

MWAF interview: Peggy Brekveld

Work title: Vice President of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA), Northern Ontario dairy farmer

Educational background: High school graduate, "school of life", Advanced Agriculture Leadership Program (AALP) (Rural Ontario Institute)

1. What are the main milestones of your career?

In about 2006, I was volunteering in my community and for the Thunder Bay Federation of Agriculture, (part of Ont. Federation of Agriculture, which is equivalent to KAP in MB). I was doing well and had just had my 5th child when a local ag rep told me that I should get involved and go to AALP. I came home and told my husband that I'd go to an information meeting. I did, and listened, and decided that's I wanted to do, i.e., AALP. With AALP you travelled across the province and learned about ag as a whole and the industry issues that were important at that time. There was a lot of variety of people in the class. It really built and grew my feelings for the entire sector. At the end, they asked me what I was going to do. I said, "First I'm going home!" then I proceeded to build leadership in my area in Thunder Bay. I became President of the local federation, then, I was asked to run as northern director for the provincial board of OFA. At that time there were 3 women in the provincial board. I was the youngest person (35-36 y), a strong voice, and, probably, made some waves. I did that for 3 years, and then ran for the at-large position and VP in the same year. It was a very bold step, but I was successful and have been in that position ever since. I now represent the whole province.

2. What were the reasons of your milestones?

Other people encouraged me to get involved, do AALP, then to be a northern director. When I was northern director, and still the youngest there, people encouraged me to run at the provincial level for at-large and VP. I still believe that encouraging is the best way to bring people to leadership. Many of those that encouraged me were men. There have been women that encouraged me too. I can think of a couple of women that pushed me because they knew me personally. Sometimes at conferences, someone motivates you because of what they say about their experiences. I value opportunities to go and listen to women speak on leadership, because they've been through those experiences.

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

Thankfulness. I had really hard times early on. We had small children and we hadn't been on the farm too long. I had to learn to stop comparing myself to others, and start to be thankful for what we had and the opportunities that presented themselves. I also think by being thankful we built on what we already had rather than saying that there are problems which seemed unsurmountable. We said, this is where we are at and this is where we want to go to - what kind of choices do we have and how can we get there?

When you are on boards or leadership roles, often you can get distracted by personalities. The reality is that every single person on that board is focused on the same thing, which in my case, is the best for agriculture in Ontario. So, how are we going to get there, what kind of messages are we going to share for farmers to government? If you get to the basics – we come from

different backgrounds and areas, but still want the same goal - you can focus on that commonality and find solutions.

It's not always easy to keep focussed on the issues. I've been bullied. I've been in a room where people thought I was the secretary until ¾ into the meeting, and finally I spoke up and they realized that I spoke with authority and you could almost see how their jaws dropped. Again, one can spend a lot of time focusing on that, but I never went into that room thinking "I'm a woman, hear me roar"! I went in feeling I had something to offer to agriculture and to ag leadership.

Many farmers are wholly absorbed in farming. My talent, rather, is more in understanding things farmers need or what would help their business grow, and wanting to tell that story. I want to be the one to tell government that this is the way we can make a difference for agriculture, and for the province.

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

Not until other people encouraged me. One of the greatest skills women have is encouraging one another. I think through sharing our stories, we tend to bond with each other. I think that is the biggest difference in my conversations between men and women. Men did encourage me. but I think women understand the need for encouragement more than men.

I was different than most in the room for many reasons. I was from the north; I was a woman; for a long time, I was the youngest person in that room; I didn't go to the Univ. Of Guelph... Again, you can focus on all the things you aren't or you can say I have something different to offer, and it is a good thing. There are people like me that need to be represented as well.

5. Why are you involved with gender issues in ag?

I notice that while I may appear to have that inner confidence we talked about, others need that encouragement, and perhaps I can offer that. I feel that someone has to say "you can do this..." I just saw that others need to be encouraged. I'd like to think that I am here to encourage others.

6. 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?

This is an interesting question. I have 3 girls and 2 boys, and my youngest girl is 12 years old. This morning, before the interview, she proceeded to tell me "Mom what are you talking about? There are no issues..."

As a woman, I am still a minority. When I see pictures of consultation tables where there might be one woman or none, I think there is a problem. But in my daughter's mind, because she sees her mother, she doesn't see any reason why you can't. At school, they encourage girls to take positions that are more traditionally held for men and so she thinks the world is limitless. I think there will be challenges, and she'll have to rise above them. And again, focus on why you are there, and that your job is to do what's best for ag.

I do see women struggling to maintain their positions or build their careers. I was bullied and pushed, and it was very hard (it probably took me a year to recover). But, I'll say that when I came through it, there were many people that encouraged me and did it because they knew I had the strength. It's not easy, it's hard. I experienced hitting the glass ceiling, that others felt I was overstepping. I had to take a step back and think hard about it. I saw that I really wanted this and didn't want to stop where the glass ceiling was. (Looking back, I would tell my past self to not

be afraid of the time under the glass ceiling. Use the time to grow, to get stronger, to understand yourself, your goals and how bad you want it.) You have to work on it until you break that ceiling or road block. Or find a new way...

The more women that move up into leadership roles the easier it becomes for others. I don't see myself as a pioneer in women's issues. Others put the foundation down and I build from that. The future is one where my children will think that the foundation and building were never actually built - that the possibility of women being active in agriculture was always just there. That's my dream.

7. What are you doing now? Why?

Right now, I am VP of Ontario Federation of Agriculture. Half of my time is spent in the farming community ensuring that our message is right and true, and what it needs to be. The other half I spend talking to government about what the future of agriculture will look like, what we need to get there and what's holding us back. Our vision statement is Farms and Food Forever.

I am able to make a difference to provincial agriculture in this role, using my skills and networks to build a better province.

8. What would you like to leave behind you after retirement?

When I leave this organization, I want to have done good succession planning. I came on the board in my 30s, whereas the majority were over 50. Every organization needs to look at succession planning and look for people in the community that will help them improve this organization. If I can find successors and people that can fill gaps, including women, I think I will make the organization strong. Anyone in leadership needs to understand that every time you say yes to something you are saying no to another. Be very strategic in choosing what to do and not to do. I have.

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

I think good leadership is not doing what one wants to do but bringing everyone with you and finding the commonalities and sticking to what you are and what we are here really for. Whether you are in agriculture leadership or on your farm, keep going back to your original goals and what tools do you have to get there. If you don't have them, see how you can bring the people in that have those abilities and that will help you get to your goals. How do we bring people in? People brought me in because they encouraged me as they saw things in me that I may not have noticed. In one local farming federation, people in the organization were aging. They went to the community, identified a couple of young people and invited them to come to the meetings. They just said "you want something from agriculture and we are happy to share information". They had something to offer to them and encouraged them with friendship. While I became involved on my own, I suggest the Noah's Ark rule - bring them in two by two. New people also need peers.

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

I think highlighting women in opportunities and that are succeeding is a great way. I think encouraging women in your own community is a great way, just ask them. They may know that they are part of the community but don't realize the opportunity is there for them. Again, I probably would've never move up except that someone said I'd be great at it.