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When he finally called it quits after 27 years in law enforcement, including as a narcotics detective on Hawaii Island, Mike Hodson knew he needed a hobby. He needed something to help ease his tension, and to salve his troubled soul.

That something became the soil.

“The first time I really put my hands in the soil, I could feel it flowing out of me into the ground. All that negativity,” he said.

From its simple beginnings as a form of self-therapy, Hodson’s hobby has grown into a thriving agri-business in Waimea — Wow! Farms, which now supplies thousands of pounds of ripe, organic tomatoes to resorts along the Kohala coast, among other customers.

“We started out with one greenhouse. When we had enough for ourselves, we would give them away to friends. Then, we had so much we would sell them at the farmer’s market," he said.

His business went from one greenhouse to 45, producing an annual gross of about $800,000. The simple act of returning to the land helped Hodson to cast off the harsh memories associated with his former life, and ended up profiting himself and his family. It worked so well, in fact, that he’s now helping to teach others how to do the same thing.

On Saturday, various state and Hawaii Island dignitaries gathered in Waimea to celebrate the graduation of an inaugural class of 14 students from a program, Veterans to Farmers, which aims to teach veterans the business of agriculture.

In total, six of the students are veterans, and all are members of the Waimea Hawaiian Homesteaders Association.

The HHA has partnered with the state Department of Labor and Industrial Relations, the University of Hawaii, the state Department of Agriculture, and others, to provide future farmers with the education, the land, and the support needed to build thriving careers in agricultural business.

Begun in June, the first phase of the project involved education at Wow! Farms — training the class to become proficient in the technical and business skills needed to succeed in farming. The second phase, which begins now, will allow the students to build and farm their own greenhouses, leased to them on property provided by the Office of Hawaiian Affairs.

Hodson said it was important to note that while the program gave the students the tools to learn to be good farmers, the future is up to them.

“These are their greenhouses,” said, “and they are going to grow whatever they want to grow. Tomatoes, bell peppers, flowers. The choice is theirs.”

Among Saturday’s attendees was University of Hawaii at Hilo Chancellor Don Straney, who
described the program as an “anti-plantation.”

“A crucial question is, how do we recruit the next generation of agri-business people?” Straney said. “After the (sugar) plantations left, farming has almost become a dirty word. ... We’re showing them that that’s not the kind of farming we’re doing today. They’re not working for someone else’s farm. They’re creating their own small business from the land. Something to thrive with, and to support their family.”

Former U.S. Marine and retired Mauna Lani Golf Course employee Daniel Kahuanui said he was thrilled with the education portion of the class, and he can’t wait to get his hands dirty.

“I want to grow bell peppers,” he said. “My son learned about hydroponics, and he got me interested in farming. It’s a very interesting hobby for me.”

Kahuanui added that he’ll also try his hand at growing onions and carrots, and anything else that strikes his fancy.

“Farmers are responsible for putting food on the table, and I want to be part of that,” he said.

Retired police chaplain, veteran, and pastor at New Hope Waimea, Sonny Shimaoka said he got a 99-year lease on five acres in Waimea and built a greenhouse there to raise cherry tomatoes. He’s thinking of calling his farm “Tossed Salad.”

At 61 years old, he added that he realizes he’s a bit old to begin a new career.

“But,” he said, “it’s better late than never.”

Also in attendance at Saturday’s graduation ceremony was Gov. Neil Abercrombie, who program organizers said had provided them with great support throughout the process.

“There is no question that Hawaii needs more farmers,” Abercrombie said. “This graduation ceremony is a very positive sign that valuable sectors of our community, our veterans and homesteaders, have the spirit and the motivation to fill this critical need, and I am hopeful that this course can be replicated throughout our state.”

Going forward, organizers say they hope the program will serve as a model for other programs across the state, helping to make Hawaii more self-sufficient. The farmer-training program is part of a broader community and economic development effort that the governor is supporting through a biennium budget request for a $3.5 million capital improvement project to build the Waimea Community Agricultural Park, which would enable the extension of the farmer training to people who do not own their own agricultural land.

UH-Hilo also expects to soon approve the curriculum for the course, making the course eligible for veterans to use their GI Bill education benefits.

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