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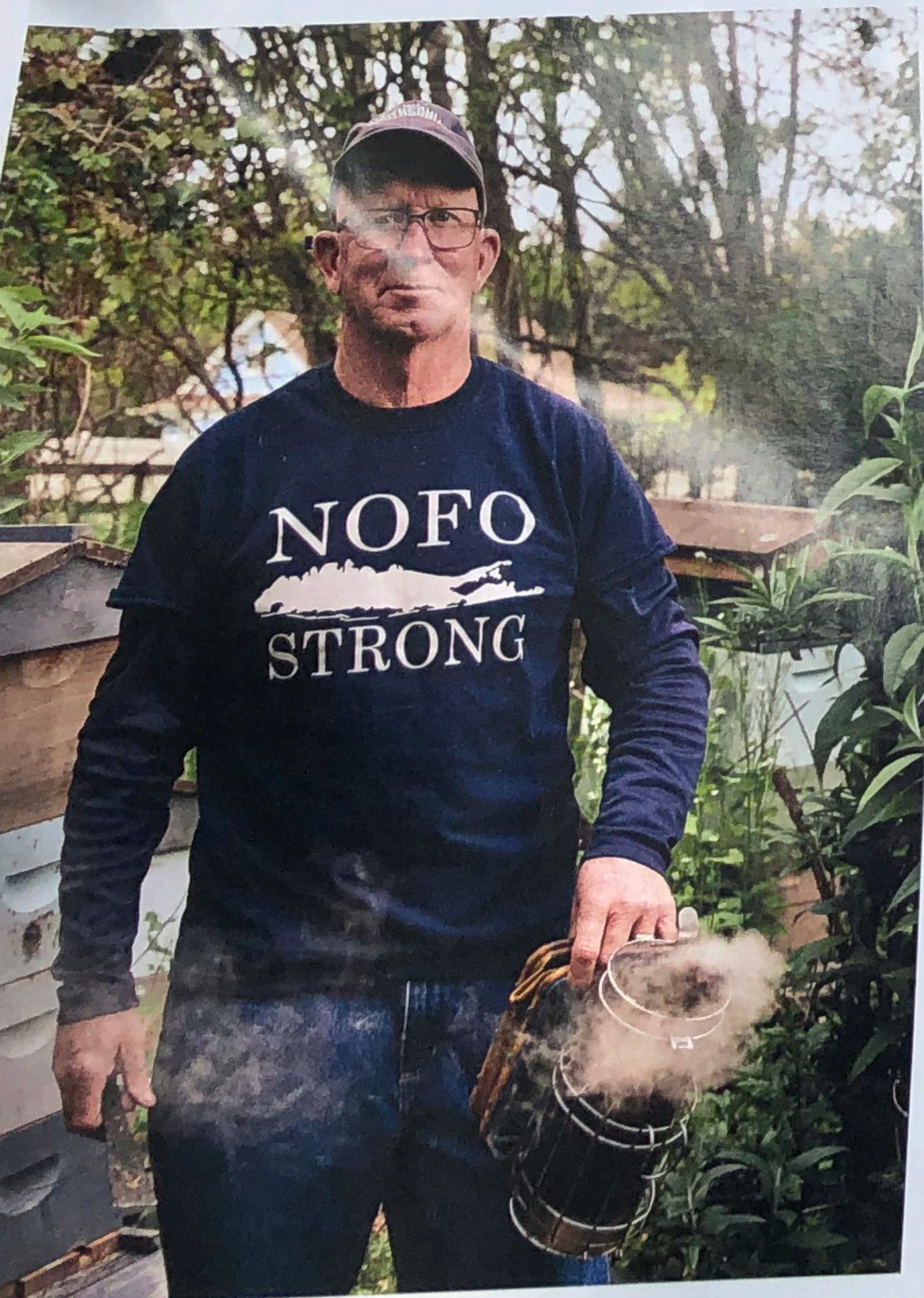
A PERFECT
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THE LIFE OF A BEEKEEPER

What starts as a hobby for many North Forkers often becomes a passion

BY FELICIA LALOMIA

PHOTOS BY DAVID BENTHAL



Taking in his hand a tin canister that looks like a cut-off limb from the Tin Man, master beekeeper Chris Kelly lights a small amount of brush placed in the bottom half of the container. White smoke pours out of the spigot, exacerbated by the pillow-like bellows Kelly pushes. He focuses the smoke around the tall house-like structures that hold the bees.

