

2000 Iowa Master Farm Homemakers Guild Inductees

Cheryl Arthur - IMFH Class of 2000

Fayette County

From planting crops, to farrowing pigs, to keeping the farm and swine enterprise records, to constructing the annual farm marketing plan, Cheryl Arthur does it all. Even when husband, Roger, was called to Washington, she adeptly ran the combine, rounded up help to load the soybeans and repair the harvester.

"My family is the most important thing in my life," she says. "Roger and I have two lovely daughters. They are caring, responsible young women who are active in their church and communities."

The Summer, Iowa, couple raises about 850 acres of crops. They farrow to finish about 2000 hogs per year. The Arthurs sell 60-80 gilts per month to other producers as breeding stock. They built the gilt program around purebred Yorkshire sows typically bred to Landrace-Duroc cross boars.

Breeding stock demand softened when hog prices collapsed. "We see three factors fueling renewed interest in breeding stock," says Cheryl. "One is financial healing following the 1998-99 wreck. Another is general optimism for hogs. Third, cheap corn and soybeans entice farmers to walk their crops to market through hogs."

In recent years, the Arthurs scaled back pork production. "That was because of economics and our full-time employee sought other opportunities," explains Cheryl.

"We're exploring options," she says. "If we can find compatible employees or partners, we might expand pork production. Other options are adding more land or leasing out hog facilities."

How will they decide? "We discuss everything before we do anything," explains Cheryl. "Whatever course we eventually choose, Roger and I will select the path together."

Cheryl has an extensive community activity pedigree as a board member of the county pork producers association, 4-H club leader, 4-H judge and Church Women United member. She also supports school activities.

Her community service career is now taking a different direction. For years, the Arthurs have been very involved in the Randalia United Methodist Church. But rural churches are struggling. A year ago, Cheryl and Roger helped organize Circle of Hope parish. Six churches realigned under one charge. The six churches have one full-time pastor. Lay people carry out the remaining ministerial duties.

"Cheryl began filling in as lay reader," explains Pastor Roger White. "Then she completed a course in lay speaking. She has led worship in three of the six churches in the parish."

The first of this year, Cheryl became Leadership Team chairperson for the six-point charge.

"Cheryl has vital leadership skills that blend with her bubbly personality and ability to work with people of all ages," he says. "She is a blessing to Randalia Church, the parish and the community."

Cheryl and Roger have traveled to Mexico, the Caribbean and Switzerland. Cheryl developed a keen awareness of foreign markets and how they impact markets here. Her travels, especially in Mexico, heightened her concerns about poverty and difficult living conditions.

The Arthurs' daughters live in Iowa. Angela Marie is employed at Principal Insurance in Des Moines. Amanda Diane is a licensed massage therapist with her own clinic in Clive.

Vara Groot - IMFH Class of 2000

Calhoun County

At a women's health and safety seminar in Manson Iowa, last spring, serious topics were covered - cancer, methamphetamine, stress management, etc. On a lighter note, the last speaker was local farm wife Vara Groot.

Her presentation, "My 4-buckle boots," is about the funny things farm wives who didn't grow up on a farm say and do as they adjust. Vara is telling her story after 31 years of marriage to farmer Merlyn Groot. Those attending went away feeling uplifted.

"That's the true picture of Vara - her ability to make others forget their problems and reflect on their blessings," says Jerry Chizek, Iowa State University's extension director in Calhoun County. "She uses humor and tells tales about herself. People enjoy being around her. Her enthusiasm and positive outlook rub off on you."

Vara is a true partner in the family farm, a devoted mother and a respected volunteer. She plays the ukulele, French horn and piano, and uses music to help deliver her message. Her talent has blessed many in community gatherings, care centers and schools.

She's been a tremendous volunteer for the music program at Manson Northwest Webster High School, says band director Jerrold Jimmerson.

Pastor Louis Hoger at St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church says Vara is very active in her congregation and collaborates easily with leaders from other faiths on ecumenical activities. She's earned the respect and admiration of people throughout the area.

A music education major in college, Vara taught music to elementary school students before marrying Merlyn. Music was how they met. He sang in a barbershop quartet in the Ft. Dodge area. "When we met I didn't think barbershop was my kind of music," she chuckles. "I soon learned it was loads of fun and heard terrific harmonies."

Vara and Merlyn sang together in several groups. They still sing at church, at home and are active in the community chorus. "Music has always been important to my family," says Vara, who has four sisters. "Our husbands didn't propose marriage to us. They auditioned. Merlyn passed."

The Groots' two older daughters live in Branson, Mo. The youngest is a University of Iowa student.

The Groots have a 45-head beef cow herd and grow corn and soybeans on 800 acres. Vara keeps the records. She feeds the calves when Merlyn is gone, sometimes drives the tractor when they bale or runs a field cultivator ahead of planting. "The farm work I do outside is limited," she says. "We've had a lot of help from Merlyn's family, especially his nephew Bruce Johnson."

Vara's willingness to manage the family and bookkeeping allowed Merlyn to assume leadership roles in farm organizations. He's been president of both the Iowa and American Soybean Association. (ASA), has been active in Farm Bureau, the Iowa Cattlemen, etc., and is now director for Farm Credit Services of America. These contributions wouldn't have been possible without Vara's support.

