

## **MWAF interview: Champions project**

### **Amy Van der Heide, Co-Founder Maritime Ag Women's Network**

#### **Work titles:**

1. Farmer
2. Farm Owner
3. Mom
4. Wife

#### **Educational background:**

- High school diploma
- Learned as I go (dive in head first)

#### **1. What were the reasons of your milestones?**

I was raised on a farm and worked off-farm as an educational assistant and receptionist before having my own family. A big milestone for me is to be able to work full-time on the farm and raise our family on it. We decided before we got married, that when the time came to have children and we were able, that I would stay home with them and work on the farm. After my first son was born I never went back to work off-farm again, i.e. a big milestone. Now we've got 2/3 kids in school and we've been able to implement that vision of working together and having our kids involved in the day to day operations on the farm.

Another milestone was stepping up to become more involved in the industry. The idea of stepping up was to attend meetings, conferences and events to learn more about farming and farming practices, so I thought of it as going off-farm to learn and bring things back to work for the farm. I've become involved with Annapolis Valley Chamber of Commerce's Ag Committee, Kings County Federation of Agriculture and very recently Agriculture More Than Ever. They reached out to me to be an Agriculture Ambassador for the Atlantic Region, which came as a great surprise to me, and I'm really happy to be doing that with them. Plus, I still have a few years left on the board with the Kings County Federation of Agriculture, and remain involved with the AVCC Ag Committee, both of which are great opportunities to be involved in your community and your county. It has always been important to me to go out and get the information I need, and stay on top of what's happening on the farm so we can make changes or seize opportunities as they come to improve our farming practices. Staying and working on the farm is a big milestone for me. Regarding our operations, we operate a poultry farm which is owned by my in-laws, and

my husband and I also have our own separate farm which is a small cow/calf farm. We love it. I love cows, they are my happy place.

## **2. What motivates you in good times and through road blocks?**

My family is my main motivation. We have 3 sons. I always try to find the positive in each day, some days are easier than others but it's important to me to show the kids that even when things are hard, there's always positive at some point during the day, and that we always have a lot to be thankful, no matter how awful it may seem at the time. I have had really strong female role models in my life, e.g., my grandmother and mother, who've been through a lot and I think I've picked up a lot of my motivation, and inner strength, from them. For sure, family is my strongest motivation.

## **3. Did you see yourself as a taking a leadership role in this field before?**

I didn't really see myself intentionally taking a leadership role. I stepped up more or less to learn for myself and things just kind of fell into place from there. Then when Katie and I created our Facebook page things seemed to shift a bit more in terms of leadership for me. We started it in order to stay in touch with the women we met at the Atlantic Farm Women's Conference as we're so tied down by our farms and families that its hard to keep in touch with other women who we have so much in common with and can learn from. Katie and I work well together. She is a thinker, planner and a doer whereas I fly a bit more by the seat of my pants, so often times she keeps me grounded with some of my ideas, or suggestions and I can help talk her through her ideas and suggestions and it works really well for us. We don't have to do too much for the page. It became its own community and people have really just kept conversation going, which is great.

I seem to fall into a lot of my roles just by being passionate and driven by things. If I take interest in something, I usually find myself involved in one way or another. I didn't make a conscious decision to step up into leadership specifically but I am happy that it's turned out that way. It was mainly a way to learn and meet others in the industry. What I found out quickly was that I knew way more than I realized and I just kind of let the cards fall where they may. Saying yes to new roles and leadership positions has really done a lot for me as far as finding what I'm good at and allowed me to follow my passion.

## **4. Why are you involved with gender issues in ag?**

I'm involved in gender issues because I think it's important to show that farmers are not just the stereotypical male farmer that consumers tend to think of. Also, its so important to step up to show that female farmers are becoming more and more prominent not only as labourers, but also as owners, managers and in the many jobs that support agriculture. It's good

to bridge the gap between consumers and farmers. It is also good to show that the gender gap does exist in Canada and our home towns. Again, I didn't plan to become involved. It just happened that way.

**5. Please comment on what's been going on with women in ag up to now? What's going on now? What do you see happening in the future?**

There's been women's conferences going on for a few years and I think they are still much needed. Seeing the discussions and progress coming from them is creating a positive outcome for all of us. Bringing prominent women to speak at them shows that we can do it and can relate it to the younger generation as well. Progress is being made right now. These conversations we are having are needed.

The idea behind the Maritime Ag Women's Network came after the 2015 Atlantic Farm Women's Conference as a way to stay connected with other farm women we met there. Also, it's a place to talk or ask questions without intimidation and a place for those that may not feel comfortable discussing topics in a room full of their peers. Often ag meetings consist of large groups of men which can make some people feel uncomfortable. The group has really taken off and grown on its own. It's been really great to see the amazing community of Ag Women it has become.

Now Katie and I are doing a feature. We pick a woman each month, give them a set of questions and the spot light for the month. The intention is to bring out those women in the group who are quiet, i.e., the invisible women. We want to show what they are involved in as well as to encourage them. We are also having a logo contest as our group doesn't have one yet. We hope that one of our members will be able to do it.

**6. What are you doing now? Why?**

Currently, I am involved in several industry groups. Including the Kings County Federation of Agriculture and the Agriculture Committee of the Annapolis Valley Chamber of Commerce. I'm also the Atlantic Ambassador of Agriculture More Than Ever. In addition, I just received the Outstanding Woman in Atlantic Agriculture Award at the Atlantic Farm Women's Conference earlier this month. It also came out of the nowhere. Also, I'm a 4H Leader for the Western Kings 4H Club in Kings County Nova Scotia. I very much enjoy working with 4H youth, its very natural to me and I feel very inspired by them.

**7. What would you like to leave behind you after retirement?**

The idea of retirement is still a far-off concept for me. I so love and enjoy what I do everyday that leaving anything behind hasn't really crossed my

mind at this point. There is the retirement dream but, yet again, being a farmer, you don't know if retirement will happen. I'm sure I'll look forward to a slower pace and downsizing but other than that I'm very much living in the moment and enjoying every day as it comes.

**8. What do you think are the most important characteristic good leaders should have?**

A quote I've recently come across says "Leadership is about making others better as a result of your presence and making sure that impact lasts in your absence". In my opinion, in order to achieve this some key characteristics are passion, knowledge, drive and the ability to work with others.

**9. What do you think is necessary to engage industry in gender conversations and make progress the women's file in Canada?**

I think we're in the perfect position right now to engage industry in gender conversations. We have those who've paved the way for us, Grandmothers, Mothers, etc., who are still around to teach us about their stories. We can use them to showcase how women have been involved in agriculture all along and what we've learned from them. We're also opening up a lot more and sharing our roles, struggles and accomplishments which, in turn, will make the path that much easier for the next generation of Ag Women to step up behind us. Ideally, they'll have less roadblocks in their careers than us, and definitely less than the generation before us. I also think having Women in Ag groups and conferences are a great way to relay all of this information and form more relationships. They are a way to promote all of the amazing women in ag, and say "yes, we're here, we're a force, we're business owners, professionals, primary producers, mothers, wives, etc." I also think its important to remember that this isn't an issue exclusive to agriculture. Its out there in every industry and women around the world are breaking barriers every single day.