"I call this misfit island," he said, pointing to the seven or so stacks of crates that hold each hive in his backyard. "Each one of these colonies has a story. They all came out of hive removal from somebody's house, office or building. I bring them back here so I can baby them."

These are only a fraction of the 200 colonies Kelly owns, not including the 150 colonies he manages on other people's properties. "It is one of these hobbies where once you start it, it can get out of hand," he said. "They are just an amazing creature to watch."

Kelly has been beekeeping for over 50 years and sees his business, Promised Land Apiaries, in two ways. One part is the honey — selling it. The other part is the education.



..... A look inside beekeeper
Chris Kelly's home operation.



"I think the best part is teaching others the wonder of the beehive," he said. "I never cease to get enjoyment — it's such a beautiful thing to see the discovery of how bees affect the environment that you live in. If you listen to them, they will teach you."

Someone who has sought out guidance from Kelly is Laurie Appel. After taking classes at Agway two years ago, she now manages about five hives during the season, however most are not on her property.

"If I have extra hives, then I look for people who would like to have a hive, but not take care of [it]," she said, adding that she will visit them every two to three weeks. "A lot of times, they'll have gardens or lots of flowers. It's a nice little addition. They can learn about it from a distance, and it's something to talk about."

Currently honey bees face three threats, Kelly said. One is a parasite called the *Varroa destructor*.

"It is the single most devastating parasite that we've ever seen and we are not ahead of the curve," he said.

Another is the fractured forage area — the more land developed, the less land available for bees to forage on.

The last is pesticides.

To help out the honey bees, you don't have to become a beekeeper yourself. There are much simpler ways.

"Most of the time people ask me, 'What can I do?'" Kelly said. "What I say is not everybody can keep bees, but almost everybody can put a plant in that is pollinator friendly."

Back on misfit island, Kelly pried open the top to another hive with what he called a hive tool. He picked back up the smoker.

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caption caption caption caption

"The tools of the trade are really these two things," he said. "And both have been used for over 150 years."

The sticky material that makes it difficult for Kelly to pull off the wooden top is called propolis or bee glue, a material bees make from beeswax and their saliva. It's made by the "engineering department" of the bee colony, he said. "What they do is if the space is less than a quarter of an inch, they seal it with the propolis. If it's over a quarter of an inch, they will build extra comb."

He pulled out a frame with a swarm of honey bees busy at work, moving around in frantic motions.

"And that," he said, pointing to the honeycomb buildup, "is the highway department. They build the foundation."

He puffed more smoke into the air as he slid the frame back in.

"I like to say it calms the beekeeper more than the bees," he laughed, referencing the smoke. Kelly is currently in the main honey flow season, May and June, when bees are producing the most amount of honey on Long Island. In July, Kelly will take over for the bees and extract all that honey to sell.

"Beekeeping is what I call one part science and one part art," he said. "My ethos is I want to impact the honey and bees as little as possible." Because of that, when Kelly harvests the honey, he doesn't filter it. So to many, his honey may look a little cloudier than what's available in the grocery store. But what he keeps is a lot more nuances in the aroma and flavor.

Someone who felt inspired by Kelly to take the jump into beekeeping is Kaitlyn Knapp.

"I've always been interested in beekeeping, but I had no idea where to begin," she said. "You can find all of these beekeeping Instagram accounts that make it look easy, but I knew that couldn't be true."




So when her husband bought her beekeeping classes from Kelly, that was her saving grace. Knapp is currently in her second year of beekeeping.

"I find beekeeping to be very intriguing. My husband, Taylor, helps me take care of the bees and I really enjoy having someone to share the experience with," she said. "There is so much to look for during inspections, and it is always exciting to see how much a hive has progressed since the week prior."

But she would be lost without the classes at Promised Land Apiaries.

"I would absolutely recommend taking a class," she said. "There is so much more to beekeeping than what I had originally thought, and I would not have been as successful during my first year if I hadn't taken classes."

As the sun started to set over the back hill of his yard, Kelly pulled out one last frame from a hive. In it are no bees, but instead a thick layer of honey suspended in honeycomb. He stuck his finger in it. The comb collapsed as the honey flowed down the frame. He moved his finger to his mouth and licked it.

"Isn't that great?" he said. 

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