

# **Livestock and Laundry, Crops and Kids: A Woman's Role in Agriculture**

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I want to thank Byron Leu for asking me to speak today and I think Denise had something to do with this too. So thank you both. Byron called me back in October. I think all of you can remember, or maybe you don't want to remember, what the weather was like then. It was raining and at home we were all trying to think of jobs to accomplish until the monsoon let up. Everyone was anxious to get the corn out of the field and let our cows have some good grazing on the stalks. Byron asked if I could come and talk about women in agriculture. I wasn't quite sure what he exactly wanted me to talk about, because women in agriculture is a pretty broad topic. As far as I am concerned, it is the second oldest profession, and I think you all know what the first is.

So I thought I'd start out by telling you how much I know about overhauling a tractor.  
.....Now that we have that out of the way, I'll tell you some things I do know.

I was born and raised in Herington, Kansas which is south of Manhattan. I grew up on the Western edge of the Flint Hills where you can still see some fences and corner posts made out of limestone. I don't think growing up in Kansas was much different than any farm kid in Iowa, other than I probably enjoyed a little more sun and endured a lot more wind. I was in 4-H and showed cattle, hogs and horses. I often got reprimanded for not knowing how or not wanting to learn how to cook and wanting to be outside most of the time. We ran an 800 head cow/calf herd consisting of purebred Angus, Charolais and Gelbvieh cows. Our commercial cows were predominantly black baldies. The horses earned their keep as all cattle were rounded up on horse back. And, as most farm families, we always had plenty to do. Between farm work, school and sports I stayed out of trouble or maybe I just dodged things that came my way.

I was more than ready to be a K-Stater and wear purple when the time came. But where I got off track was when I started out majoring in Apparel and Textile marketing. I did like to sew and had the ambition to light the world on fire as a buyer but something just didn't cut it. So I switched to a business marketing major and after one semester I finally saw the light. It took me a whole year to realize I was in the wrong place. You see, my real love was what I had grown up doing. Why I thought I needed to do something different was beyond me. So I started down the path of agribusiness. Finally I really enjoyed my classes. They were interesting. I actually looked forward to going to class. Learning about agriculture and all the different aspects of economics, animal science, crops, horticulture and so much more was a world of its own. And back then the guy to gal ratio in agribusiness wasn't too bad either. But I wasn't concerned with that. I was career oriented. Economics fascinated me. Learning how supply and demand rule all commodities is a pretty cool thing. I actually could take things I was learning in school back home and apply the concepts on the farm. My Dad thought I was getting a great education and

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when your parents are pleased life always seems to go a little smoother. It wasn't until my last year of college that the trouble I had missed before or dodged found me. His name was Charlie. This career minded gal had to step back and make some choices. It's funny how life always makes us do that, isn't it? Make choices. And to top it off, we are supposed to make good choices. Well, the choice really wasn't that hard. We were married and moved to Denver, Colorado. Charlie worked for the North American Limousin Foundation and I took a job with the Beef Promotion and Research Board. We bought a fixer upper house with a few barns and a few acres and 12 months later our first son Mathias was born. So I guess you could say this is when my career really started. I quit my job at the Beef Board to be a stay at home mom. We started building our cow herd while we were in Colorado and I taught riding lessons with Mathias on my back or in the stroller. Life seemed to be going well. I was able to take care of the cows, teach a few lessons and manage through Charlie's travel schedule. I guess somebody thought I needed more to keep me busy and nineteen months later we were blessed with Michael.

You know, growing up I was never one of those girls who liked little kids. I never baby sat. I really didn't even like babies. I thought they really just slobbered all the time and have you ever had to change somebody else's kids diaper. But as most of us know, when you have a child of your own it all changes. The slobber is not so much and the diaper thing, you just get used to it. Life is full of surprises as well as those choices I mentioned earlier.

In May of 1997 we loaded the cows on the semi and the furniture in the Uhaul and moved back to eastern Iowa. Charlie started working for Laura's Lean Beef doing cattle procurement and research for the company. We moved back close to Charlie's family and finally we were able to raise cattle the way they were meant to be raised. I'll never forget Charlie saying to this Kansas girl, "You are going to love it there. We are moving back to God's country." Well that particular year we moved back I started to question his God's country. We didn't see the sun for a stretch of 4 weeks. We kept the heater on in the house till June and that summer this Kansas girl thought she was going to melt away or have a heat stroke. But I survived and if you asked me today I would have to agree with Charlie we do live in God's country. One thing that I would like to say though is that in every place I have lived or visited with cattle producers, they all think that they live in God's country. I'm just glad they really know who's country it is.

