



AFT PHOTO APRIL ANN OPATIK

Women for the Land

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

The New Faces of American Farming

Over the past few decades, women have entered agriculture in unprecedented numbers. Increasingly, women own farmland, are new farmers, or have become more involved in all aspects of agriculture. There are now nearly one million women farm operators and over a half million additional women landowners who lease their land to farmers. Nearly 301 million acres of U.S. land—about a third of the nation’s land in farms—are now farmed or co-farmed by women, and at least 87 million additional acres are in the hands of women landowners.

Throughout AFT’s target regions, women farmers and non-operating landowners are making tremendous strides in taking control over the conservation decisions made about their land.



AFT PHOTO

AFT’s Women for the Land Initiative: Learning Circles

Research shows many women farmers and landowners have a strong conservation and stewardship ethic. American Farmland Trust’s national Women for the Land initiative addresses the obstacles women landowners face in accessing conservation programs and resources. In part, the initiative hosts “learning circles” that empower women landowners to adopt environmentally sound farming practices, protect farmland, and improve the viability of their farms. Women for the Land combines research, on-the-ground projects, and policy efforts to transform the agricultural landscape and develop a new voice for conservation.



Lesley Riker, Ohio
Learning Circle Participant

Lesley Riker never imagined being a full-time farmer—until recently when her husband fell incredibly ill with multiple sclerosis. “The biggest challenge was myself,” Lesley recalls, “I didn’t have enough knowledge or skills to address issues such as farm equipment maintenance or the right time of planting. These are skills you can only gain over time and by

working directly in the field. Luckily, the farm was co-managed with lifelong friend, Dan. “I wouldn’t have been able to farm this land without Dan, co-farmer and mentor. I would suggest every beginning farmer find someone you can trust and learn from,” Lesley recommends. Lesley farms over 750 acres and has a strong belief in giving back to the land. All the acreage is in no-till conservation practices and some acres are sown with cover crops. Just like a harvest season, life has a way of shifting in many different directions—for some that means taking over a different lifestyle and career. Lesley had to overcome many challenges but found support and knowledge from a dedicated mentor, attending a women’s learning circle, and finding trust from her family.

Kathy Kaesebier, Illinois
Learning Circle Participant



Kathy Kaesebier saw farming as a legacy she wished to continue; it was in her blood. “I knew from when I was a young girl that I loved the land and wanted to always be a part of it. Both my husband, Rick, and I started farming in 1980. My husband and I have always been a team,” Kathy expressed. For many women, like Kathy, finding resources and pro-

professionals to talk with can be difficult. Kathy mentioned, “The AFT women’s learning circles are a unique experience and an opportunity to speak with and learn with a room full of women. It gave me courage to seek out more women in the farming community and to continue talking with professionals on implementing conservation practices.” Kathy and Rick were already implementing no-till on all 700 acres. Since the learning circle and an AFT soil health program, they have increased their cover crop conservation practice to about two-thirds of the land. Kathy and her husband continue seeking deeper knowledge and an understanding of agriculture as a whole-system approach. It is their land that unites them and their desire to see their farms stay farms in the future—and, it’s in their blood.

Dena Vittorio, Indiana
W4L Circle Participant



Dena Vittorio always dreamed of continuing to farm her family’s land, but when she was young, she became a widowed single mom who needed a steady income. At the time, farming wasn’t a feasible way to make a steady income. Dena stated, “My grandpa began farming this specific farm in 1887. My professional life as a church pastor took me away from the

farm, yet I never gave up the dream that one day I would return. Twenty-five years later, my husband and I returned in 2003.” She knew she needed to gain more confidence and opportunities to ask questions without judgement. After searching for opportunities, she came across the Women Food and Ag website and the Women Caring for the Land learning circles. Farming can be seen as a solitary journey, especially for women who want to understand why soil and food health are so important. Dena expressed, “Being in the presence of other women farmers who speak the same language and express the same passion for their farms is like coming home—changing my solitary farm life to solidarity. I felt like I received more than what I was expecting.”



Marlila Hickins, Virginia
Learning Circle Participant

Marlila Hickins calls herself an accidental farmer. Four years after moving back to the family farm and in the midst of raising five children, tragedy fell upon the Hickins family. In February 2006, Marlila’s husband passed away in a plane crash. Through the support of her family, friends, community, church, and Marlila’s undeniable strength and passion,

she and her children were able to continue living on the farm. Marlila’s impetus to operate the land on her own, without the renter, began when she attended an AFT women’s learning circle. Marlila said the women’s learning circles are a beautiful way for women to learn and share with their hearts. Three learning circles later, Marlila finds herself with confidence she didn’t know existed. “From my very first learning circle to my last circle, my attitude changed to view everything as a learning experience. I am able to confidently go into a room full of male farmers and feel as if I have earned and gained permission to speak for my land. My point of view matters.” Marlila has brought responsibility and stewardship for the land that will last forever.

To read more stories and learn about the initiative visit www.farmland.org/initiatives/womenfortheland or contact Jennifer Filipiak, AFT’s midwest director, at jfiliplik@farmland.org or (515) 868-1331