

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

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Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Karen Eifert Jones

Two years gave way to more than two decades.

After graduating from Oklahoma State University, Karen Eifert Jones intended to go off and work for a couple of years and then return to the land of her raising, just off U.S. Highway 81 near Waukomis in Garfield County.

Instead, Jones spent more than 20 years away from home working in the agriculture industry in ag finance, ag chemical sales, government programs and farm management.

However, two decades isn't all that long when you consider her ties to the reddish silt loam soil where she was raised go back more than 125 years to her great-grandfathers. That connection was powerful enough, that Jones did return in 2008 and many days can be found covered from brow to jeans in that dirt she loves so much.

One recent honor goes a long way in describing Karen Eifert Jones. This year, she was a recipient of Oklahoma State University's "Master Agronomist" award. Recipients of this award, initiated in 1947, have participated in agronomic education efforts and have contributed valuable public service because of their unique efforts in the fields of soil conservation, range management, or crop production.

Both on and off the farm, Jones has remained a faithful friend to agriculture throughout her life.

"I have always had a deep faith in God's plan for my life," she said. "I could never have predicted many of the turns my life has taken. So, no, I didn't always know that I would be back on the farm I grew up on. I was at peace working in whatever facet of agriculture I was in and simply trusting God's plan."

Home and away, and then back home

Jones, who has a rich sense of humor, was asked what took her away from the farm and what brought her back.

Jokingly, but literally, she replied, "Left in a Nissan car and came back in a Dodge pickup."

Jones graduated from the OSU College of Agriculture in 1985 as a Top Ten Senior. Her father knew his four daughters all carried a deep devotion to the farm.

“But despite his love for agriculture he ensured that each of us went to college and told me I was not allowed to come back to the farm for two years after graduation,” she said. “He wanted to be sure I was there because I chose it, and not because I didn’t know anything else to do.”

She was away from the home place for 23 years.

In that span, she was employed by Dow AgroSciences working with farmers and ranchers and teaching proper use of chemicals. Then she spent several years with USDA Farm Service Agency analyzing farm finances and administering the guaranteed loan program in conjunction with local lenders. During eight years of her USDA career, Jones was based in Washington D.C. and traveled to nearly every state and Puerto Rico.

She returned to a life of full-time production in 2008. Her husband Dr. Rod Jones is a professor of Agricultural Economics and Finance at OSU and they have two children, son Weston, 16, and daughter Caroline, 14. While Karen is the primary operator of the farm, she says "there is no way I could be doing this without him." Rod comes home as often as he can and the two are in frequent contact on production decisions. It is truly a family farming operation.

“God’s timing allowed me to become a full-time farmer as my employer had offered a buyout to reduce staffing and my father had passed away leaving a void in the family farming operation,” she said. “We did not take over the family farm. We simply rented land from my family; most of which I have a part ownership in. My mother kept the cattle. We also purchased several quarters ourselves and rented some from neighbors. It has been a building process. We didn’t walk into a ready-made operation. My husband liquidated some of his own farmland in Kansas to purchase land here.”

Jones’ approach to farming is as diversified as her overall ag experiences.

“I knew that the only way we could grow a sustainable operation was to utilize no-till practices and rotational crops to improve the soil and produce the best crops,” she said. “This year I have corn, soybeans, and grain sorghum growing and canola and wheat being harvested now.”

Lessons learned

Away from the farm, but still knee deep in agriculture, Jones worked in sales and marketing, policy development, auditing and ag lending.

She looked at organizations that worked and saw what made others fail.

Jones worked with corn in Iowa, almonds in California, rice in Arkansas, fruits in Puerto Rico, ranches in Montana, poultry producers in Delaware, wheat farmers in Oklahoma and almost any other ag commodity you can name.

“I had a front row seat to agriculture of all types in all areas,” she said.

Sharing her crop

If experience in the ag industry were grain, Jones would have countless bins that could be completely full. The key is “could be” because instead of storing her knowledge, her challenges and her successes, she readily shares with others.

“Looking at Karen’s career in agriculture, her greatest service is that she is an encourager,” said Dr. Damona Doye, who has known Jones in part through the producer’s service for several years to the planning committee for the Oklahoma Women in Ag and Small Business Conference. “She has held leadership positions, but really thrives when in a role of encouraging others; helping them to be their best so they can contribute to the industry that she holds dear.”

Jones has remained in the ag industry not only because of her own love for agriculture, but also to encourage others who are traveling paths she’s already been down.

“When I was in the FSA Kansas State Office, helping field staff was my focus,” she said. “When I was selling chemical, I worked hard to see that the least knowledgeable could become educated about range and pasture management. I have helped coworkers move ahead. I have broken through barriers so others can succeed without wasting time or energy on those.”

She’s encouraged bright minds to participate in the highly successful Oklahoma Ag Leadership Program. Jones has fought for loans for those that seem to have potential but barely meet the criteria.

Patently, she has taught many who needed a job how to drive a tractor or a standard transmission pick up. She’s recognized high school students that seem to have potential and “mentored them through their job on our farm and college.”

All because, Jones is not only an ag producer but an ag encourager.

The “soul” reason

Even though she’d been away from home for more than two decades, Jones feels blessed that her life has circled back to Waukomis “and we get to raise our children on the land that is in my soul.”

“Our children are growing from life here and will take the farm with them in the form of passion and life lessons, regardless of the vocation they choose to pursue,” she said.

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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 14 industry professionals.



Photo caption (Photo credit: Must credit Courtney Newman): Karen Eifert Jones is shown near a barn that was built by her great-grandparents Solomon and Helen Beese and “with the help of the community I’m sure.”