She notes ASA's market development program, which promotes the use of U.S.-produced soybeans in Mexico, actually started on her dining room table.

Darla Thompson - IMFH Class of 2000

Winnebago County

Stop in at the Four T farm just west of Thompson, Iowa on any given morning and you are likely to find Darla Thompson helping her husband Ted load hogs for market. But don't expect her to stick around long. As soon as the hogs are on their way, she will be changing into business clothes and heading to her full-time job in town.

Darla epitomizes today's modern farm homemaker. She is involved in community, church and school activities, works full time outside the home and is an active partner in the family farming operation.

Family is her No. 1 priority, however, and she and Ted try to attend all of their children's athletic, musical and other activities. Darla and Ted manage an 800-acre grain and livestock operation. Marketing decisions are made jointly. "That means Darla will say, 'Sell the hogs this week, they are just going to go lower,'" quips Ted. The Thompsons market around 1,100 hogs a year.

Darla does some of the record keeping and helps with fieldwork when she has time. She accepted a full-time position with Farm Bureau Insurance in 1989. Today she is an administrative assistant for two agents. She obtained her insurance license four years ago but she doesn't actively sell at this time.

Family always comes first, but Darla also devotes time to church and community. She served as the first woman president of the Bethany Lutheran Church Council in the early 1990s. She has served at many levels including Sunday school teacher, confirmation mentor/teacher and choir participant. The family attends church together unfailingly.

"She is truly a Christian leader for today's world, caring for her family while giving her time and talent to the betterment of others in the community," says the Rev. Perry Fruhling, Immanuel Lutheran Church, Independence, Iowa.

Darla is a past Winnebago County Farm Bureau Women's chair, has worked at the county fair in various capacities and was a member of the parent teacher organization. She also volunteers for 4-H activities.

Darla grew up on a farm near Buffalo Center that was purchased by her grandfather in 1942. After she married Ted, they made their home in Thompson, later moving to Ted's home farm that was originally owned by his great grandfather.

They set high expectations for themselves and their children. The children are encouraged to set goals. Following through on those goals is something Darla and Ted try to teach.

All four of their children are working hard to achieve their goals. Carol Weaver works at Ultimate Auto in Des Moines.

Terry Weaver works at Ultimate Auto in Des Moines.

Seventeen-year-old Tom Thompson is a senior at North Iowa School. He plans to major in Ag science at Iowa State University and wants to eventually return to the farm. "Tom's been interested in the hogs since he was 3 years old," notes Darla. "He's even taken over my hog chores."

Amanda Thompson (15) is a sophomore at North Iowa School.

Bonnie Sanders - IMFH Class of 2000

Benton County

More than 1,000 preschools and elementary children visit the Sanders' farm near Vinton, Iowa, each fall. But that doesn't bother Bonnie and Dwight. In fact, they like it because one of their goals is educating young people about farm life.

The Sanders work as a team in their farming and seed business and support each other's projects. For example, more than 25 years ago, Bonnie began growing several acres of pumpkins, squash, gourds and Indian corn. Each fall she displays the produce for sale at the farm where visitors pay for their purchases "on the honor system: by placing money in a can. The Sanders also open up the farm for visitors to see goats, ducks, chickens, geese, peacocks, an emu, ostrich and pot-bellied pig.

Bonnie gives tours to the school children each morning and afternoon Monday through Friday in October. She allows the children to choose a pumpkin and some Indian corn from the field - her "hands-on" classroom.

On most winter days, Bonnie can be found helping Dwight in one of the "twin silos" that were renovated for storing, conditioning and bagging seed. The family has had a certified seed business since Dwight's father, Verle, started it in 1947. "I didn't want to pay what they were charging for certified seed so I decided to certify it myself," explains Verle.

The business has grown every year. In 1998, however, Sanders switched to custom conditioning and bagging for seed companies. Last year they handled around 70,000 units, shipping several container loads to Japan. Organic soybeans have become a big part of the mix.

Bonnie maintains the records for the seed business as well as the 500-acre diversified farming operation.

Bonnie not only devotes her time and energy to educating children, and helping Dwight in the farming seed business, but she also gives time to others through her involvement in 4-H, community and church.

Both Bonnie and Dwight have been youth group leaders at Wesley United Methodist Church. She and Dwight received the local Iowa State Education Association "Friend of Education" award in 1990. Bonnie is also involved in Eden Aid, a group of township ladies who do service projects.

"What amazes me most about Bonnie is not only all that she does with the farming operation and for others, is that she does this in spite of suffering from lupus for nearly 20 years," notes Linda Engelken Fischer, Benton County extension education director.

Bonnie and Dwight have instilled many of their values in their son Jason. At age 9, he started a broiler project with 50 chicks and has grown the business to where he will raise and sell 1,800 range-fed, farm-fresh broilers this year. Now 22, Jason is majoring in agricultural education at Iowa State University and plans to return to the family farm after graduation in December. Jason married Angie Baldwin in June.

Angie will graduate from the University of Northern Iowa in 2001 with a degree in public relations and journalism.