As our cow herd started to grow, so do responsibilities. Charlie working for Laura's Lean Beef meant a steady income for our operation. That also meant he was gone quite a bit and I was at home "manning the fort" or taking care of the operation. Now for all of us who have been in agriculture for some time, we realize that the word **income** is a nice word and when you add **steady** to it that sounds even better. So we all did what we had to do. One of my favorite things to say is "you just need to pull your boot straps up" Well believe me there were many a night I felt I was wearing hip waders. But you do what needs to be done and you get through it. That is what life is all about and all those great choices we get to make.

Being a woman in agriculture means making those choices and to me the first step is:

Asking yourself, "**Why am I involved in agriculture?**"  
Am I involved because I enjoy agriculture?

Am I involved because I'm married to agriculture?

These two reasons I think are very common today and really need to be looked at in order to make an operation successful. We as women need to step back and really ask ourselves this question. For myself I truly enjoy agriculture. And maybe it is because I grew up with it and maybe it is because I understand how everything depends on everything else to make things happen. Now if you married agriculture, there is a lot to learn to get up to speed. But not to worry - with a lot of communication we can get there.

I think one of the hardest things growing up in agriculture is understanding how everything depends on one another. I like to think of it as the domino effect. If one thing doesn't get done today it affects what happens tomorrow, either good or bad. You never know what will happen until that day. You never know what your schedule will be because of what might have to be done that day depending on the weather. If it is going to rain we need to move cows off of new seeding. If it is going to freeze we need to clean yards and haul manure. If it is going to be dry and not rain in the summer you better be making hay. So as a parent my children have heard these words "we will have to see" quite often. Which brings me to a trait that women in agriculture must have.

**We have to be flexible.**

Wow, it is a lot easier to say it than to be it, that is for sure. Let me say it again for myself. I HAVE TO BE FLEXIBLE. One more time I HAVE TO BE FLEXIBLE. Just because I grew up with this lifestyle doesn't mean I don't have to keep taking refresher courses. It's hard. Being flexible a lot of times means putting what you would like to do or get done on the back burner. Which includes laundry, cleaning the house – well I've given up on that one, cooking – although eventually everyone does like to eat, the garden, the lawn, or here's one for you, time for yourself. You know time is an interesting thing. It is a very valuable commodity. When we are younger we don't value it so much. We think about ourselves and time, but as we get older it becomes even more valuable and we never can get enough. The time we want is not for ourselves so much but time with our family. Time to enjoy the people around us.

So as I was learning to be more flexible, what better way than to have another child. That's where Samuel came into the picture. Now I was just starting to get the kid thing down, the diapers and all that slobber that I talked about before. I had two arms, one for each child or Charlie had one while I had the other but now where does the third one go? I HAVE TO BE FLEXIBLE, remember? Here go those boot straps again. Charlie was still traveling two to three nights a week. Our cow herd was growing. We were determined to make it work. But in order to make it work we have to be flexible and diversified. The question was how can we make a living doing what we enjoy? That really is the big question, isn't it? And sometimes it comes down to doing things that others are not willing or able to do. Developing bred heifers is one area in the cattle industry we chose to expand in. We are willing to take the time and the financial investment to manage and produce a group of females that are functional and ready to perform. Now convincing the banker that in a year and half we will see a return on the investment, that gets to be the tricky part. We also have an embryo transfer program where we use our cows for embryo recipients and calve them out for our customers. Here again, it takes

more time and effort than just turning the bull in. We are able to wean the calves in September and sell them for fat steer price. This gives our cows an extra opportunity to fatten up for the next year and that works for us. I think that is another thing that is sometimes forgotten by us producers. Maybe what works for Joe down the road isn't going to work for us. And what works for us might not work for Joe. That is what we have to decide. What works for our operation?

The second step for women in agriculture is deciding exactly that.

