

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

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Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Rae Ann Blakley

By: Kaylee Snow

OOLOGAH – When Rae Ann Blakley was five years old, her grandpa, Wilbur Lee Ball, bought her a goat so she would keep going to school.

A stubborn little girl, Blakley refused to continue Kindergarten.

“I didn’t want to go to school,” she said, “and my grandpa told me if I’d go to school he would buy me this goat.”

Blakley laughed as she recalled the drive back from Miami, Okla., to their home in Kansas with the goat, who she later named Snowball, in the back seat of her dad’s car.

“I just loved that little goat,” she said. “I had it ’til I graduated from high school. It’s kind of funny. I didn’t ever show goats. It was just kind of a pet, and I loved it. I loved taking care of animals.”

What started as an incentive to keep a little girl attending school led to a life fully consumed by agriculture.

Early years

Blakley was born in Ark City, Kan., but grew up in northeast Oklahoma on a pig farm. Her dad, Jim Wilford, had one of the largest swine feedlot operations in the state during the ’70s and ’80s and could house up to 10,000 hogs at a time.

“We raised pigs, and we did custom hay baling,” she said. “I worked in the hay field with my dad. He taught me at an early age the importance of having a good work ethic and being dependable. I was active in 4-H and FFA as a youngster. I judged livestock. We ran a few cattle but mostly the hogs.”

Throughout her childhood, Blakley exhibited pigs, cattle and sheep.

“I started showing livestock in Kansas when I was 6,” she said, “and then we moved to Oklahoma, and I had to wait a few years because we couldn’t show in Oklahoma ’til we were 9.”

Blakley’s mother, Kathy Wilford, had a garden and enjoyed growing plants and flowers.

“I didn’t realize it until later in life how much that had had an effect on me also,” Blakley said.

After graduating from Miami High School in 1984, she received an associate’s degree from Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College in 1986 where she also judged livestock. She then graduated from Oklahoma State University in 1988 with a bachelor’s degree in agricultural economics.

Throughout Blakley’s life, agriculture has been a part of the most important events in her life. College, marriage, children. She met her husband, Lyle Emmett Blakley, through 4-H and FFA – at a livestock judging contest in high school.

The two married in 1988 and both decided to come back to his family’s farm full time. In order to make it feasible, they built a greenhouse. Blakley opened Creekside Plants & Produce and began growing vegetable and bedding plants.

This was just the beginning.

Alternative agriculture

What started as a 1,500-square-foot greenhouse is now a 10,000-square-foot greenhouse that grows vegetable, bedding, ornamental and perennial plants as well as herbs. Blakley sells both retail and at farmers markets year-round. The Blakleys also sell beef and pork meat and eggs raised on their farm at the farmers markets.

“We came back to the family farm [in 1988], but in 2000 my husband and I purchased the farm from his father,” she said. “So we took it over completely in the year 2000.”

While the greenhouse was built as an additional source of income, the farm consists mostly of the typical livestock and hay operations.

The Blakleys run 450-head of cows, a purebred Maine Anjou and Shorthorn herd, pigs and chickens. The family also bales hay and does custom hay work.

Each year, they market 20-25 pigs off the farm through the meat market. Their beef is also sold through the meat market, but they also sell seedstock bulls and heifers.

Blakley has been very active at the farmers markets, serving on the Cherry Street Farmers Market board nearly consecutively since 1999. She’s also been on the Owasso Farmers Market Board since 2009.

“We are founding members of the Cherry Street Farmers Market,” she said. “We’ve been there since the first one nearly 20 years ago.”

The market started with 15-20 vendors and now includes about 80 vendors.

Blakley is also involved with the Farm to School program and provides 4,500 plants each year to Tulsa Public Schools to be distributed to children.

“The kids go through a little workshop,” she said, “and they actually take a tomato plant home with them and plant it.”

Blakley said it’s very rewarding for her.

