wedding.

Harper is a fifth-generation farmer, vice chairman of the Oregon Board of Agriculture and former president of the Lane County Farm Bureau. He's also a pilot, former sprinter for the University of Oregon and one of only a few young Black farmers in the state.

"Sometimes people are surprised I'm a farmer," said Harper. "I guess I don't fit whatever mold they expect."

No regrets

Harper said people often assume with his sprawling array of airplanes, titles and awards, his life must have been comfortable.

But those close to Harper say it has been far from easy and his path to farming far from certain.

“At one time, I tried really hard not to be a farmer. But here I am, full circle, no regrets,” he said.



Bryan Harper is a hazelnut grower in Junction City, Ore., and vice chairman of the Oregon Board of Agriculture.

Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

‘Little rural heart’

Harper was born in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1988 to Rose, who is from a small village, and Warren, a fourth-generation farmer from Junction City, Ore.

Harper’s parents met through mutual friends when Rose was visiting the U.S., maintained a long-distance relationship and married in 1987.

They lived in Kenya when Harper was born while waiting to secure a visa for Rose.

Warren had one child and adopted Rose's four children, and when Harper was 17 days old, the family moved from Africa to the Willamette Valley farm, which grew grains, row crops and other commodities.

People say Harper, from his earliest days, had a "little rural heart."

"When I was young, all I wanted to do was farm," said Harper.

His grandma taught him and his younger sister, Tiffany, to hoe and pull weeds.

"My grandma was my first boss," said Harper.

He laughed as he walked out of an 88-year-old hazelnut orchard and across a carpet of sweet-smelling morning glories.

Harper said his childhood was mostly happy: riding four-wheelers, playing in the dirt, cooking peppermint oil in the middle of the night.

"Ever since he was a little kid, Bryan was driving a tractor around like he'd been driving forever," said Josué Reyes, 49, a Harper Farms employee for nearly 31 years. "And he wanted to be with us. He was a little shy but really involved."

Harper's dad said those early interactions likely shaped how Harper related to people.

"Teachers would come to me and say: 'Bryan is not like these other kids. He'll come talk to us and give us time like an adult.' He wasn't afraid," said Warren Harper.

The fields were home for the young Harper, but so was the sky. He said he was "raised in an airplane."



*Bryan Harper, left, and his dad, Warren Harper, right, with the T-6.
Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press*

Harper's dad had learned to fly from neighbors. Beside Harper Farms was an airstrip owned by the family's neighbors, Alice and Hank Strauch.

The Strauchs collected planes, including a rare 1930s model that Harrison Ford rode in 1981's "Raiders of the Lost Ark" film.

Harper's dad nearly died once while flying but didn't give up and passed the passion on to his son.

But not everything was golden in "those happy years."

Uprooted

As Harper grew, family life became tense.

Siblings went different directions. The farm faced financial challenges. Because his dad was white, people often asked if Harper was adopted. And Harper said his mom “never healed from her Kenya days.”

Harper recalls coming close to failing middle school. It wasn't that he was a rebel, relatives say. They characterized him as “pretty innocent” and even “gentle,” but he was struggling.

In fifth grade, Harper and his younger sister were sent to live with their aunt and uncle in Bend, Ore., while their parents filed for divorce. They lived there five years.

Once his parents were apart, Harper was passed back and forth between family in Bend, Eugene and Junction City.

Straddling the state was difficult, and at the end of ninth grade, he moved back to the farm.

“I had always wanted to farm, and Dad never pushed me one way or the other. But during that time, he was like, ‘Don't farm. It's depressing.’”

Harper decided to become a pilot.

In high school, he ran track and got his grades up. As he posted impressive running times, people took notice.

Grady O'Connor, then head track coach at Lane Community College, tried to recruit Harper, but he said the high schooler gave him a polite “no thank you.”

Harper had other plans. He was going to flight school.



*Bryan Harper with his T-6 World War II-era plane on Strauch Field, at the western edge of his property.
Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press*

Up in the air

After high school, Harper moved 3,000 miles to attend Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Florida.

The stint was short-lived.

“I hated it,” said Harper.

The flight program wasn’t what he’d expected, so Harper moved home and enrolled in Lane Community College. He still wanted to study aviation, but at a different school.

With Harper back in Lane County, O’Connor got his wish: Harper ran for LCC his sophomore year.

“His teammates gravitated toward him,” said O’Connor. “There’s a gentleness about him.”

But O’Connor said Harper also had an inner “fieriness” that came out when he was running.

The University of Oregon noticed that fire. One day, a recruitment letter came from UO’s track coach.

“It was a hard choice,” said Harper. “I knew it could derail my flying plans.”

He accepted.

Harper had talent: he specialized in the 400-meter race, which he could run in 46 seconds — only three seconds off the current world record.

Travis Thompson, Harper’s UO roommate and track teammate, said his humility struck him.

“There’s a lot of people with egos in college athletics,” said Thompson. “Bryan didn’t flaunt it.”

What stood out to Thompson more was Harper’s determination to keep farming.

“He’d be running in the mornings, going to classes, keeping his grades up, coming back for afternoon practice, flying planes, helping on the farm — hopping on a John Deere, too. I’ve never heard of anyone doing all that,” said Thompson.

Some of Harper’s friends say perhaps he had too many “irons in the fire.”

To farm, or not to farm

Harper graduated with a psychology degree in 2012 and had to make another hard decision.

His dad was aging and the future of the farm lay in the balance. Harper's family said he didn't have to take the farm, but if he wanted to, it was his.

He said yes.

Harper said he considers himself fortunate to have inherited land. Young farmers, he said, and especially Black farmers, often struggle to buy farmland.

