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The DNA of a farmer's daughter



Tara Barrett Duzan started at WAND News in 2004. She led a successful career as a morning news anchor until 2011 when she went to work on her family's farm. Last year, her former co-workers created a documentary to showcase her journey from a chair behind a desk to the driver's seat of a combine. Left to right are film director Scot England, Tara Duzan and photographer Kylie Daniel.

Special to The Prairie Press

BY BETHANY WAGONER
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HUME — According to Nashville-based biographer Scot England, Tara Barrett Duzan is one of the “most interesting people.” His fondness for his friend and former co-worker is one of the reasons Duzan has had cameras follow her around town, to school board meetings and ball games for the past year of her life as the subject of a documentary set to air later this year.

“I have always thought of Tara as an ex-

traordinary person... we worked together as news anchors and then she left to go back to the family farm and I thought, ‘Oh, that’s kind of unique, that she’s doing that (farming),’” England said. “I thought, ‘Wow, that is a really amazing story, and I’d like to tell it.’ That thought was over 10 years ago.”

After years of dreaming and planning, England said it was “now or never” and he decided to take the leap and tell the story of his friend.

The idea of a video documenting her life

and the unexpected transition from a seat behind the desk of a TV news station to a seat inside a combine on the family farm was not something Duzan said she wanted, at least not at first.

“I was completely uncomfortable with the idea honestly and didn’t want to do it, but I also know Scot and that wasn’t going to be an option, so I just had to get comfortable with it,” Duzan explained. “I had a lot of anxiety about it.”

Never one to shy away from a challenge, England quickly enlisted the help of an-

other former co-worker, Kylie Daniel, and the two of them began planning how to showcase the story of Duzan’s family farm.

“The whole thing was just me and him...,” England said. “I told him what I wanted, and then he would film it all, and then I would go up and supervise it. It turned out exactly the way I had hoped it would.”

It was halfway through the process of filming, after reconnecting with her former co-workers, that Duzan had a change of heart.



Special to The Prairie Press

Scot England has wanted to create a documentary about his friend and former co-worker Tara Barrett Duzan for over a decade, but last year he decided to take the leap. "The Farmer's Daughter," a film showcasing her journey, will premiere later this year.

"Looking at it now, I am glad I did it...they made me dig through home videos that I didn't even know existed. We didn't take a lot of pictures and a lot of videos growing up but we found like 20 I didn't know existed," Duzan said. "There was a video of my dad that my uncle had gotten, just a snippet of him in the field, and my mom's college graduation ... they also interviewed my grandma, who's 97 years old, and it was kind of nice listening to her talk about things."

Throughout interviews with family members, neighbors, former co-workers and friends, England set out to showcase Duzan's life as "the farmer's daughter."

While she was growing up watching her parents work on her grandfather's farmland, Duzan said she never planned to go into farming or agriculture; she "didn't even participate in FFA."

"When I was young, we had pigs and we were in 4-H. I played on the farm and played outside. But, I already kind of knew what I wanted to do when I was in high school. I knew I was more into writing and being creative and inquisitive. I wanted to do something where I'm learning about other

people," Duzan said. "I kind of already had my mindset, so (farming) never crossed my mind... I also had a brother with plans to take on the farm."

Duzan only considered leaving WAND News and the broadcasting career she had started in 2004 after she gave birth to her first child in 2011.

"I was on maternity leave and telling my dad how nice it would be to spend more time with her and he offered to hire me on the farm for part-time help," she explained.

Just a few years earlier, in 2009, Duzan's brother tragically lost his life in a motorcycle accident. The unexpected loss happened just a month before her wedding.

"He was 32 when he passed away... It had been a really great week for him; we had just moved into our house and my brother had just been there to see the finished product," Duzan said. "He was not fully transitioned (to work on the farm) and my dad ended up hiring one of my brother's best friends for help."

It was two years later, after Duzan gave birth, that she transitioned into the role her brother's friend had held on the farm.



Special to The Prairie Press

Filming for "The Farmer's Daughter" took just over a year. Thousands of hours of footage show the life of Tara Barrett Duzan on the farm and in her hometown of Hume. The documentary promises to be a story full of heart, farm and family.

"It was a lot of timing, good and bad timing," Duzan said. "A part-time role, of course, turned into a full job pretty quickly."

Duzan's grandfather passed in 2014 and just four years later her dad was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. She explained her father's treatment as "very harsh and his symptoms from the cancer were even harsher; he struggled through planting and spraying until he was bedridden," eventually the cancer claimed his life in July of 2018.

It was at her father's visitation, in response to concerned friends and family asking her how the farm was going to survive, that Duzan said she gave the obvious answer.

