NOT THE FARMER'S DAUGHTER

Dena Vittorio can still hear her father's voice echoing through the barn and into her childhood home in rural Rushville, Indiana 'Can somebody come down here and help me?' "It would always be me," Vittorio said laughingly. "It gave me a close relationship with my father. He was a very quiet man, like many farmers are". Dena helped her father with the livestock, feeding the cattle and hogs, and caring for the chickens. She recalls a certain wildness about the rural property with birds, songbirds, and butterflies fluttering around.

Not the Farmer's Daughter

Dena's father farmed there all his life, and his father before him. Dena and her sister inherited the farmland from their parents. Like many women who are becoming farmers, they have pursued other career paths before returning later in life to the farm. "We are outside the box of what has traditionally been defined as a farmer. We are women, curious and inquisitive. We are ready to read, research, and study to make a positive difference. We are not the farmers' daughter anymore; we are the farmer".

A Non-Operating Landowner

Dena doesn't do the actual production work herself. She has a strong relationship with a production farmer. Her husband, Dennis Simmons, is the farm manager. "He is very progressive. He has been very willing to listen to ideas I have had and do research himself." Dena equally shares the farming costs with the production farmer. "That helps us take more chances because we also underwrite some of that economic loss if there is any. For us, it is learning about

our soil. We understand this is a partnership between the production and land farmers, but also with God, and with creation. To do no harm is our goal". She adds to be a successful farmer in today's world; you have to be economically viable, community mindful, and ecologically sustainable.

Searching for Answers

Overnight Dena's farm didn't go from conventional to conservation-minded. She did a lot of research and talked to a lot of people. Her studies led her to the Women Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN). "I was so hungry for a group like that. Through the research, I began to understand that other people were doing different things and that women, in particular, were willing to try bold things".

Her WFAN connection led her to Women 4 the Land. "They opened the door here for us in Rush and Shelby Counties to form our group, which meets every other month. It is just a wonderful learning circle of opportunity for us to sit down with other women farmers and talk without being intimidated by our lack of information or our ignorance. We share what we are learning. We share our resources. Some speakers come in and say 'I've never talked to a group of women farmers' like we are going to be some alien, strange experience. By the time it's over, they are happy they have come to listen and have shared so much knowledge with us."

A look back

Dena's father kept his farm records, so she had the opportunity to look back at what he did over the years to the land. What she found was a great diversity of crop rotations. Five to six rotations occurred a year to feed the livestock. Then in the late 50s and early 60s, he began using synthetic chemicals on the soil. By the time Dena returned to the farm in 2003, she says it was very evident that the land required high inputs of chemicals and fertilizers to be productive.

She thought she was coming back to the copious fertile soil she left behind. She took some of it and moved it to her garden bed, but nothing would grow.

"I knew something vastly wrong was happening, but it was such a slow progression. I don't blame the farmers. We bought into what industrial agricultural services encouraged us to do..."

She described the soil as hard-packed. She quickly noticed the absence of songbirds and butterflies that her childhood memory so vividly recalls. “I knew something vastly wrong was happening, but it was such a slow progression. I don’t blame the farmers. We bought into what industrial agricultural services encouraged us to do. Overtime, I began to see my father and farmers of my father's age getting Parkinson’s or leukemia, and it was rather pervasive. I do not doubt that working hands-on with all of those chemicals all those years harmed him.”

Observe, Study, Implement

Moving forward and away from conventional methods is a slow conversion. Dena cautions not to vilify how we have done farming for the last 30 or 40 years. These practices of tillage and high inputs were based on our best knowledge and intentions. But we are learning that farming practices that value production over soil health and profit are detrimental. Slowly we must re-educate ourselves and incorporate different practices. Dena is in her fourth year of doing no-till and cover crops. She has installed a two-acre pollinator buffer meadow along her farm which has brought the return of pollinators, songbirds and butterflies.

The farmer south of her has been implementing cover crops a little longer. Dena’s production farmer also plants cover crops on his acreage. Together in their area, they have a swath of folks who have adopted cover crops and no-till practices. “Just this year a farmer just north of us began to say, ‘y’all seem to be doing well in the production of your crops. I can tell you are doing different things, and I’m curious,’ and so it starts by not trying to be threatening, not saying others are doing something wrong, because all these farmers love their land. All farmers want to do their best.”

The Ability to be Malleable

In 2018, the rains were too intense to allow for harvest in a timely fashion. The wet weather during the spring of 2019 pushed many farmers to plant close to the prevent-it planting date. Due to the use of cover crops for the past few years on Dena’s soil, her land was more resilient. Meaning, the large farm equipment was able to get out on her ground sooner. “We could plant sooner than farmers around here who were not doing this. We could not eradicate our cover crops as soon as we wanted, so we were planting in three, four feet tall rye, but because of that, we had such good suppression of weeds in the summer. It’s just been an amazing difference.”

Financially, her corn bushels per acre increased over 44 bushels per acre. “That was higher than we have ever had. And this was in one of the worst years, with all the rain”.

The Confidence to Move Forward

In a Women 4 the Land ‘Learning Circle’, women have the space to gain a sense of confidence, a sense of trust that they can ask any question. For attendees, it is really about what comes from the relationships formed. “Every woman that is in our small group all value and treasure their farm. It is very important to them. They want to know how they can care about it for future generations. They want it to be its best. They want to know they can ask questions and not sound silly”.

Dena is active in the Rush/Shelby County ‘Learning Circle’ and says it is good to see what other women have accomplished and done. She learned a lot about what is a watershed, which got her thinking even more about her farming practices. “It was a whole other area I hadn’t even gotten to yet, and I was thinking ‘What is my watershed? Is my runoff possibly affecting it? What do I need to do to care for the watershed?’”.

For those hesitant about attending a learning circle, Dena suggests finding a friend who would go with you the first time. “You don't have to say anything if you feel uncomfortable.” Walk in the door and take a seat in the circle. Everyone has the chance to speak if they want to, but no one is forced to. Questions are urged and encouraged. “Experience it one time, and you will want to continue coming back.”

Women 4 the Land