### **Am I a Partner in the Operation?**

Being a partner in the operation is going to be different in every situation but it is critical that you are a partner. A hands on partner is someone like myself who works together with her husband on a daily basis, making decisions to achieve the same goal. A hands off partner is someone who is choosing to have an off farm job which contributes financially through benefits as well as supplemental income to the operation. Both are equally important to a successful farming or livestock operation. But you have to make a choice. You have to choose what type of partner you will be. There is no reason to have splinters on this one from riding the fence. A good choice must be made. And I think it starts with deciding:

### **What do I enjoy doing?**

Do I enjoy being outside each and everyday? Cold days, hot days, rainy days - have to love it all? Do I enjoy going to work where I have more interaction with the public? Or do I know the minute I step outside, I'm at the office? In today's economy we all are tightening our belts trying to do things more efficiently. The main goal is to know what you do best and be able to contribute your assets when needed. Most of the time what we are good at is also what we enjoy. So we must ask ourselves, "What am I good at and how can I contribute the most to our operation?"

Now when our fourth child, Miranda joined our team in 2001, I know a lot of people were thinking that Charlie must be putting his education in reproductive physiology he learned in grad school to use and I must be really good at having children. And in all honesty, I guess we were.

Finding your expertise is important. We as women in agriculture need to be involved in the operation at some level. We need goals that we can achieve. We need to be responsible for some part of the operation and we need to be needed. It is that easy. So let's look at the advantages and disadvantages of being a hands on vs. a hands off partner.

The biggest disadvantage of being a hands on partner vs. hands off, is not having that off farm income to be able to fall back on or use for a cushion. You have to perform. Or another one I like to say is you have to take the bull by the horns and make things happen. Responsibility - It all rests on you. The choices you make each day, small or large, contribute to your success. The domino effect is always a factor. What you get done today will affect tomorrow. Long range planning 5, 10 years it is a must. Do you have a plan? And how will you make it happen? It is up to you. You can't pass the buck and wait for someone else to decide how your operation will be running in 1, 5 or 10 years.

For me the advantages are great in number or I wouldn't be doing what I am doing. The greatest advantage in my book which some would probably consider a disadvantage, is getting to **work with my husband every day**. Now believe me, I could not truthfully say that 365 days out of the year I enjoy working with Charlie but I can say that 355 days out of the year we make a really good team and life is pretty enjoyable at each others side.

The **freedom** that comes with owning your own operation is a big one. My dad always said we work hard and we play hard and it stays in that order. This holds true for our team today. The hard part is keeping the balance. If I get sick, Charlie is pretty lenient with sick days. It's just those vacation days I have to keep working on.

**Nothing stays the same and each day is different** is also a plus. Being a partner in your own operation always creates new things each day. You might be loading cattle on a semi one day, hauling manure the next or everyone's favorite - fixing something that broke.

**Being in the know.** I explain this advantage the easiest by saying I can't have all the laundry done and know what went on outside today. I simply can't have both. Communication in our house takes enough effort as it is. If you are in the game the plays make sense. If you are not you have to take extra effort to figure it out. An example I can use is Charlie and I selling bred heifers. We had a young couple who came by to look this fall. They ended up buying 15 head. The advantage of both of us being there was not only that we both knew which heifers sold and how much we sold them for, but was that we got to visit with the couple and compare experiences. It is that networking that keeps agriculture alive. It helps us realize that we aren't the only ones that run into problems while enjoying the upside of an agriculture way of life.

Therefore, having an off farm income means not being in the know or being in the know at a delayed time when you come home and communicate at night.

So I would like to flip this scenario around to use as a disadvantage of having an off farm job. Let's just say I sold insurance and went to work Monday through Friday. Charlie is at home and this couple come to look at heifers. He did tell me that morning that a couple was coming and he thought they were interested in 20 head. We had decided what our break even was and what price we needed to get for these heifers. Remember, a year and half investment and we are still trying to keep the banker happy. I come home that night and Charlie tells me he ended up selling only 15 bred heifers and he wasn't able to get the price he thought. He got \$50 less per head. Now how do you think that goes over? Well, what happened I say? Why didn't they want 20 head and I don't understand why you didn't sell them for what we talked about. Now this is just an example on how communication is such a necessity even more so when you are a hands off partner vs. a hands on. When you are there making the decisions, or in this case selling the bred heifers, things happen causing us to change course, become flexible and it is easier to understand if we are there when they do change.

**Freedom- not so much.** The sick days and the vacation days are planned out and scheduled to accommodate your employee as well as other employees. Maybe flextime is an option for you but really you are more limited when you are not your own boss.

**What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours.** You wanted to farm, you make it work. My salary should be spent on the house, the kids and the groceries. Now if you have heard this before I hope you were able to work it out but most of the time if it gets to this point you might need some outside help. It is kind of like when you have children, if you think your husband is going to change 50% of the diapers you are sadly mistaken. It just doesn't happen. So if a woman with an off farm job isn't willing to contribute her salary to the farming operation, it makes things tough.

