

# Following Her *Passion*



**T**he 2023 growing season is presenting a new challenge for Stephanie Cook of Davenport. While she's no novice at farming, this year, the process of planting, harvesting and marketing her crops is giving her a new perspective.

"This is the first year that I am establishing myself as a farmer, as far as buying my own land, renting my own land, putting my own crop in," Cook says.

Cook is also farming with her parents, making her the fourth generation of her family to till the North Dakota soil.

There may not be a lot of female farm operators in North Dakota, but it likely comes as no surprise to people around her that Cook is one of them.

"I've always jumped at every chance to go help on the farm, even from when I was a young kid," Cook recounts. "When I was first getting to drive, I'd bring lunches out to the field or run around, helping get equipment going during harvest, washing windows and greasing equipment, doing all of that type of stuff."

Cook states that she has always had a passion for agriculture and

that those flames were fanned through her involvement in FFA during high school. Cook went on to college, earning an agribusiness degree with a business administration minor. An internship with Titan Machinery during college led to a full-time job with the company after graduation.

Cook believes that working in the corporate world and stepping away from the family farm for a while was likely a good thing. She worked at Titan Machinery for about eight years before marriage and children changed the dynamic. Cook decided to stay home with

her two daughters until they were old enough to be by themselves for a few hours. Now that they're teenagers, Cook was ready to make the leap.

"I took the chance to get more active on the farm again, and it has just kind of snowballed," Cook maintains, "and here I am today, taking on more and more responsibility and stepping out on my own."

## Young Leader

As if becoming a first-time farm owner wasn't enough of a load, Cook was also encouraged to apply for the American Soybean Association's Corteva Agriscience Young Leader program. The leader-training program seeks to identify and to train new, innovative and engaged growers to serve as the voice of the American farmer.

"I have two friends who went through the program, and they just raved about their experience, and they really kind of pushed me, but it wasn't a hard push because I was excited to try to do it," Cook explains. "My friends pushed me to apply, but I didn't feel like I was qualified. On paper, everything looks like I would be, but up until this year, I was just an employee of the farm, so I never felt like I was qualified or eligible to participate."

Cook applied to the program, was accepted and has thoroughly enjoyed and grown from the experience.

"It's been a great push and a great confidence boost to really take the leap and jump in and establish myself as a farmer and a business owner," Cook explains. "The Young Leader program has helped me to step up and make connections and build relationships. It has just been amazing."

Along with enhancing participants' skills through leadership, communications and issues-based training, the Young Leader program also builds a strong peer network. Cook has found those relationships to be invaluable.



“We’re all there to cheer each other on. That’s been huge,” Cook contends.

Because the Young Leader program is available to farmers nationwide, Cook has met with fellow young farmers who are also dealing with the day-to-day challenges of farming.

“It’s been fun to see how agriculture is all over the United States. It’s so different from one farm to the next, yet still the same,” Cook says.

Spouses or partners are encouraged to participate in the program. Cook’s husband, Jesse, attended with her. Although he’s not involved with the farm’s daily operation, every family member pitches in to help the family business when needed.

While being a female farm owner may put her in the minority in North Dakota, Cook was not alone in the Young Leader program.

“In my local area, I do feel like I am in the minority as far as being the main farmer,” Cook states, “but in the Young Leader program, there were four females who were the main applicant. It was also encouraging to see all of the couples there and how strong the females were in



**Stephanie and Jesse Cook, Davenport, N.D., center, accepted a Young Leader program plaque from Matt Rekeweg, U.S. Industry Affairs Leader, Corteva Agriscience. Others pictured are Turner Bridgforth, Federal Government and Industry Affairs Manager, Corteva Agriscience, far left; Katie Jordan, Federal Government Affairs and PAC Manager, Corteva Agriscience, far right; and Christine Luelf, Director of Affiliate Relations and Leader Development, American Soybean Association.**

those operations.”

### Deeper Involvement

The North Dakota Young Leader also gets to participate on the board of the North Dakota Soybean Growers Association (NDSGA). Cook states that she used to know enough about the world of politics to consider herself dangerous. Now, she has a broader picture of how policy decisions can affect farmers

in a multitude of ways.

“I’m learning all of the political aspects and how that affects us on the farm. There’s just so much,” Cook contends. “That is part of the bigger picture that you don’t always remember when you’re just at the farm working every day.”

Cook describes how the Young Leader program has helped her to be more confident when talking

about farm issues. The program has assisted her with learning more about opportunities to help her advance her farm in order to make it more efficient and better.

“It’s definitely been a positive move for me in my career,” Cook explains.

The NDSGA is seeking applicants for the 2024 Young Leader program. The current participant leaves no doubt about the value of applying.

“If I could do the program every single year, I would,” Cook asserts. “When we had our last training at Commodity Classic, nobody was ready for it to be done. If you’re questioning whether or not to apply, I would say, yes, 100%, just apply and try. You gain so much out of it.”

*—Story by Daniel Lemke,  
photos by Daniel Lemke,  
Wanbaugh Studios and ASA*

**To apply for the Corteva Agriscience Young Leader program, scan the QR code.**



**Stephanie Cook’s desire to farm started at an early age, now she runs her own operation.**