

MWAF interview: Katie Keddy, Co-Founder of the Maritime Ag Women's Network

Work: Charles Keddy Farms Ltd - Inspected strawberry plants & Largest sweet potato growers in Atlantic Canada

Educational background: B.Sc. Agriculture – Animal Sc., from Nova Scotia Agricultural College (Now, DalAC). Variety of other courses, e.g., HR, finance.

1. What are the main milestones of your career?

I didn't grow up in Agriculture so in some ways every job I've learned on the farm has been a milestone. Being able to replace my husband in the field as a tractor operator has been pretty empowering one though! Each year with the support of my in-laws and husband and the personal motivation to do so, I take on something new. I love the variety and the challenges that working in agriculture brings.

I've stepped into more roles on many boards, projects and committees over the last couple years as well which has given me many opportunities. A recent one was being approached to sit on CAHRC's LMI Project Advisory Group, which was very exciting and it was a privilege to be in that room with so many of Canada's industry leaders, both male and female.

Going to schools to talk about agriculture to the next generation is something I am passionate about also. I love being able to teach kids about how their food is grown, and where it comes from. To hear their stories, help them plant a seed/garden, see them engage and answer their questions is so important for the future of our industry and bridging the growing gap between farmer and (future) consumer. Every time you go into a school, you have the opportunity to make an impact even if it's just to one child. This isn't what one typically refers to when discussing milestones, but for me, this is what I consider to be one of the most important things I do when working in agriculture.

2. What were the reasons of your milestones?

Simply put, I work hard. I speak up and I say yes to opportunities that come my way. Even more than that, I have so many people in my life who support and encourage me.

3. What motivates you in good times and through road blocks?

It's not so much a what but a who for me - my two sons motivate me. I want them to grow up continue to see each gender taking on the equal roles within the industry. For them it will be the norm. I also want them to know that as changes happen within agriculture that I was there as an advocate and a voice for their future within the industry. My husband, as well. He believes in me, and knows when and how to push me when I need it. He is 100% behind me in whatever role I take on. To get through road blocks staying positive is important, especially in times of stress. A phrase a good friend told me when I was a new mom was "This too shall pass..." and it has helped me through those moments when life can

feel overwhelming.

4. Did you see yourself as taking a leadership role in this field before?

My entire life I've naturally found myself falling into leadership roles, so while I don't foresee myself taking on these roles per se it seems to happen anyway.

In terms of the farm – yes, I think when you've married in/are the daughter in law there are some assumptions there that you will fall into a leadership role somewhere, if the want is there of course, and if there is a role within the farm business for you. I am fortunate in that regard, while I have had others careers before coming to work on the farm, when it came time for me to take a larger role I was welcomed without hesitation. In our busy season we have over 80 employees so there are key people needed to fill those leadership roles to keep things running smoothly and I am one of those people.

In terms of my work with the Maritime Ag Women's Network, honestly no, I never expected myself to be referred to as a leader. Myself and my friend Amy started the group after attending the Atlantic Farm Women's Conference 3 years ago. We left inspired and met some amazing women. We didn't want to lose contact with those we met so we created our group. From there it has grown in ways I couldn't have imagine and brought me experiences and opportunities that I am so grateful for. While it's humbling to have people see you as a leader this way, my main goal is to build up, support, and promote others within our industry. I want women to feel proud and well represented in any and every role they have within agriculture.

Why are you involved with gender issues in ag?

I got involved and continue to be involved with gender issues in Ag because I am a woman. As I said above I want women to feel well represented, and to know they have a voice; and in order for that to happen we need women to speak up. I grew up with many strong female role models, and I want to be a role model where I can. There are also barriers that many women continue face within the industry, such as wage gaps and discrimination for example, which is also why I will continue to be involved and be a voice to help break these barriers down.

When I was new to the area and industry, there was a woman who was president of our Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture at that time. She was outspoken, passionate, and a true example of a leader to me. I am involved in gender issues also because of women like her, I want to continue see women in these roles and encourage them to fill these roles whether on the farm, or in other aspects of their life; and what better way to encourage others then leading by example.

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?

Women are the backbone of agriculture. Their presence has always been there; the roles may have changed over time. We are and continue to be farmers, business owners, leaders within the industry. Today groups such as the Maritime Ag Women's Network, AWN, MWAF and others help to provide a unified voice when it comes to the issues women face still today in the industry. Women's conferences

inspire and motivate. They help build leaders. They give a space where women can engage, ask questions and gain new skills outside of their day to day.

Conversations need to keep happening, and they need to involve both genders. We need men to get involved in these conversations. In the future I would love to see us get to a place where these conversations aren't needed at all honestly. While I love the communities we have built, and I love empowering other women; to get to the point that we are all just “people in ag” that can focus on moving the industry forward as one would the ultimate goal reached.

6. What are you doing now? Why?

I'm living and loving my life! I'm raising two amazing kids with my husband, while we work on the farm alongside my in-laws. We have a funny farm of animals at our place, which has always been a dream of mine. We spend time with family, we travel, we camp. We love being outdoors. I also work part-time at a veterinary clinic – another industry I am passionate about.

In terms of our group, it is different from others in that we don't have a formal structure or membership. Right now, we are doing a series of interviews titled I AM: A Maritime Women in Ag, where we will highlight leaders from all aspects of agriculture in Atlantic Canada. Our first will hopefully be released in December with others posted monthly after that. We continue to have an active Facebook page, and also have a spot where we are set up to answer questions that are sent to us anonymously that may be too personal for someone to post directly to the page.

What would you like to leave behind you after retirement?

Retirement is a long way away at this point and if/when that day comes we hope to leave a successful, sustainable business; and a business that will continue for generations to come. My inlaws have worked hard their entire lives to do this for us when they choose to retire; and because of them we will one day be able to do the same for our two boys should they choose to farm. For the time being though, I wake up everyday excited to go to work, and proud of the industry I work in. I get to work alongside my family, and that is a privilege I don't plan on giving up anytime soon.

As for our group I've honestly never thought about what I would like to leave behind after I “retire” from the Maritime Ag Women's Network. I hope that the group would continue to be the positive supportive place it is now, and a place where women can learn from each other, grow and have opportunities come their way.

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

I believe everyone is a leader in their own way; and don't believe there is a list that someone should fall under to be considered a “good leader”. It's about how you engage people and build others up. It's your commitment, your authenticity, and an overall positive attitude. It's about making an impact in your own unique way.

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 beginning to get on the right track now. Companies, and organizations are seeing the need

for these conversations and beginning to make them a priority, but there needs to be action after the conversation. It can not be a trendy topic that goes, and then years from now makes its rounds again. We need empowerment across the industry, we need inclusion and diversity, we need champions to keep things moving forward.