

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, betty.thompson@ag.ok.gov, 405-208-2850

Significant Women in Agriculture - Emily Oakley

Emily Oakley has brought a world of passion for organic foods to 3 acres in Cherokee County in northeastern Oklahoma.

Oakley, a city girl from Tulsa, never planted a seed before her high school and college courses grew her awareness of global environmental issues and their connection with agriculture. Attending Oklahoma State University's Science Academy opened her eyes and gave her a desire to work with small-scale farmers to build sustainability.

That desire blossomed into a drive to become a small-scale farmer herself in spite of opportunities to stay in graduate school at the University of California Davis where she received her master's degree in International Agricultural Development. Graduate school emphasized policy-making over hands-on farming, but Oakley saw her future differently. Feeding people the highest quality fresh vegetables she can grow is her policy.

She returned to Oklahoma and eventually bought land east of Tulsa in Cherokee County where she and her husband, Michael Appel, grow more than 25 different types of vegetables on 3 acres including a hoop house full of tomatoes.

This is the second in a 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.

One of the many impressive facets of Oakley's life is her amazingly unselfish attitude when it comes to sharing her love for agriculture with her neighbors – and Oakley's neighbors span the world. Take for example, her involvement in the Farmer-to-Farmer Program. This program promotes sustainable economic growth, food security and agricultural development worldwide. Volunteers including U.S. farmers, as well as people from agribusinesses, cooperatives, and universities, help developing countries improve productivity, access new markets, build local capacity, combat climate change and conserve environmental and natural resources. Oakley has served as a Farmer to Farmer Consultant to Guatemala, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Ghana and Nigeria.

“We actually still do the Farmer to Farmer exchanges through USAID (United States Agency for International Development) in our off-season,” Oakley said. “Every other year we tend to do them and we actually took our daughter to Guatemala. We still try to maintain that connection with Farmer to Farmer because it is a big part of why we do what we do. It is a big part of what brought us to farming in the first place and why we chose to become farmers rather than what our original path was which was sort of like studying it and then maybe doing extension work. Ultimately we just decided to become farmers ourselves.”

So, just inside the Cherokee County line, Oakley pulls on her work clothes each day and heads to the field. The sun’s first rays catch the brim of her floppy, brown hat as her hands swiftly harvest organic vegetables for the Cherry Street Farmers Market in Tulsa.

In spite of the challenges, they have created a loyal base of 120 subscribers to their family farm. The subscribers come to the Cherry Street market to select their supply of fresh, ripe vegetables. Oakley finds that Oklahoma has a vibrant food culture with many people who are willing to go to farmers markets because they care about meeting farmers as much as they care about taste and just-picked flavor.

Growing vegetables for more than a decade on Three Springs Farm is only one of the ways Oakley benefits those around her – and everyone is Oakley’s neighbor.

Oakley’s service on the board led to the market’s move from a small parking lot to filling two blocks of Cherry Street and expanding the market to over 70 vendors. She was also one of the first board members of the National Young Farmers Coalition and later served as the group’s president. Oakley was also a founding board member and co-president of Global Gardens, a Tulsa organization that facilitates school gardening in low income areas. She currently serves on the National Organic Standards Board as a producer representative.

“Agriculture hasn’t just provided a livelihood for Emily, but is Emily’s life work and passion,” her husband said. “Through her farming, Emily wants to show that women play a key role in farming and that farming can have a positive impact on the environment.”

So, Oakley nurtures that passion on 3 acres in Oklahoma and then shares her love for agriculture with a world full of neighbors.

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Suggested photo caption:

Emily Oakley, left, was recognized as one of Oklahoma’s Significant Women in Agriculture for her work as a teacher, community builder and producer of fresh, organic vegetables on Three Springs Farm in Cherokee County east of Tulsa.

