



One Woman Farm

Margaret Schlass cultivates her own path.

BY JENNIFER BROZAK

Of the roughly 2.1 million farms operating in the United States, only about 14 percent of them – around 280,000 – are run by women. The average age of these women? 59 years old.

Margaret Schlass' One Woman Farm is anything but average.

At just 29, Schlass has already been running One Woman Farm for more than six years. Unlike other farm owners who have grown up on farms, her passion for farming materialized in college, when she was studying abroad in Peru. She was pursuing a double major in art history and cultural anthropology.

"While abroad, I spent zero time in the classroom," explains Schlass. "I had an amazing professor who took us to the Amazon River Basin in the jungle to study the indigenous population there. Watching these flood plain agriculturalists farm the banks of the Amazon River, I felt a spark I'd never felt before."

After graduating from the University of Delaware, Schlass found work managing

a farm in Long Island that was growing rapidly. The owners were overwhelmed by the demands of running the 80-acre farm while raising their small children.

"I had been looking for a special farm – one that was growing by leaps and bounds where I could prove that I was capable of doing the work they needed me to do," she says.



These first experiences helped to cement her career's trajectory.

"For the first time in my life, I felt like I was where I needed to be," says Schlass. "I felt totally like myself...and I excelled at it."



After gaining experience working on the Long Island farm, Schlass, a Bethel Park native, was presented with an opportunity to move back home to run her own farm in the North Hills. A family friend had five acres of property and asked Schlass if she wanted to farm it.

“At some point, I had to make the decision to stop farming for other people and to start doing it for myself, so I decided to move back to western Pennsylvania,” she says.



Although she understands it now, Schlass says she was initially surprised at the amount of gender and cultural opposition she encountered when she first established the farm.

“Let’s be honest: It’s very uncommon for a 23-year-old single female to start a farm. A lot of people probably thought it wasn’t going to work. They’d say, ‘You’re a young, unmarried woman. You don’t have a husband to weld or to be your mechanic. You don’t have a mechanic to run your equipment,’” she says, adding “but I can do all of those things by myself.”

As a self-described transplant from the South Hills, she knew she had a lot to prove to her new community.

“When I first moved here, no one knew me. I didn’t know the area at all. I didn’t even know where any of the roads led,” she laughs. “So I just put my head down and went to work.”

Six years later, Schlass has 18 acres of farmland in production, five full-time employees, and a thriving Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program with more than 200 active members. She sells her produce to local restaurants and at farmers markets throughout the region, including markets in East Liberty, Market Square, Squirrel Hill and Ligonier.

All of her produce stays in the greater Pittsburgh region, and is certified naturally grown (CNG), which, she explains, is a grassroots alternative to the “U.S.D.A. Organic” label. Like organic farmers, CNG farmers avoid the use of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, fungicides and genetically modified crops.

As an agriculturalist and farmer, Schlass understands the fragility of the farming industry and is outwardly appalled at the number of regional properties which would be feasible for food production and are being sold.


“To a farmer, land is opportunity. If you care about farms in your region then you need to buy local food,” she states. “If you don’t participate in local agriculture, you’re saying goodbye to farming.”

The name “One Woman Farm” itself reflects her commitment and dedication to ensuring the farm’s success.

“I have a larger team now, but at the end of the day, it’s still just one woman’s responsibility to run this entire operation,” she says.


Schlass says she is always open to discussing long-term leasing opportunities with landowners who wish to see their property farmed. For more information about One Woman Farm or to contact Schlass, call 412.913.7709 or visit onewomanfarm.com. ■

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