

Women in Leadership Positions in Canadian Agriculture

SANDRA VOS | RED ANGUS CATTLE [BRANT COUNTY, ONTARIO]

Sandra grew up in Toronto, far from the fields she would eventually farm. As a child she visited her aunt and uncle who owned the acres where she now raises Red Angus beef, but at the time, Sandra wasn't allowed to help with farm activities. Instead, if she was assigned a task, it was likely washing dishes.

But Sandra loved those visits and being outside, and so eventually, when the opportunity arose years later to buy a parcel of land from her family, she jumped in head first.

“I knew nothing about farming, but I thought I guess I better go learn to be a farmer if I've just bought a farm,” she says.

Sandra had been working as a healthcare professional in the city and was unfamiliar with most machinery, plants and animals involved in farming but she settled on a simple principle for her farming approach. “If you're good to the land, the land will be good to you.”

Now, nearly 16 years later, Sandra's philosophy has served her well. 35 Red Angus cattle rotationally graze on the acres she kept entirely in pasture and she direct markets her beef to loyal customers. She's played an active role in her local farming associations and mastered much of the technical side of farming she that had once intimidated her.

Sandra's days now involve manage fencing for the rotational grazing, maintaining machinery, processing animals and marketing her beef. “I sit down once at the beginning of the day to try to do the Globe crossword,” she says.

Sandra has become fixture of the farm community, supporting governance and local innovation projects. “When you go into a rural area and buy a farm people think you're nuts but they realize you're new blood for the organizations.”

Sandra sits on the local farm federation and cattleman's association, and has played a big role in the local food movement in Brant County. After receiving grant money, Sandra and other direct marketers were able to develop maps and a website that encouraged citizens to access food grown in their own communities.

Sandra says she is naturally self-taught but she found a lot of help in the farm community to learn the business when she first started. Neighbours and family lent her equipment and also taught her how to use it, even when it wasn't operating smoothly.

“I learned all the different ways people are brilliant on their farms.” Sandra says. “And also, what not to do.”

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“The biggest challenge I had to face was having confidence in myself to be able to do things by myself.” Sandra grew up with 3 brothers and as the lone girl she was discouraged from taking risks. “When I took on farming there were a lot of tasks that looked daunting.”

But after completing a seemingly intimidating job for a neighbour, Sandra says she realized, “I can do this, and nothing is insurmountable.” That also kick started Sandra’s confidence in her own opinion on how things should be done.

Sandra says she’s pleased to hear female farmers are connecting online to share their frustrations and successes, hopes the networks will continue to give women a leg up in the industry.

As farmer who entered the business without a family legacy on the land, Sandra worries about those who also want to get into farming. “I see the prohibitive cost of land for young farmers to come in as a major issue in agriculture. Luring people back to farm will be difficult because the financial situation would be incredibly daunting for anyone to consider.”

But despite those challenges, Sandra says, “I still think working agriculture is one of the greatest professions. It grounds you and you learn to really pay attention to the world.”