

More Women Empowered by Annie's Project

Women's involvement in the farming business is increasing in Iowa and across the nation. Their knowledge and comfort level with that involvement is also increasing, thanks to Annie's Project, a program led in Iowa by Iowa State University Extension farm management specialists. Lisa Holmes, Shenandoah farmer, pulls up the Board of Trade several times each the day to see what is going on. She reads reports and advises her farming partners—her husband and father-in-law – when she believes it is time to move some grain. She does it with confidence and some authority – because of what she learned at Annie's Project and at the additional market trainings Extension offered at the request of Annie's participants.

"My husband suggested that I attend Annie's Project, because I grew up in town and my only connection to farming was through my grandparents and marrying a farmer," Holmes said. "When our first child was born and I decided to be at home, my husband and father-in-law both had fulltime off-the-farm jobs. I had time to take on responsibilities of the farm business, but had a lot to learn. Annie's Project was a great class to learn the basics, gain some confidence and meet other women with similar issues and questions."

Holmes and 1,112 other Iowa women have attended Annie's Project workshops since the first one was held in 2004. Annie's Project covers five areas of risk management—production, marketing, financial, legal and human resources. The program is typically composed of 3-hour classes held weekly for 6 weeks. Women, in groups of 15 to 25, explore critical decision making processes of farm business while building a local network with other participants and presenters. At each of the 45 programs presented in Iowa, many participants come from the hosting county, but there are always some that drive as far as 45 miles to attend the program.



Part of the draw is the need or desire to learn; another factor is the course structure. Bob Wells and Tim Eggers, Extension farm management specialists and Iowa coordinators for Annie's Project, have developed some best practices for presenting the program that include the farm management specialist providing leadership at each course session, local women practitioners presenting session topic materials, and participants sharing their experiences and questions about the topic each night. It is a comfortable environment, according to Lisa Holmes, one where women know they can ask a question and not feel embarrassed because at least five other women in the room want an answer to that question too. "I'd be so excited after each night's session that I'd get home and keep my husband awake talking on and on about it," she said. "There was just so much to think about and share with him each week."

Nancy Adrian, Washington County farmer attended the first Iowa Annie's Program because she was working in an agriculture related job and wanted to be more

knowledgeable about farm business issues. “Annie’s gave me a taste of many topics—but not enough to fill me up,” she said. “Annie’s Project helped me realize what I needed to know, made me want to know more, gave me links to resources and built a network with classmates that made it possible to continue learning.”

When Adrian’s husband sustained serious head injuries in a farming accident last spring, she became responsible for many farm business decisions—including the financial and risk management planning. “When my role on the farm changed, and I had to be more involved on a regular basis—I knew from Annie’s where to go to get help and answers,” she said. “I knew the questions to ask and I suddenly realized the weight of the responsibilities that had been my husband’s for years. My life changed. I have always listened to radio music stations, now I’m tuned in to the 9:30 market reports. I feel very comfortable calling Annie’s participants for advice when I’m unsure which way to go and need to make a decision because we have that shared experience.”

After Wells completed the first offering of Annie’s in Iowa, he contacted colleagues in several states, encouraging them to offer the program. He and Eggers say the demand for the program continues to grow, in Iowa and other states. They have made Annie’s Project best practices presentations in 20 states—17 of those states have gone on to present the program. They work with Ruth Hambleton, creator of Annie’s Project and University of Illinois Extension farm business manager, to expand the circle of empowered farm women through the Annie’s National Leadership Team

“As Annie’s Project spreads across Iowa and into other states, more people want to be involved—as participants, sponsors, and presenters,” Tim Eggers said. “We are also seeing participants increase their community involvement following the program. They present a very professional image with their Annie’s portfolios and acquired organizational skills and knowledge.”

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- Nancy Adrian, Washington County participant

The program continues to grow as relationships are built across state lines, best practices are shared and new partners are brought onboard. While the outline of the course is the same in every state, it is localized according to the needs of participants, according to Wells. “We like to say that no matter what you produce – whether it is corn, cattle, carrots, carnations or cotton—Annie’s Project can help you make better risk management decisions.”

For more information about Annie’s Project contact:

Bob Wells, Extension farm management specialist, 641.673.5841, wellsjb@iastate.edu
Tim Eggers, Extension farm management specialist, 712.542.5171, teggers@iastate.edu

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