

## MEET CHARLIE CALDWELL OF OVIS HILL FARMS



Charlie Caldwell is a fixture of the local farming community, as is his wife Alice and colleague Mary Ellen DeWitt. Pioneers of local markets around here, they joined with the city a few years ago and have been regular sellers at the market ever since.

Through their regular business, Ovis Hill Farm in Darlington County, they grow and/or sell certified organic seasonal vegetables; pasture-raised, grass-fed lamb and beef; and poultry, eggs, and dairy products. All meat is USDA inspected, hormone and antibiotic free.

“We realized early on we needed to provide a pretty full food basket,” said Charlie in-between serving customers at the Market. So, they teamed with other local food providers such

as local dairies for grass-fed milk, cheese and butter; and others for pasture pork, free-range chickens, micro greens and more.

Long before the farm, Charlie was a platoon commander in the Marine Corps during Vietnam, assigned to “Fox 2/9,” a rifle company part of the 3rd Marine Division.

“After 9/11, 2/9 was reactivated as a special anti-terrorism unit and deployed to the Middle East,” Charlie said. “I was too old to go, but my heart went with them. Semper Fi!”



**(military photo-**To the far left is Charlie Caldwell, now of Ovis Hill Farm, but then Platoon Commander - with Squad Leaders of the 2nd Platoon, Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines, July, 1969, Quang Tri Province, Vietnam. Fox 2/9 (how Marines refer to a unit) was a rifle company, part of the 3rd Marine Division.)

After his service, Charlie pursued a career in the graphic arts industry, moving to this area with Alice, a full-time nurse practitioner, nearly 20 years ago. They started the farm with sheep, added chickens for eggs, and it snowballed from there. Ovis Hill also uses its farm and farmers markets as the base and support for organizing and producing on-the-farm, hands-on educational programs for local schools and groups.

They started doing deliveries and for more than 12 years have continued to run their own mobile grocery store/market. They eventually added the City Center Market to their circuit, bringing their quality, hard-to-find products, along with their expertise and personal charm.

“A lot of our customers want to know who’s growing their food,” Charlie said. “They just want to know it’s done clean and *locally*. There’s no better form of food security.”

Alice said doing a market is hard work, taking several hours of preparation beforehand, followed by an hour-and-a-half setup once at the market, and then another hour-and-a-half back at home.

But their regular customers, who come out despite “rain, snow or cold,” make it worthwhile. “And we get new people every week, curious about what we and other vendors will have,” she said.

The community has embraced Ovis Hill for its healthy products and expertise, but people also connect with the down-to-earth, neighborly demeanors of the folks under the City Center Market’s Ovis Hill tent.

Speaking of, on this day customer Trudy Muench braved unusually low temperatures for the kinds of meats and vegetables she routinely buys from Ovis Hill Farm.

“I’ve been following Charlie ever since I moved to Florence,” Trudy said. “I came here from Miami and wondered how I would get quality food that I know is produced locally, in humane circumstances. But someone turned me on to Charlie.”

*Text and current photography by Neil Hopwood*