



*Strengthening Agriculture*

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Hello Farm Sisters,

July 2020... where did the last 6 months go? I have had such a hard time writing this note to all of you. So many changes on top of the many changes farmers and their families usually have had to face. I am not one to normally wish time away but this time... For the first time wishing at least the last 4 months would just go away like a bad dream...wow.

Summer seems to have arrived with the temps going up to 90 today. The fields are looking good and have finally dried out from all that rain. A calf got out last night and many of us had to look high and low for that little guy. So many normal farming things still going on, even though the world is losing its mind...

Symposium last March, wasn't it wonderful? Many of the ladies shared how much they really enjoyed being in Gaylord. Didn't we have a great bus trip? I had no idea an Elk was so big until we saw them in person. I sure did enjoy how big the rooms were at the hotel. It would be wonderful if they were always so large. Gaylord was kind to us weather wise as well. We never know what it will be like in March. The selection of Silent Auction items was one of the best we have ever had. The seed money for next year's Symposium from the proceeds will really help to make it just as special as this year. Thank you all that brought items and those that bid on items. The Committee did a wonderful job with all the little details making Symposium go so seamlessly. Heartfelt thanks for the hard work of each one of the committees.

Symposium for next year you will have to wait a little longer for information. Please watch our Facebook page or our website for more information. If you see any of our Sponsors please let them know how very much, we appreciate them. If you would like to help, please talk to the people you buy from about being a Sponsor. Without Sponsors, we would not be able to put the program on that we do. Hoping to see you all at the 2021 Symposium in March.

May your worries be small, and your crops grow tall.

*Debbie Rasmussen*

Debbie Rasmussen  
Chairperson  
(616) 824-5306

2019/2020 Committee Members



The 29th annual Farm Women's Symposium (FWS) was held during cold weather and light snow from March 4-6, 2020 at the Treetops Resort in the hills outside Gaylord MI—the first time held in the north-central region of Michigan. 110 ladies attended.



After FWS chair Debbie Rasmussen gave the opening comments, two ladies representing Otsego County government welcomed the attendees to Gaylord.

The key-note speaker, Jeanne Bernick, from Walcott, Iowa, is an ag consultant and business specialist at the accounting firm KCoe Isom, LLP. Her morning presentation “What Women in Ag Want” contrasted generations ago when a female’s property became her husband’s upon marriage. Often outliving the husband, the widow would then farm on her own. Preceding “Rosie the Riveter” were “The Farmerettes” who in WWI were paid to harvest grains while the men were overseas. Bernick compared those roles with female farmers of today, some who left 6-figure salaries and the big city to use their business skills back home in the rural community, find a niche market, or grow their family’s farm, strengthening their towns’ economies along the way.

According to Bernick, women today make up 36% of all USA farmers, and own 30% of the farmland. “GRIT is your capacity to dip deep, do whatever it takes – sacrifice, struggle – in order to achieve your most worthy goals,” Bernick said. She gave tips to be a more effective leader and communicator.

The morning’s next speaker was Greenstone/Farm Credit Service’s Ryan Kratochvil, Crop Insurance Specialist from the Cadillac branch. He gave an overview of the realities of the 2019 crop year, and changes coming in 2020. To keep on top of programs available and rules, Ryan advised contacting people like himself. “Call for recommendations. Take photos of your fields in question, with a time/date stamp, to explain later to adjustors,” he advised. forage, and an earlier hay/graze date.

Diane Reed Loew, blogger “A Farm Wife” and FWS committee member, led an interactive session “I Never Knew That About You”. She asked for attendees to

raise their hands if they had lost a loved one in the past year, or had family farm conflicts, become empty nesters, had a new child, loved to travel, craft, read, etc. – designed to find others with similar struggles or interests, or who have “gotten to the other side” and could now mentor others. Before lunch, all the ladies lined up from January 1 to December 31 according to birthdays, and found their “birthday buddy”. After lunch, Jeanne Bernick returned with “Tips for Building a Personal Brand”. In her journalism years, Jeanne traveled in all 50 states and several countries, sitting down at lots of kitchen tables discussing farming and family issues. To build one’s brand and own who you are, one must be engaging, be a negotiator, embrace the education given, and win over critical colleagues. She advised utilizing social media such as LinkedIn and Twitter, develop a website or blog, and combine with smaller details such as your email signature and developing your personal look and style to set you apart. Jeanne suggested compiling an “I love you” folder filled with kudos from colleagues and friends, to refill your cup when feeling down.



Local seed potato producers Ben and Alison Sklarczyk put on a presentation called “Seed Potato 101: Hands-On Tissue Culture Cutting and Basics.” The farm began with his grandparents purchasing land in 1942. In 1982, they began a tissue culture lab and opened a greenhouse. In 1997, the family started developing their current 100% hydroponic (without soil) process. In 2001, they obtained their first direct Frito-Lay contract. The farm grows about 6 million potatoes each year and ships their potatoes all over the world. Ben revealed that 65% of potato chips sold in North America originate (in seed form) at their farm. Using hydroponics means greater sterility in the growth media, more efficient use of greenhouse space, and quality control with reverse-osmosis recycled water. Research and development continue improvement, along with pathogen testing. Alison demonstrated cutting tissue culture with audience participation.