Harper said his dad willingly handed over the reins.

“As we transitioned, I'd show up and the guys would ask me, ‘What do we do?,’ and I'd say, ‘Ask Bryan,’” said Warren Harper.

Reyes, the farm's longest-tenured employee, said the transition was relatively smooth.

“At one point, I was the one telling Bryan what to do. Now, it's the opposite. But it works because we get along. He would never say: ‘I'm the boss' son, so you have to listen to me.’ He treated us well and listened to us,” said Reyes.

These days, Reyes said, he and Harper start off mornings at the shop talking about the day's plans over coffee.

Nuts for hazelnuts

Reyes said that in 2015 Harper decided to focus on hazelnuts — Oregon's official state nut. The state's farmers produce 99% of the nation's supply and export internationally.

Harper said he manages about 440 acres of hazelnut orchards, which produce an average of 750,000 pounds of hazelnuts each year.

Marilyn Rear, Harper's aunt with a farm 15 minutes away, said her nephew has improved the farm's yields and markets.

Harper has updated irrigation, purchased trucks to bulk-haul nuts, upgraded equipment, used a professional agronomist to collect soil samples, experimented with nutrients and hired another pilot to aerial-spray chemicals. Harper even visited Shanghai on a trade mission to learn about international markets.

He has found creative ways to handle industry challenges: floods, ice storms, tariffs, pests and a fungus called Eastern filbert blight.

Although Harper is a young innovator, those close to him say he's "an old soul," listening to 1960s Motown music and using phrases like "as my grandma always said."

Rising industry leader

As Harper's farming success has blossomed, so has his popularity among peers.

In 2016, Harper was elected to a two-year term as president of the Lane County Farm Bureau. His grandpa had been the organization's first president.

"It felt great to carry on that legacy," he said.

Also in 2016, Harper was appointed to the Oregon Board of Agriculture, which advises the state's Department of Agriculture. Harper said he appreciates opportunities to lobby the Legislature, talk with Gov. Kate Brown and work across sectors. In June, Harper was appointed to his second term.

Tyson Raymond, another board member, said Harper has credibility because he's soft-spoken, looks people in the eye and listens.

"You can't put a label on him, like what side of an argument he's going to come down on," said Raymond. "He seems to develop opinions based on what's in front of him, not based on some rigid political camp."

Flying farmers

Although Harper chose farming, he never stopped flying.

Harper and his dad keep several small airplanes at Strauch Field.

Harper bought his favorite, the World War II-era plane, in 2016. His T-6 has trained pilots, seen combat and served from 1944 to 1997 in Cape Town, South Africa.

"I want to steward these old airplanes like I steward the land," he said.

Harper said the flying community is big enough to broaden his world yet small enough to create deep friendships. Harper has formed a tight-knit group of friends in Oregon, some of whom, like Harper, farm and fly.

Chad Goracke, 46, one pilot in Harper's group, is a grass seed farmer in Monroe, Ore. Goracke said he and Harper exchange tips about farming and flying.

"He's not afraid to ask for help," said Goracke.

Norm Younger, another "flying farmer," has known Harper since Harper was a little boy and said he's "so tickled" to see him pursuing his passions.

Younger, Goracke, Harper and a few others often do backcountry get-aways. A favorite spot is the Alvore Desert, lying like crumpled paper over southeast Oregon. The pilots say they land in the desert and enjoy beers and steaks by a campfire.

Harper even met his fiancée, Jessica Bauman, through flying. Bauman is a California pilot who shares Harper's love for chasing sunsets in vintage airplanes. The two plan to marry in August 2021.



*Bryan Harper climbs into the cockpit of his plane.
Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press*

Still a battle

Even with rising success, Harper said life has challenges.

In 2016, Harper's mom died. She was buried in Kenya.

“My mom was super cool. People loved her,” said Harper.

Months after his mom’s death, Harper’s grandma died.

Then his dad battled stage-four cancer. He survived but is battling a second bout of cancer now.

Although Harper’s family and friends say he’s well-respected across the state, Harper said he’s still tasted racism.

“Racism in Oregon is usually subtle or coy or indirect. People make a hurtful remark and then say, ‘I’m not racist.’ It’s the same as a person staggering in like, ‘I’m not drunk,’ but they are and they just don’t realize it,” he said.

His biggest challenge, he said, is that he, his siblings and his relatives carry relational wounds from his high school days, some of which haven’t healed.

Harper’s younger sister, Tiffany, lives and farms near Monroe, Ore. His other siblings are scattered around the state, nation and world.

And farming itself proves a continual battle.

Creating a legacy

Despite challenges, Harper said he’s proud to farm.

Just as his parents didn’t force him, he said he hopes to have kids and will encourage them to pursue their interests.

“I know it seems like my interests are all over the place,” he said, “but I think the common thread is either you’re in or you’re out. Being a leader in the industry, a pilot,

running track at that level, being a farmer — for each of those, you’ve really got to give it all you’ve got.”

He sat cross-legged on the airstrip, plucking grass and squinting at his T-6 as the sun lifted.

“And this land. That’s the other common thread. It’s been a constant in my life,” he said.

A favorite tree. The shape of a field. Big sky overhead.

Harper’s aunt said her nephew is extraordinary at first glance. But having grown up in the farming community, she said she thinks all farmers are full of secrets and surprises.

“I like stories about farmers,” she said. “Ordinary people who are far from ordinary.”



*Harper surveys the airstrip on his property. Although Harper came close to choosing an occupation other than farming, those close to him say he's always had a rural heart.
Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press*