

# The Recorder

IN THE COMMUNITY, ABOUT THE COMMUNITY, SINCE 1877.

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## AMI welcomes new staff

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER



**Below: The AMI cohort this season is, from left, front: executive director Sue Erhardt; village manager Maggie Wilder; fellow Grayson Shelor of Tennessee; fellow Elora Overbey, Virginia.; fellow Maya Epelbaum, New Jersey; fellow Sophia Hutnik, New York; fellow Mary-Ellen Garner, Florida; education director Jessa Fowler; founder and board president Laurie Berman; back: fellow Patrick Banks, Wisconsin; farm manager Carter Wallace; fellow Stephen Rodriguez, Kentucky; fellow Matthew Kitchen, Virginia. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)**

MONTEREY — Allegheny Mountain Institute staff members Sue Erhardt, executive director, and Jessa Fowler, education director, took part in The Highland Center open house June 2.

Erhardt joined AMI as its new executive director in March. With AMI offices at the Virginia School for Deaf and the Blind in Staunton, and the AMI campus in Hightown, she splits her time between the two locations. Originally from East Lansing, Mich, Erhardt has worked more than 20 years for conservation nonprofits in inner city Detroit and Washington, D.C. She joined AMI after working years at Casey Trees, an urban forestry nonprofit planting trees in Washington, D.C. Erhardt earned her undergraduate degree from Michigan State University and her graduate degree from University of Michigan.

“I’m excited to be here and help further AMI’s mission of nutrition education, and I’m excited to welcome this exceptional new group of s to the mountain,” Erhardt said. The new cohort arrived April 30.

Fowler is an AMI ship graduate who joined the staff in October to manage the program. She and husband, Chris Swecker, moved back to the area in January after about two years in Seattle, Washington. “I’m excited to be a part of this dynamic community,” Fowler said. “There is a local foods movement under way, and AMI is excited to be a part of it.”

Fowler earned her graduate degree in education at University of Washington while in Seattle. She earned her undergraduate degree at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon.

The eight AMI fellows of the 2017- 18 cohort hail from as far as Florida and Wisconsin and as close as Lynchburg. The fellows participate in weekly workshops with local experts, and take gardening, leadership, and community development classes as part of the AMI curriculum. They are involved in the community through farmers market demonstrations, helping with the school garden program, and hosting a gardening radio show.

AMI Stephen Rodriguez of Lexington, Ky. said the program has taught him about sustainable agriculture and exploring the wilderness. That’s important, he said, because he has spent a lot of time in the education

system, and his AMI experience allows him to gain training through hands-on experience.

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