The last segment of Wednesday was “Mindful Laughter” presented by MSU Extension Health Educator, Tracie Abram, from St. Ignace/Mackinac County. With Tracie, attendees discovered the therapeutic benefits of laughter – it stimulates the immune system. Laughing may lessen pain, relaxes tense muscles, speeds up O2 to our bodies, helps regulate heart rate, increases endorphins, lowers BP, serum cortisol levels, and blood sugar. Laughing combats stress, provides moments of joy, and eases anxiety while lifting depression.

Sponsors and attendees had donated silent auction items which were bid on throughout the first day, with proceeds grossing over \$3500, including some high-profile items that were live-auctioned off at the banquet (Kimba Clunis, chair of Silent Auction committee, stood as auctioneer) to defray expenses and launch the 2021

FWS budget.



Several hundred more dollars were raised raffling off the blue patterned queen-sized quilt made by Marlene Schulte, Harbor Beach. The winner

was Nina Green, Snover, MI.

Wednesday night's banquet offered a delicious dinner buffet, followed by card playing and chatting in the Hospitality Suite, or hot tub or swimming in the outdoor heated pool.

## **2020 Bus Tour**

**by Shari Konkell**

Thursday was set aside for the popular bus tour. Stops were:



1. Alpine Maple Farms, just down the road from Treetops, is owned by Jordan and Amanda Hunt, with right-hand man Abe Jacobs. Walking into their shop, one

is overcome by the sweet smells of maple, including maple cotton candy, maple cream, bourbon-infused syrup, candles, and meat rub. They provide groomed trails for snow-shoeing, and host events throughout sap season.

2. The downtown Gaylord City Elk Park has around 40

elk contained on 108 acres which the City of Gaylord maintains and provides viewing areas for the public. The herd started with three elk several years ago when a local nature center closed.

3. Gaylord's Alpine Chocolat Haus began in 1985 by Bruce Brown “Der Chocolatmeister” and his wife Barb. Bruce credits his candy-making ability to his mentor. Besides their store in Gaylord, the Browns have expanded to stores in Boyne City, Sault Ste. Marie, and Plymouth. “I use butter, never margarine,” Bruce said.



Popular items are milk chocolate covered potato chips and caramel corn made from a special “mushroom” brand of popcorn.

4. Big Buck Brewery is owned by Cathy and Shawn Smalley, with Executive Chef Randy Troy and Head Brewer Doug Mehl. They began the process to revive this iconic business in May, 2018, after leaving their corporate jobs and moving back home. With a new menu, favorite and new beers, and focusing on MI-made products, Big Buck is back, better than ever. They hosted the FWS bus tour attendees for a delicious lunch and a quick tour.

5. Kitchen Farms, owned by Don and Sarah Kitchen, has been growing, bagging, and shipping potatoes since 1910. Kitchen Farms owns more than 5000 acres of fine, sandy soil ideal for potatoes, using irrigation and controlled-temperature storage, offering whites, russets, reds, and yellows. In a usual year, they will produce up to 60 million pounds of potatoes. Sarah and Don led the ladies on a



a tour of the storage areas as well as up on the catwalks watching potatoes being rinsed, sized, landing on conveyors where they eventually were bagged and loaded.

Thursday night entertainment provided by Treetops at Legends was musician Bill Oeming from Petoskey.



Friday's lectures started with a legislative update from 105<sup>th</sup> House District **State Rep. Triston Cole**, first elected to the House in 2014. He is now Majority Floor Leader and Vice Chairman of the Gov't Operations Committee, but will be termed out in the next election. He is concerned about Lake MI's high-water levels which happened before in 1986. Cole defended Nestle's water use and said they are doing everything by the book. "Emotions run high about water," he said. "Other crops or fruit/vegetables use likely more water and then are sold out of the state. At least this stays in the watershed."

**Kate Pigott**, Intake/Outreach Coordinator of MI/FL Agricultural Mediation Programs (Lansing) explained how the program works with farmers involved in disputes with legal or credit issues, leases, farm transitions, neighbors, compliance with farm programs, etc. Farmers work with a neutral mediator to try to resolve differences and come to a compromise that works for both sides.

**Ashley Messing-Kennedy**, blogger/farmer/mom (Bad Axe) discussed how being honest and transparent changed how her followers connected with her. Ashley's presentation explained how talking about the tragedies and challenges in her life actually helped her develop a support system in her listeners, with both she and her followers benefiting from the interaction. She often gets questions from her followers about food and where it comes from, so she can also inform and promote agriculture at the same time.

The concluding presentation of the conference was brought by **Keyona Williams**, representing **Rachel's Challenge** headquartered in Colorado, where the school massacre in Columbine happened on 4/20/99. Rachel Joy Scott was the first victim, and her journals led her parents to start this organization in her memory, with a mission to make schools and communities safer. Her essay "**My Ethics, My Codes of Life**" contained 5 challenges: *Prejudice* – look at character, not skin color. *Dream Big* – write goals and keep a journal. *Choose positive influences* – choose carefully who to surround yourself with. Reach out to the vulnerable. Don't let your character change color with the environment. *Speak Kindness* – words can hurt OR heal. east side, Tawas and Oscoda, were impacted by Rachel's story and

*Start a chain reaction* – tell people you love them. Keyona ended with a video showing footage of how two arch rival towns on MI's healed their "War on the Shore".

New friendships were formed and older networks solidified; farm women were inspired, educated, and entertained...for a time, forgetting their cares and responsibilities, some taking advantage of the spa and skiing. FWS 2020 is in the books now and the ladies have returned home, renewed and ready for a busy spring on the farm.





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*Gaylord—2020*