But if she is willing to contribute, that income can be hard to overlook. Remember when I talked about income and it being steady. What a plus. Just the benefits alone can very well be the only selling point needed to get you to town every day.

The thing to keep in mind is communication. Which ever direction you choose, whether it is to be a hands on partner or a hands off partner, communication is critical. Understanding what your spouse does each day is essential when you have an off farm job. What is important on the farm that day and what is important off the farm that day could easily be two completely different things. When working together on the farm, the most important thing of the day is usually the same for both people.

My challenge to women in agriculture is this. If you are contributing to your operation and are happy doing what you are doing, great! But, if you are unsure if you are contributing as much as you can or would like to contribute more, don't be afraid to step across the line and try something different. Don't be afraid to offer advice to your husband or educate yourself more in the farming or livestock industry. Maybe you have an interest in commodity trading. Take a class to learn more about it. Maybe you feel you could make your operation more money by being a teacher or a nurse or working at the bank instead of working at home. Go do it. Maybe you could bring in enough money to hire that extra help so you don't have to be outside all the time with your husband. These are things that have to be evaluated in making a good choice on how to contribute. If we do not enjoy what we do each day we won't do anything well.

As I have been talking you have probably noticed I use the word team, success and having goals quite often. I come by it rightfully so. You see, my father was many things in life. He was a hog farmer and he was a cow/calf producer and a rancher in Kansas, but to start out his career he was a teacher and basketball coach and a pretty good one at that. His teams made 5 trips to the state tournament in six seasons and won the state championship 2 years in a row. So when I say the word team, even in place of the word family, that is just what I mean. Having a team is having a family but the difference is that in a team all members contribute and all members have a job. We try to instill this each and every day with our children or our team at home. Competition is a part of life. Why suppress it? When we work cattle, everyone has a job. Someone's running the head catch, someone's using the pipe, someone's pushing them up, someone's writing numbers, someone's giving shots and when we need a snack, Miranda is really good at making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for everyone. You see, when everyone has a job, everyone feels important because everyone **is** important. If someone slacks off, the success of the team or final goal is lessened. If Mathias lets the calf get through the chute, we

have to sort him out again. If Michael doesn't get the pipe put in at the right time, the calf gets back, if I don't administer the shot correctly the calf gets sick or maybe you get an abscess, if Sam doesn't get the numbers written down right there is a lot of work later, if Miranda doesn't bring us those sandwiches we don't get anything to eat, we all get cranky, and if Charlie can't keep those cattle coming up the chute we all give him hell. So you see, it takes the team to make things happen and for success to occur. The coach always said 80% of success is in the mind and 20% is ability, and the older I get the more I believe it. But isn't that the way it is? The older we get the smarter our parents become. You see, our teenagers question our ideas and thoughts quite often. They don't say a lot but I think that is only out of respect. What they are really thinking is that Charlie and I have really lost it. Sooner or later they'll come around and realize the coaches know how the game must be played.

#### Conclusion:

I want to thank everyone in extension who helped make this conference happen. With out extension our continued education in agriculture would decline greatly. I would also like to thank all of you for coming today. I know many of you come for knowledge and for many of you this is just a nice break away from the farm and that's okay, too. But either way, I think we always walk away from things like this learning something. And hopefully you can take something from this conference home with you that will help your operation in some way. Remember, we are the elite. If farming and raising livestock were always good, everyone would be doing it. But it is not. There are good years and there are bad years. It is the strong who survive the ups and downs. It is the producers who believe that 80% of success is in the mind and 20% is ability that do succeed. It is the producers who believe in the way of life instead of the lifestyle.

Therefore, I would like to leave you with this:

Our job, as women in agriculture, is really to pull it all in. It's that simple. We must accomplish this role whether we are a hands on partner working each and every day on the farm or a hands off partner, where our role is contributing with an off farm job. We make things possible for others around us. It is our job. It is our life. We are partners, we are helpers, we are managers, we are facilitators, we are educators and we are doer's. Our job is educating our children to be good stewards of the land and livestock. To educate what is right and wrong. To make good choices each and every day. Being a woman in agriculture is advocating the quality of life farming has brought in the past and can continue to bring. It does sound like a lot, but it is really only doing what was intended of us to begin with. Because it really is the oldest profession in the world in my book.