

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY
2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, OK 73105-4912
PRESS RELEASE: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 14, 2017

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Betty Thompson, 405-522-6105, betty.thompson@ag.ok.gov

Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Nikki Schuth-Mitchell

By: Betty Thompson

Durant—For Nikki Schuth-Mitchell, agriculture is more than her career; it has been the cornerstone for her family for many years.

At a young age, Mitchell was begging to have an animal of her own. She recalled that every time her family went to the county fair she went straight to the lamb pens and her parents “practically had to drag her away.”

At the time, her father ran cattle, near Colbert, about 15 miles southwest of Durant. But he didn’t let Mitchell help work the cattle for fear that she would get hurt, so he made a deal with her that she could have a lamb when she turned 9 and joined the Bryan County Clover Leaves 4-H Club.

With the help of their local ag teacher, Don Allen, her family purchased two lambs: one for Mitchell and one for her brother Ethan.

“It snowballed,” said Mitchell. “I started with one lamb—a Dorset Wether—at 9, and by my senior year of high school I had 23 show lambs.”

Nikki laughed when she recalled that she named her first lamb “Vanilla” because he was solid white.

Some of her fondest memories growing up are spending time with her family during the shows. She and her brother Ethan are only 11 months apart and very close.

“We would load up in the single cab truck with a bench seat and head to a show,” Mitchell laughed. “My dad eventually upgraded and we got a four-door.”

Her family traveled to shows for the Southeastern Oklahoma Lamb Association, the Texas Jackpot, Kansas City for the American Royal, and many others. But she was most fond of one show in particular.

“My absolute favorite is the North American International Livestock Expedition (NAILE),” Mitchell said. “I loved seeing all the different breeds, and I loved watching the fitting before the shows. The first time I showed there I was about 12.”

NAILE is notorious for its green sawdust and white fences in the show ring. Mitchell said she hopes to go back as an adult.

Mitchell was very active in her County 4-H and the Durant FFA Chapter, serving as a Bryan County 4-H Teen Leader for five years, and earned her State and America FFA Degrees. In 2009, Mitchell was inducted into the Bryan County 4-H Hall of Fame.

After graduating from Durant High School, Mitchell went on to Oklahoma State University (OSU) where she enrolled as a double major in Agricultural Education and Animal Science.

“I took a few classes in Animal Science and really felt like that was for me,” Mitchell said. “I fell in love with agriculture all over again.”

While at OSU, she also met her husband Michael when she partnered with a friend for an animal science project. Her project partner was a coworker of Michael’s and introduced the two.

“He got his undergrad and master in aviation,” Mitchell said. “He doesn’t come from an ag background at all—he’s been thrown into it and luckily enjoys it.”

In April, they will have been married two years.

Before graduating, she also spent some time exploring international agriculture in London. During her four months abroad, she worked with a non-profit called Urban Orchard, which focused on revitalizing community gardens and orchards.

“I really loved seeing agriculture in different parts of the world,” Mitchell said. “We did a lot of outreach and education. We found people who had been living in the same apartments but had never met their neighbors. The gardens helped connect people.”

Mitchell also said they found that giving communities something to work on together improved mental and emotional health.

Shortly after returning home from London, she began looking for career opportunities. A listing with the Choctaw Nation particularly appealed to her because it would be an opportunity to continue educating others about agriculture.

“I was the first one hired with the agriculture outreach program,” Mitchell said. “We work with members of the tribe, the community and youth within the southeast corner of Oklahoma.”

Mitchell was brought on as the first Tribal Extension Agent for the Choctaw Nation’s Agriculture Outreach program, which works to promote agriculture opportunities and success for Tribal members through workshops, field days, on-farm research, demonstrations and technical assistance. She works closely with OSU Extension, USDA and other agricultural organizations to bring resources to the producers and community members within the 10 ½ counties of the Choctaw Nation.

Mitchell said that because the Choctaw Nation revived the USDA 2501 grant, Ag Outreach is able to connect socially disadvantaged and beginning farmers and ranchers to USDA opportunities and programs as well as provide youth and producer education.

In 2017, Choctaw Nation's Ag Outreach program reached over 100,000 people through 58 community, tribal and agricultural events throughout the state.

Even though her family is actually Chickasaw, Shawnee and Cherokee, she said it is fairly common to work closely with or for another tribe. In fact, both of her parents also work for the Choctaw Nation.

"It's very helpful in the fact that I understand tribal culture," Mitchell explained. "I didn't have as much of a learning curve on that front."

In addition to producer assistance, Mitchell also gets the opportunity to work with over 2,000 students in 26 different schools and incorporate curriculum from the Ag in the Classroom program. During her two years with the program, she said she has been surprised by how little many students know about agriculture and where their food comes from—even in rural communities—such as the belief that chocolate milk comes from brown cows.

"We started teaching Ag in the Classroom once a month to the Jones Academy and now those students are learning about Oklahoma commodities," Mitchell said. "I would say it's having a positive impact."

When she finishes her work as an extension agent, she goes to her family farm where she helps take care of 200 Hampshire ewes on 240 acres. She's responsible for the evening feedings and putting the ewes up for the night. In the summertime, she shears all the ewes herself.

"I'm not as quick as some at shearing," laughed Mitchell, "so it takes me awhile."

But just like showing, farming it is a family activity for them. Her dad takes on the morning chores and lets the ewes out and takes care of the evening feeding and putting the ewes back up in the barn if Mitchell gets off work late.

But even if all the chores are done, she still takes the time to go out to the farm and spend time with her family. Eventually, Mitchell said she and her husband hope to build on the family farm.

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Editor's note: This is part of a continuing series of stories on Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture. The project is a collaborative program between the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food & Forestry and Oklahoma State University to recognize and honor the impact of countless women across all 77 counties of the state, from all aspects and areas of the agricultural industry. The honorees were nominated by their peers and selected by a committee of industry professionals.



Photo Caption: Nikki Schuth Mitchell serves as a Tribal Extension Agent for the Choctaw Nation's Agricultural Outreach Program.



Photo Caption: Nikki Schuth Mitchell and her husband Michael reside in Calera. Nikki is being recognized as a Significant Woman in Oklahoma Agriculture.



Photo Caption: Nikki Schuth-Mitchell pictured on her family farm near Colbert. Her family raises Hampshire ewes.