

We get out of it what we put into it.... maybe more in this case.

By Diane Wellons-



Cesar Martinez, Greg Carey and Walt Williams @2021 Charles Co Fair

I can almost hear my fathers' exasperated words in my head, "young lady, you won't get anything out of it if you don't even participate." Or "how do you know you won't like it? You've never done it before." The problem for me has always been that I'm shy, painfully, desperately, hiding in the back of the room kind of shy. It was a hard way to grow up in a family with 6 kids. But grow up I did, and for the most part I grew out of a lot of the shyness (thank the stars!) I look back and realize how much I missed out on because of that little personality quirk. I can honestly say I am thrilled to be more outgoing these days, which leads me back to the topic of this article-participation.

Every year in the Southern Maryland region, fair season comes in mid-September, and for three weeks in a row, the tri-counties are a-flutter with all kinds of fair-going hubbub. Folks find themselves daydreaming of cotton candy, funnel cakes, horse pulls, and if you are a beekeeper, the honey shows. It doesn't cost a thing to participate, except your time, creativity, a little elbow grease. Plus, an ability to follow "simple" directions. My mentor is a huge advocate of participation. Not just in the fairs but, in our local bee club meetings and in events that highlight and showcase beekeepers in the region. I learned from the best. (Shout out here to Greg Carey whos' articles you have seen in this very magazine.)

I try to be a good student, here's what I have learned.



Best of Show, Walt Williams 2021 St Mary's Co fair. Walt has been the Superintendent since 2010 and he is the current Association of Southern Maryland Beekeepers Vice President.

Fair season is fun. That's the whole truth of it. It can be a lot of work if there aren't many hands to make the workload lighter. For the most part though, it's just plain fun. We all know beekeepers love to talk about bees and everything that goes into beekeeping in general. Well, this one gig will have even the most vociferous well and truly tongue tied by the end of a busy week at the honey show. Participation can come in many forms. You can show up as a volunteer to talk to the public about all the joys and misadventures of beekeeping. If you are a shy type, this is a perfect opportunity to talk to strangers about something you love- let's face it you'll never see most of them again, and they aren't going to critique you or judge you on your knowledge- only you will. It's worth doing this one event if for nothing else but meeting the public and sharing enthusiasm about your most amazing hobby. It was hard the first year, like any new experience typically is. But by the second and third years I felt so much more comfortable talking to people and engaging them in conversation. Truth be told, the bees do most of the work. Most folks don't even notice us standing there next to the huge observation hive, all they see are the bees!



Greg Carey @2021 Calvert Co. Fair educating young ones/future beekeepers

You can also make your own exhibits and show off your skills at candle making or bottling your liquid gold—delicious honey. Making home-made cosmetics or arts and crafts that showcase beekeeping as a hobby or career. There are specific rules to follow for each class you enter. Weight, size, smell, cleanliness, overall quality, presentation, or public appeal. Some judges love wax, others photographs, and others still love pollen exhibits above all things at the show. Each artisan is a craftsman. Each entry a singular work of art. You didn't know a bottle of honey could be a work-of-art, did you? Well, neither did I, until I started participating in the shows. I started off small, a couple of entries, just for kicks to see what it was all about. Honestly, I had no intention of ever entering anything after that first year. I thought I would try it, say I did it, and then walk away with knowledge and experience that would no doubt make me a better more well-rounded beekeeper/citizen and (yay) participant. Stepping outside of my comfort zone to just enter took an act of sheer will for me. But, I did it. And it was FUN! Fun enough that I wanted to do it again, and each of the last 5 years I have participated in this behind-the-scenes aspect of fair-going that I never even knew existed. Oh, by the way there's another bonus—I also got paid. Every ribbon won came with a monetary award.



Volunteer, Cesar Martinez @ 2021 Charles Co. Fair

You bet yer bippy I was surprised and thrilled to collect CASH from my very first fair. Well, then I figured I had some serious improving to do. My white ribbons improved to red, which improved to blue and wow my participation was not only fun, it was a tiny bit profitable too. THAT felt really good. I found something I loved in beekeeping and then I found something I was good at because I tried, and didn't give up. Each year my exhibits get better and more creative, and I pay closer attention to the little details. I enjoy it and the fellowship and comradery of competing with others from the region. It's a fairly small community of beekeepers, we all know each other, we spend time at other events around town throughout the year. We genuinely appreciate one another as keepers and friends. We are also very competitive! We needle one another with playful jests and mockery. It's never mean spirited or hurtful, always full of laughter and kindness that only truly belonging offers. I have made some of the most wonderful friends because of my participation and I have found a whole new kind of joy for putting myself out there and "trying." Honestly, that should say succeeding, not trying. I would have called it a success even if I had never won a single ribbon. This activity driven only by a willingness to participate, has brought so much enrichment to my life, not just as a keeper of bees but as a friend, steward, educator and volunteer.



Photo of Gerard Worrell @the 2021 Calvert Co. Honey Show. He has been the superintendent (a volunteer position) for years and beekeeper since 1972. He is one of the founding members of the Association of Southern Maryland Beekeepers.

My goal in writing this article is to encourage and inspire others to step outside of that comfort zone just a little. Try something new. Heck you were crazy enough to try beekeeping in the first place, volunteering will be a piece of cake. Participate in your local honey show. Once you do, you'll really understand the value of each of the exhibits that you see at the fair. The hard work, effort, sweat and tears that went into making each of those treasures shine is exactly what keeps folks coming back each year. Not just to gawk at the bees, but the displays as well. Give it a try, participate in some small way next season. The public is genuinely thrilled to talk with real life beekeepers who are singing the praises of the mighty honey bee- one honey show exhibit at a time. Happy keeping friends.