

Watauga County Farmers' Market continues to build community a year after Hurricane Helene

By Hope Davis



Photo courtesy of [The Watauga Democrat](#)

BOONE, NC – As the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Helene approaches, The Watauga County Farmers' Market continues to serve as a bustling hub for the community, providing not only fresh food and local goods for the High Country, but a system of support and family.

On Saturday mornings, the often vacant parking lot of 591 Horn in the West Drive, home of America's longest-running Revolutionary War outdoor drama, Horn in the West, trades their annual show of muskets and gunpowder for fresh flowers and produce, transforming into an energetic crowd of local vendors and customers alike. It is a place where the rhythm of the community feels warm, simple and beautifully alive.

Just a year ago, those same warm voices that echoed their laughter off the old wooden stalls were unsure if they would ever see another market in Watauga County again.

On Sept. 27th, 2024, Hurricane Helene made landfall over Western North Carolina, dumping up to 20 to 30 inches of rainfall over the mountainous region, bringing along with it large-scale flash flooding, catastrophic landslides and hundreds of fatalities. To date, the National Hurricane Center has named it the second deadliest hurricane to hit the continental United States since Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

For farmers and artisans in rural areas, Helene posed an especially-unique challenge. As the late days of September are generally considered to be the prime harvest season for those growing crops, a natural disaster like a hurricane can destroy months and even years of hard work. Loss of land, flooded fields, and thousands of dollars worth of damage are just some of the obstacles the community faced head-on.

As farmers and consumers alike began to assess the damage and process the large-scale devastation to their beloved community, local spaces like the Watauga County Farmers' Market took the form of not only a vital resource, but a system of support and family.

“A lot of people would get together to discuss who unfortunately didn't survive, who did survive and how much property damage they had,” said Billy Joe Ward, a local vendor who has been selling handmade wood-crafts at the market since 1994. “That hurricane just came and just sat.”

The market additionally serves as a source of produce for local outreach organizations like F.A.R.M. Cafe, a non-profit which stands for “Feeding All Regardless of Means” and focuses on providing accessible, high-quality meals to all members of the community



Billy Joe Ward in front of his booth. Photo Courtesy of Watauga County Farmers' Market

“During the hurricane, F.A.R.M. Cafe was open on the weekends for quite a while, just trying to feed the community,” said Evan Guiney, an Appalachian State University student and intern for the organization. “People lost their homes, people couldn't have access to food, and we just wanted to make sure people had a warm meal and a nice full belly.”

One year later, as farmers, businesses, families, and homeowners are still rebuilding, the role of the market has remained vital in nurturing a community that has faced such devastation.

Lynda Hamborger of Heritage Homestead sets up shop at the market almost every weekend, helping her family's creamery sell goat cheese and other dairy products. As she greeted customers with a comforting smile, she reflected on what the market meant to her.

“As a retired person, I really appreciate having something to do,” said Hamborger. “Just having something concrete, that I never thought I would do – I never thought I would retire to be a goat cheese maker, who would’ve dreamed it?”



“I’m finding it very rewarding,” she said between laughs. “This group of people, they’re just the greatest people. It’s a very vibrant and busy market, there’s always something going on. I’ve visited other markets here and in other states, and this one just really, for the most part, is local people, not people trucking in vegetables from far away.”

The Watauga County Farmers’ Market takes place every Saturday throughout the months of April to November, located right in the center of Boone.

*Lynda Hamborger (right) with her family at the market.
Photo Courtesy of Watauga County Farmers’ Market*