“People will come to the market and say, ‘Oh, my child got one of your plants, and we grew tomatoes.’ That’s kind of neat,” she said.

Each year, 200-300 children visit Blakley Family Farms on school tours. They visit the greenhouse and get to see the livestock and farm equipment. The students learn how to transplant and propagate plants and the different cuts of beef.

“We just think it’s very, very important that children know about agriculture and where their food comes from,” Blakley said. “If we don’t teach that to the youngsters, there’s no way as they become adults that they’re going to realize you don’t just go to the grocery store and milk appears. You need to know where it comes from, where the beef comes from, and what’s involved in producing it. So we like to do that just to kind of get the city kids more connected to the rural area.”

Looking forward and back

Blakley, a fourth-generation farmer, says agriculture is “everything” to her because her entire life has revolved around it. It’s more than just producing food. It’s about educating and helping others, too, like Mara Harness.

Mara, a young lady with a condition similar to Down syndrome, has worked for the Blakleys for three years.

She had just moved to the area and needed something to do, so Blakley gave her an opportunity that would greatly impact her.

“She started helping with the cattle, and it absolutely amazed me how it changed her,” Blakley said. “She has so much more confidence and pride, and she just loves it.”

The family has been continuously impressed by her improvement.

“Although she had never been around livestock, she was a natural,” Blakley said. “The confidence and maturity she has gained by these responsibilities is amazing. It truly makes me appreciate my life and the opportunities agriculture has to offer.”

By hiring Mara, the Blakleys sowed a seed through a simple act of kindness, yet both Mara and the Blakleys will reap the benefits for years to come – the kind you can’t buy.

A couple years ago, Blakley heard Temple Grandin, an autistic woman who is an expert in animal behavior, speak about the connection between special needs children and livestock. It left a lasting impact on Blakley.

She said it's truly amazing what agriculture can do for all kids – not only kids with disabilities – but troubled kids who simply need direction, too. Agriculture teaches them how to work for things in life.

“It doesn't come to you,” she said. “If you want it, you have to work for it.”

This is exactly what Blakley has instilled in her children, who were all active in 4-H and FFA and have chosen to pursue agriculture.

Her daughter Rashele, 26, is an agricultural teacher in Cherokee, and her daughter Reighly, 21, will graduate from OSU in May with a degree in agricultural communications. Her youngest son Larahmy, 14, “talks about coming back to the family farm and taking his dad's position.”

Blakley has a unique view of agriculture because she grows the produce and raises the livestock, and then physically sells it to the consumer. She makes time for the farmers markets because she sees the lasting impact it has on the public. She is personally bridging the gap between the producer and the consumer.

“It's very rewarding to me to take the products that we produce and sell them directly to the consumers because they appreciate it, and it makes me feel good to know that they like our product,” she said. “They understand what we're doing. They're trying to shop locally and help support the farmers.”

Her customers are loyal, and while there are “many misconceptions in agriculture,” Blakley says “it's good for the farmers to be at markets and help promote agriculture.”

“People will drive out from Tulsa whenever we're not at the market, and I just think that's kind of special,” Blakley said. “It makes us feel like we're doing something good. When you're not dealing directly with the public, it's a little bit different. I just find it very rewarding.”

While the Blakleys face challenges from urban expansion, they continue to be successful after 30 years of agricultural production because of their dedication.

“We do it because we love it,” she said. “You have to love what you do, and that's the biggest thing. We both enjoy it, so that makes all the hard work and the time we put into it worthwhile.”

Blakley is thankful for agriculture and the rural lifestyle, but she's also pretty thankful for a goat named Snowball who started it all.

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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: Rae Ann Blakley is being recognized as a Significant Woman in Oklahoma Agriculture. She is directly involved in production agriculture through Creekside Plants & Produce, a 10,000-square-foot greenhouse where she grows vegetable, bedding, ornamental and perennial plants as well as herbs, and Blakley Family Farms, which consists of cattle, pigs, chickens and hay work.

