Returning home

Twenty-six-year-old Katelyn Wilson Gardner strong, confident, and always willing to try something new. Katelyn grew up in Orleans, Indiana, a small southern Indiana community rich in farming. "I guess we just take for granted how awesome it is out here until someone who never gets to see this comes out and they are just star-struck by it."

Littlest Cowpuncher

Katelyn is the youngest of the three daughters in her family. "I was the last one. When my parents knew they weren't going to have a boy, they decided they would have to make us work like the boys". She learned to sort cattle by the age of four. "My dad called me his littlest cowpuncher." Fast-forward two decades and Katelyn is a partner in a full-fledged cattle ranch. "I never once felt like, I wasn't good enough to be out here working because he never made me feel that way. If anyone ever gave him a hard time about not having any boys, he would lash back and say 'I'll put my girls against anything you've got' because that's how he raised us and taught us to do".

Coming Home

After graduating high school, Katelyn attended and graduated from the University of Kentucky. Between 2011 and 2015 she remembers a drought hitting smack dab in the middle of her college career. By then, her older two sisters already moved away and had successful careers of their own. She couldn't help but stress about everything her father had to go through all alone. "I would be in class thinking I feel bad about not being at home. I would feel so guilty I wasn't here. There were many nights I would go home and think about what's going to happen to our farm".

She was concerned that he couldn't run around like he was 20-years old forever. Graduation was upon her, and the job opportunities were coming in.

So, one Sunday night she called her father and told him she had an interview for a herdsman position at a purebred farm. "We talked a little bit. He said, 'Why don't you come home. You can work here, and we can be partners'. It just kind of clicked. Four years later, here I am and I haven't looked back."

As a child, Katelyn traveled all over the country, showing cattle. If the family wasn't on the road, they were helping get crops in or hay up. Through it all, her passion has been the cows. "I love everything about the cattle industry." Two weeks after graduation, she started making purchases. "I bought two pot loads of mama cows, so 85 bred commercial cows, along with the purebred Angus cows that my dad already had. Plus, we have the feedlot as well where we finish out cattle for the market".

Women 4 the Land

It's a man's world

Katelyn recalls being drug to cattle meetings her entire childhood. She knew all of the men and knew all of their wives. While the industry is still heavily male populated, she has been seeing more women in the last five to eight years. With men on either side of her at these meetings, she doesn't feel the least bit intimidated. "Actions speak a heck of a lot louder than words and if you are just going to sit there and jaw around at guys and tell them 'I'm a woman in ag, I'm so great' That is not going to hold near as much weight with them as showing them, 'Hey, this is her out there doing the same stuff as the guys do. She is holding her own, if not better.' To me just being able to do that kind of stuff and they see that".

Women have come a long way in the industry, and it is helpful for Katelyn to be on the same level as them. She does her best to be kind to everybody, whether she has a lot in common with them or not. "I try to keep a positive attitude. For the most part, I seem to reciprocate the same kind of feelings. You know I think a lot of it is just showing what you do. Getting people to understand what you do might help them understand the actions you take. I think just trying to stay positive and explain yourself rather than get defensive when you go somewhere is the best way to go."

Women4theLand

Women4theLand is an organization to educate non-operating and operating female farmland owners on the benefits of conservation methods. Katelyn became aware of Women4theLand through her local Soil, Water, Conservation District (SWCD) office. She recalls her first meeting being on a nasty, cold, snowy day. At first, she hesitated to go, but with a bit of a push from her father, she opted to attend. She wasn't sure what to expect but was pleasantly surprised to be welcomed by roughly 20 women. "I thought it would be six or seven women who show up and get preached to all day. I was not expecting the interactive, 'What is your input,' 'What is your background,' 'How can your background correlate to her background over here.' I was not expecting near as much interaction.

"...Getting people to understand what you do might help them understand the actions you take..."

I thought we would sit down and they would give us a bag of chips and we would get preached at for three hours. I was impressed with how well it was operated and what all we got out of it."

The room was filled with women who do everything from organic farming to conserving forests, trees, and waterways. "It was a cool spectrum of people who had different backgrounds and different views. They had different views on how they wanted to do their farming. Although everyone wanted to get things done as efficiently as possible and conserve the resources we have been given with the least harm to the environment. It was cool to see everyone was on a different playing field but had the same idea of how they wanted to accomplish the things they were doing".

Different than Daddy

Katelyn is doing things differently than her father. She jokes that it can get comical. She will have an idea that he will think is crazy, then six months later she will see him trying to do it. "I tag cows differently than him. I tag my heifers in the left ear and my bulls in the right ear. That way, you don't have to look down and say what's that. You can tell by what's in the ear, who's who. The first time I did that he said, 'All you have to do is look at the plumbing, and you'll know who's who.'

