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Annie's Project Fosters an Entrepreneurial Spirit in Dickinson County

By Kiley Allan

As the sun casts a golden glow upon the round, orange pumpkins and strings of green vines, Taryn Kurpgeweit can be found tending to her pumpkins, feeding her animals, or preparing for her guests to arrive. Kurpgeweit owns The Grove, a 32-acre pumpkin patch in Okoboji, Iowa, with a lot to offer to visitors.

Starting a pumpkin patch was never something Kurpgeweit intended to do. As she went on different outings with her three young daughters, Kurpgeweit grew a fondness for pumpkin patches and their charm. She enjoyed seeing other visitors in their purest form - enjoying nature. They were not preoccupied by their phones, but rather, living in the moment. Kurpgeweit began to dream of running her own pumpkin patch.

Agriculture has always been a part of Kurpgeweit's life. She grew up in a large family with generations of farmers who raised corn, soybeans, and hogs in Wayne, Nebraska. Her parents had a little bit of everything on the family farm including horses, chickens, and ducks. When she moved to the Okoboji area, she saw opportunities for agritourism in the community. She seized the opportunity to make her pumpkin patch dream a reality.

Kurpgeweit consulted her local Dickinson County Extension and Outreach professionals, and they provided her with the guidance she needed to begin her business journey. Shortly after, she enrolled in the Annie's Project class held in January of 2020 in Milford, Iowa. The course was led by Gary Wright, ISU Extension and Outreach farm management specialist, with support from Amy Forrette, Clay County youth specialist, and Katie Goodell, Dickinson County program coordinator.

Annie's Project empowers women in agriculture to be successful through education, networks, and resources. Course participants learn effective strategies to make good decisions in five key management areas including financial, human resources, legal, marketing, and production. Annie's Project brings women together in a comfortable and supportive learning environment focused on the best farm business management practices. The classes are a great way to network with other women in the agricultural industry.

"The Annie's Project class, I think, is awesome for anyone going into ag," Kurpgeweit shared. She believes that the information she learned was crucial to her business success. Kurpgeweit enjoyed the classes. She not only learned more about agriculture, but she also learned more about herself and her purpose in agriculture. She feels Annie's Project gives women the opportunity to delve into their own personal characteristics and discover how to utilize these in their respective agricultural careers.

Kurpgeweit is an organic vegetable grower. She plants 25 varieties of pumpkins in her 2-acre patch at The Grove. While the corn and soybean farmers in her family can hook up their tractor

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and planter, or jump in a combine, Kurpgeweit must take a different approach with her crop. She plants and harvests all her pumpkins by hand.

She doesn't do it alone. The Okoboji community and her family surround her with support. It is a common occurrence to see Kurpgeweit's family members, or the local high school sports teams helping weed the pumpkin patch, perform simple maintenance tasks, or build new agritourism activities. Kurpgeweit says that it is the community that makes The Grove a successful pumpkin patch.

Visitors only need to pick up their phone cameras to capture special memories at The Grove. The inviting environment truly has something for everyone. Fun can be had in the corn pit, obstacle course, corn maze, petting zoo, train ride, and of course, picking the perfect pumpkin!

The Grove is constantly evolving in its offerings. Recently, the Imagination Building was unveiled at the patch. The building's inviting environment fosters education through self-exploration. Guests explore the hands-on activities that provide educational opportunities about agriculture and more. The activities in the building are constantly evolving. Kurpgeweit changes activities and even brings in guests to host workshops and activities. A fan favorite was a traveling workshop that allowed guests to make their own stuffed animal.

One of Kurpgeweit's favorite aspects of The Grove is hosting groups. The agritourism business brings in family reunions, bachelorette parties, day care children, life skills classes, and even entire high schools. They all find their autumn fun at The Grove.

There were 17 women in Kurpgeweit's Annie's Project class. Of these, 16 women completed a pre-course survey and 10 women completed a post-course survey. Like Kurpgeweit, 62.5 percent of the survey respondents were young producers with ten or fewer years of farming experience. Oppositely, 12.5 percent had more than 31 years of farming experience. This made for lively discussions. There were 100 percent of respondents who 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' the course 'provided enough time for discussion and interaction with other participants', and the 'Annie's Project women-centered environment was important to me.'

The women who gathered for the Dickinson County Annie's Project found many things to enjoy in the course. Kurpgeweit recalled the story of one woman who attended the class and shared about the influential experiences she had at numerous other Iowa State University Extension and Outreach women in ag programs. "I can see why people love them," said Kurpgeweit.

On the post-course survey women wrote about the most important things they were taking away from the course. While many participants noted the importance of communication and understanding business details, such as markets and crop insurance, many others found the comradery of the class just as important. One woman wrote, "I am not alone. There are many women in my situation." Another noted, "There are so many resources and people to go to with any questions you may have." Women left the Milford class with a sense of community and a toolbox filled with resources they can use, apply, and refer back to.

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Two years after taking the Annie's Project course, Kurpgewei't s business is flourishing. She left with professional and personal connections, that fostered a sense of community. She took away good resources and applied the skills that she learned. Kurpgewei't's story is a good example of how ISU Extension and Outreach can improve people's lives and help them achieve their dreams.