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Barkley: ‘Sky is the limit’ for women in agriculture

By ALI PRESTON FarmWeek

Farming wasn’t Traci Barkley’s first choice for a career. After earning a bachelor’s degree in ethology, ecology and evolution and a master’s degree in natural resources and environmental sciences from the University of Illinois, she spent two years as an AmeriCorps volunteer. She trained citizen scientists to collect data on the state’s threatened streams, forests, wetlands and prairies for rapid assessment of environmental health by state scientists.

Barkley built her career as a freshwater ecologist, bridging science and policy for organizations like Prairie Rivers Network and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. It was work she was passionate about. But after 20 years, she started to “get a little itchy.”

It was around the same time that Barkley heard of a 4-acre community farm started by the ministry of St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Urbana. Sola Gratia was in its second year and had a mission to feed the community, which aligned with Barkley’s values.

“I believe strongly in the mission and wanted to be a part of it,” she told FarmWeek. Barkley approached the board of directors and said she “saw an opportunity to do more.” She was hired as one of two staff members after that encounter.

“I completely switched careers and never looked back,” she said.

That was nearly nine years ago for Barkley, who serves as the director of Sola Gratia. And it turned out the switch from clean water to clean food was an easy one for her.

The Iowa native grew up on her family’s farm where she watched her great-grandparents, grandparents and parents live off the land. “I learned a lot from my grandparents and my parents of just what that means to provide for yourself and then share with others,” she said.

Barkley also witnessed her grandmothers being a critical part of the farm. It’s a vision that inspired her throughout her career.

“Working in ecology and fisheries and now agriculture, I’ve always worked in a male-dominated environment. And I think representation is really, really important,” she said. “Even though the farmer has almost always identified as the man in the family, I look back to my grandmas and they were farmers. I think often women don’t get the recognition or acknowledgments as farmers.”

It’s been a full-circle moment to watch the face of agriculture change and more women like herself step into leadership roles. For women pursuing a career in the ag industry, Barkley says the “sky is the limit.”

“The field of agriculture is a lot broader than what people think. When people think of farming, they think of huge combines and massive monocrop operations, but there

are so many opportunities, whether it’s in the greenhouse industry or the specialty crop industry, or you know, biotechnology or flower farming, there’s a lot of possibility in the field of ag right now,” she said.

Coming to work every day and knowing she’s helping make a difference means “everything” to Barkley. And she says focusing closer to home,

“closer in our community,” keeps her grounded. It’s what reminds her the career switch was more than worth it.

“We had a volunteer orientation, and we had 30-plus people in the room and one of the folks that was coming to volunteer came because she has been served by us,” she said. “It’s moving to meet someone who has benefited from our hard work and then

comes back to contribute at the same time.”

That’s the beauty of Sola Gratia, according to Barkley. She sees the same beauty in her personal life.

“I have two children and I’m hoping to raise kind people who contribute to make the world a better place.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: This story is part of the Cultivating Our

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Jack Oye
Office: 217-273-6395
jack@jcoye.com

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