I said it's just quicker for me. One time he said we have to go tag this calf; it's a bull, be sure you put it in the right ear. I said, 'Oh, why's that.' He said, 'Well, you had a good idea.' and walked off. It is little things like that".

She is also willing to mix it up; literally. They used to put a purebred cow on a purebred bull. Enter Katelyn into the picture, and she is bringing in 85 commercial cows. She put Angus on the part of them and then a Hereford on the part of them because she wants to sell black baldies. "He's like 'What are you doing?' 'You are polluting my farm.' But now he's like, 'Those baldies are growing great.' And I say, 'I know.' He is just a little reluctant at first". On the flip side, her father has brought up ideas that Katelyn was too stubborn to adapt. Together, they feed off each other's ingenuity.

If it's not Katelyn and her father pulling each other's chains, then leave it to the neighbors. "When I turned a Hereford bull out for a year they would stop and be like, 'You know there is a Hereford in your pasture, right? And my dad would be like, 'Yeah, that's Katelyn's deal'." Through her short time as a young adult, she has learned what matters. "Here is what I have come to conclude 'If they don't pay your bills it doesn't matter what they think." If you haven't guessed yet, if you throw it at her, she is strong enough to throw it back. She is willing to fail, and when she does, she brushes off and keeps plugging away.

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Rotational Grazing

The worst summer Katelyn can recall was in 2012, "It was terrible." It only takes one bad experience to teach Katelyn. "I remember by June of that year everything was burnt to a crisp. Everything the sun touched was brown all summer long. It did a lot of people in; cows, crops, pasture." She says when you go through a dry spell for a month or two, one has to manage what they have carefully. "If you don't, you are going to be out of grass and out of resources quickly. If you use hay in the summer, it really can deplete everything you have for the winter, which is when you really need it."

Summers like the one in 2012 are why Katelyn practices rotational grazing. "I rotate the rotational fence between them about once a week, to every two to three weeks. It depends on the rain we have had. I am huge on keeping the grass growing and making sure we do not over pasture anything". She keeps a separate pasture in reserve for fall only. She does not let the cows graze on it for the rest of the year. "We know right before they go into calving, we know early winter, that they are going to be in good body condition. We haven't had to feed any hay yet for a year like this".

The wet Spring of 2019 prevented hay from vigorously producing. Katelyn works hard to keep her resources full and where they need to be. She has only needed to use her hay in the winter months. "My cows both calf in the fall during September and October, then my Spring calvers will be born February, March, April. That is when we need the hay, to keep the calves milking and gaining the weight." She says you have to manage your hay/feed resources, so you are not left scrambling around.

Manage your portfolio

For all the new additions Katelyn has brought to the farm, she says she doesn't like change because she likes to keep to a routine. She is always planning for the worst and hoping for the best in making sure she has the resources for whatever might hit her. In her line of work, paychecks don't come every Friday. Her cash flow is very tight. She has to be very conservative when managing her funds.

Katelyn has researched what type of hay will grow the best, for the soil she has. Through the process, she formed a good relationship with a crop specialist in her area. She suggests keeping an open mind to working with people. "There is a saying, 'Failure is saying this is how we've always done it,' and you have to think outside of the box. You may not particularly want to at first, but giving it a try is better than staying in the same rut.

Continuous Education

Katelyn has a formal education, but it has been her in the field experience that has helped her put what she has learned into practice. She attends and pays attention at conferences to those talking about their success, and then she tries it herself. "I am very much a supporter of getting out there and doing things and being hands-on. I have done things where I have fallen on my face, and I've done awesome things. I think that everybody needs to be brave enough to get out and try something new. If not, you are just going to sit on that log and never know what could have happened".

To make sure she doesn't ever get stuck in a rut, she will continue networking. In an industry that boils down to being a good person and working hard, she keeps her arms and ears open. "If they see you are trying to do things right, they are going to go out of their way to help you more. They will get you resources and connections that they have to help you out more". Who knows, one day you might see Katelyn as the keynote speaker. For now, you'll likely run into her at a Women4theland' Learning Circle'. Don't knock it until you have tried it. You never know who you are going to meet, that you might end up doing business with. You might meet someone who has something you need, or you might need something someone else has. You might form that relationship there."

Learning Circles have with folks from different backgrounds, but all are working with a common goal. "The land that is here is the only thing you are going to get. What is here is all you have to work with. If I let a group of 40 cows on 20 acres for three months, there would be no grass whatsoever. There would be absolutely nothing but dirt left". She points to the fact if you want to grow organically, you will need nutrients in your soil. If you're going to grow vegetables, you will need to have nutrients and rotation. "A few years after I have had corn in, we might rip it up and put alfalfa seeds in. You need different types of roots growing in your soil to keep it healthy. No matter what you are doing, it is all going to play in together. The have to take care of the ground you have. Once it is damaged, it is going to be hard to get it back to a healthy state".

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