

## Annie's Project celebrates 10 years of education



By Susan Collins-Smith  
MSU Ag Communications

JACKSON -- As the number of female leaders in agriculture increases, a program dedicated to their success prepares to expand.

Annie's Project teaches women in agriculture-related fields problem solving, record keeping and decision-making skills. Facilitated by Mississippi State University's Extension Service, organizers plan to train educators across the state to deliver the program. Extension educators in the 25 Mississippi counties with the highest number of female landowners and principal operators will learn to teach the workshops.

Sylvia Clark, MSU Extension family and consumer sciences associate who works with Annie's Project, said the expansion makes the training more accessible to the growing number of women in agriculture.

"Women have always played roles in family farm businesses, and this class increases their skill level and confidence," Clark said. "The number of women taking on leadership roles associated with agriculture is growing every year. Women are returning to family farms with the intent to run them."

Clark said several of the state's enterprises are managed or co-managed by women. An increasing number of vet school graduates are women, and 60 percent of Extension offices are now led by women.

Annie's Project workshops cover business plans, bookkeeping, human resources, marketing, risk management, estate planning and technology. Women are introduced to Extension resources and community service providers, such as attorneys and bankers, who can help them with specific issues.

To mark the program's 10th anniversary, Annie's Project graduates came together May 7 in Jackson to celebrate the success and expansion of the program with Annie's Project founder Ruth Hambleton.

A retired University of Illinois Extension agricultural economist, Hambleton created Annie's Project in 2003 in honor of her mother, Annette Fleck. Fleck married a farmer and faced the challenges of managing a multi-generational household and a farm.

"As a child I watched my mother run our farm, handling the bookkeeping and financial decision-making," Hambleton said. "She later took on the physical labor when my father took an off-farm job to make ends meet. I married a farmer and delivered educational programming to women for more than 25 years as an Extension employee."

Along the way, Hambleton said she realized that many women were not getting the full benefit of workshops intended to help them. So she set out to create a program that would give women a comfortable place to share experiences and network while learning business, computer and interpersonal skills.

"Women have a unique way of learning," Hambleton said. "They like to share experiences and need to feel comfortable asking questions. Extension programming provides valuable, research-based information that women need. But if they are embarrassed to ask questions or say they don't understand the material, they won't benefit from



Ruth Hambleton (left), who founded Annie's Project in 2003, talks with graduates of the program May 7 at the program's 10th anniversary celebration. Annie's Project teaches females in agriculture-related fields problem-solving, record keeping and decision-making skills. (Photo by MSU Ag Communications/Susan Collins-Smith)

it.”

Hambleton said the program's format is the key to its success.

“Women get to talk about what matters to them, share their ideas and experiences and get training that helps them fulfill their responsibilities as farm women,” she said.

Jan Holley, who owns Holley Farm with her husband in Itawamba County, attended one of the first Annie's Project trainings in the state. Her experience in the class led the Holleys to add an agritourism component to the family's fifth generation row crop operation. For the last five years, from September through October, the farm has offered several attractions, including a corn maze, pumpkin patch, rides, games, food and a country store.

“Attending Annie's Project was the main stepping stone to get us to where we are now,” Holley said. “I had started exploring the idea of agritourism before the class, but the program offered me the information and connections I needed to put my idea in motion. The class really empowered me and helped me discover my self-confidence.”

The forum in which the program is delivered helps participants forge a social network that is critical to helping women like Holley reach their goals.

“Being able to connect with other farm women is a huge, huge asset,” Holley said. “It helps me realize I am not alone. There are other women out there who have the same concerns, ideas and backgrounds.

“It gives us that sense of, ‘Yes, we can do this. We can make these decisions and be successful,’” Holley said.

For more information about Annie's Project, visit <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/annie> or contact the local Extension office.

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Contact: Sylvia Clark, (662) 325-1696; Dr. Bobbie Shaffett, (662) 325-3080

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