

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, OK 73105-4912
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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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

Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Susan Allen

Everybody has a story to tell, but it is the journey of finding *your* story that is sometimes most challenging.

Even though Susan Allen was raised on Lively Ranch in Sharon, Okla., where her family farmed cattle and wheat, it was many years before she recognized the vital role she could play in the agricultural industry as a non-producer.

“It took me a long time to realize that I too had an ag story to tell,” Allen said. “But it takes all of our stories and our different roles to move agriculture forward.”

As the youngest of the four children, and the only girl, Allen spent a significant amount of time in the kitchen with her mother learning how to cook and “feed the farmer” with the foods they produced on their farm. Little did she know the skills she learned in that kitchen would blossom into a career of educating consumers about those products.

Active in 4-H growing up, Allen found another avenue to develop her knowledge base in nutrition with her Dairy Foods project through numerous activities such as food nutrition demonstrations. But a defining moment for Allen’s future was when her father and two of her brothers were diagnosed with diabetes. This health crisis forced her and her mother to completely change the way they fed their family.

After dedicating a great deal of time to studying and understanding the science behind managing diabetes, Allen developed an interest in a career in nutrition and health.

She went on to earn a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Education in Family and Consumer Science from Southwestern Oklahoma State University. Admittedly, she still did not think of her degree as an avenue to a career in agriculture.

Allen’s father was also a great inspiration to her growing up. She admired his drive to be an advocate for farmers and the agricultural industry.

“He didn’t just stay on the farm,” Allen said. “He joined organizations in order to help move farming forward. He taught me to not sit back and hope things go your way, but to get involved and speak up.”

One of the biggest examples of this was when her father drove his tractor (twice) to Washington D.C. with 5,000 other farmers for the American Agriculture Movement that demanded changes to the nation’s farm and food policies. Their hope was to see changes that would support a more profitable and equitable industry for family farms.

Her admiration for her father and the work he did for the industry continued to drive Allen to pursue an agricultural career.

Early into her professional life, she worked with the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service as a 4-H Youth Development Extension Educator. Several years later, Allen took a job at Oklahoma Beef Council serving as the Director for Consumer Information and Education.

“That’s when I first thought ‘Okay, I’m in ag,’” Allen said, “Even though I had been in ag all of my life.

“My father had passed away by the time I went to the beef council, but I think he would have been proud.”

Her role with the beef council was bridging the gap between the producers and consumers. Rather than raising the cows, she was promoting the products farmers, like her family, had produced, and the nutritional benefits they provided.

“My job was to do what the farmers didn’t want to do for themselves,” Allen said, “which was talk to consumers about the nutritional aspects of beef.”

Her education background in consumer science as well as her early 4-H and family experiences came into play perfectly in preparing her for her career at the beef council, as well as Dairy MAX.

Today, her role at Dairy MAX is very similar to the work she did at the beef council. Allen serves as the Manager of Industry Affairs and travels central and western Oklahoma collaborating with pediatricians, family physicians and dietitians to help educate consumers on how to make healthy choices. She has been named a Friend of Oklahoma Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics twice since 2007. Additionally, Allen works closely with farmers, encouraging them to tell their story.

She says consumers have changed throughout her career. Today, they want to know who the farmers are and where their food is coming from. She helps farmers make a critical connection with their consumers by putting a face with the product—a sometimes challenging task.

“Some farmers became farmers because they didn’t really want to talk to a lot of people,” Allen laughed. “Our job is to help them realize they have such a great story to tell, and people *want* to know farmers.”

Allen helps facilitate numerous trainings through Dairy MAX to give dairy farmers the tools, ideas and skills necessary to connect with their consumers whether it’s through farm tours, social media or videos of daily farm activities. Through the Dairy Farmers Spokesperson Network, they have trained over 100 dairy farmers as well as numerous industry leaders and partners to be advocates for the dairy industry.

“Consumers have challenging questions that present opportunities for our farmers to connect to people,” Allen said. “The trust level is high with farmers when people feel like they know them. Our goal is to fill that trust bank.”

Additionally, Allen manages the Issues and Crisis team for Dairy MAX, covering Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico. Allen says this training is critical to helping farmers maintain their composure in the event of a crisis when the industry needs spokespeople.

“There are two sides to every story,” Allen said. “We need farmers to tell their side of the story.”

When she is not helping train industry spokespeople, Allen is actively promoting the nutrition of dairy products. She says understanding the whole scale of consumers is vital. In addition to thinking outside of the box and being creative in how the message reaches the consumer, you have to learn to meet the consumer where they are at.

“I think it’s a fluid situation—no pun intended,” laughed Allen. “The message has to be reasonable and doable for every consumer, like the little changes they can make.”

One of consumer groups Allen has spent a lot of time with is school-aged students. Dairy MAX is an active participant in the National Dairy Council’s Fuel Up to Play 60 program that is partnered with the NFL. The program focuses on students fueling their bodies with healthy foods, like dairy products, and being active for at least 60 minutes every day.

While most people would assume the NFL player would be the star of the Fuel Up to Play 60 program, Allen has seen there is another guest who is surprisingly more popular—the dairy farmer. And it’s not just the kids captivated by what these farmers have to say.

“I’ve seen NFL players quiz farmers because they are so fascinated by what they do,” Allen said.

That’s where her role of educating consumers about the nutritional components of dairy products and encouraging dairy farmers to tell their story merge. Many of the farmers trained through the Dairy Farmers Spokesperson Network participate in Fuel Up to Play 60 events, putting a face to the product those children are fueling their bodies with.

Allen has also seen that it is not just outside consumers paying close attention to the information she shares, but also her own children Audrey, 10, and Luke, 7. Both children emulate the things they have learned from her, such as eating healthy most of the time, having three servings of dairy, and being active. Her daughter Audrey even has a Dairy Foods project in the South Logan County 4-H club.

Allen is her kids' 4-H leader, just like her mother was her 4-H leader. Her mother still owns the family farm and continues to be very influential in her life. While Allen's husband Russ did not spend much time in 4-H as a kid, he is supportive of both Allen and their kids' activities in 4-H, church, school and sports.

Even though Allen didn't grow up on a dairy farm, she feels like the dairy industry is a family she has been adopted into. And whether she's promoting beef or dairy products, she shares the same passion the farmers who produced the products have.

"When your values match the values of the people you work for every day, then it is not really a job," Allen said. "I have been so lucky with 4-H, the beef council and Dairy MAX that I share their passion."

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Susan Allen participating in a Dairy MAX cooking class for the Health and Wellness Advisory Council.