"I'm going to take it over," she said.

Duzan has been running the farm since then, learning how to manage crops and use equipment she never visualized herself sitting inside of.

"I don't know how many times my dad would tell me when I was just sitting in the truck waiting on a load, 'You should get in here and sit in the combine and learn how this thing runs.' I always said 'I will, I will,' and I never did," she said. "I just thought I had more time, I could do that another day,

you know, but you don't know. You never just do it and we all should."

From the start of her journey, Duzan admits the process of becoming a farmer was petrifying, but she was backed up by people who loved and supported her.

"I wasn't sure that I could do this. I was pretty scared, but I just felt that I had to," she said. "I know a lot of people probably are like this too, I was scared to fail or to disappoint, but I knew I had to try. So that gave me a lot of strength and determination, just knowing too it was for my family to keep farming."

The unwavering support of her mother, husband and community launched Duzan forward. Now, Duzan makes it a point to involve her children in farm life as much as possible, especially her son who has already said he wants to take over the farm one day.

"My grandpa and my dad worked very hard to be able to farm the ground that they have and my son, I know, wants to be a farmer one day. He was my dad's right-hand man," Duzan said. "I know this is what he wants to do. So I wanted to do everything I could, to try to hold on to everything for him to be able to farm as well."

"I'm not the only woman who farms," Duzan said. "There's a lot of women who farm. I know the story behind me getting into it is probably what's unique. A lot of times, when you're transitioning from one generation to the next farming, you're doing that together. And this, we just never got there, you know?"

England agrees that Duzan's story is unique and since meeting her on the set of WAND News more than a decade ago he has made plans to share her story. The documentary, according to England, is his "love letter to (Duzan) and her wonderful family."

"(The documentary) is not just watching

corn grow. It's a story for family and about a family. It is sad, it is happy, it's got it all. It's just what it is for the life of a farmer over a year; there are good times and bad times," he said.

England had finished the first round of editing when he spoke with a Prairie Press reporter about the project in late September. His plan was to have the film ready for a mid to late-November debut.

"Just watching the first round of edits, I've already shed a tear, and I'm the one who wrote it," he said. "It's going to be on all the streaming platforms, TV and then we'll play it for a

couple of days at the Decatur theater, and give the money to charity."

The most touching moment for both Duzan and England is the film's title.

"I had the title, 'The Farmer's Daughter' picked out all along, but I never told her, and until she saw the trailer, she didn't know what it was going to be called," England said.

Little did the producer know that tucked away inside a box in Duzan's home was a tiny, pink shirt with the name "Tara" on the back and "Farmer's Daughter" written on the front.

"I cannot believe I still have it or that it would be so meaningful 40 years later," Duzan said.



Special to The Prairie Press

The documentary title "The Farmer's Daughter" was picked out for Tara Barrett Duzan's film long before production began, according to Scot England. Little did the film's writer know that tucked away inside a box in Duzan's home was a tiny, pink shirt with the name "Tara" on the back and "Farmer's Daughter" written on the front.

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Autumn brings crisp cool air and a burst of color as Mother Nature stages her big annual show. It also brings the farm harvest season, which is the topic for today. Big machines move across the ground in rural America, bringing millions of bushels of grain to market. Drivers along nearby interstate highways see the clouds of crop dust rising toward the sky.

Farmers produce a variety of crops and livestock, but I'm going to focus on corn and soybeans because that's what is raised on the Barth family ground in Edgar County, downstate Illinois. I was raised there and spent formative years working the land with the men in my family. Journalism took me on a journey, but as my mother often told me, "You can take the boy off the farm, but you can't take the farm off the boy."

Since Dad passed a couple of years ago it has fallen to me to manage farm business af-

fairs for myself and my sister, Kathi. I'm not driving a tractor or combine, though I certainly have, because Dad's brother, Lee, has worked the ground for more than 50 years. We call each other "brother" as well because Lee is just over four years my senior. We were kids together and now the farm has brought us full circle.

What I write about today, though, involves economics. Or, more specifically, the constant whining about the high price of what we eat. Call this essay "Don't Blame the Farmer."

I'm reminded of a quote. Different time, different topic, but somehow apt: "Never ... was so much owed by so many to so few ...," said Winston Churchill, speaking of the brave pilots of the Royal Air Force. The same sentiment could apply to America's farmers, the surprisingly few who feed not only this nation but much of the world.

Let's look at some statistics:

■ America began its story as an agricultural society. As late as 1900 nearly 40 percent of the workforce still toiled on farms. By 1950 the U.S. population had risen above

150 million (it's about 330 million today), yet only 7.6 million worked the farms. By 1990 the number dipped to just over 2 million – a decline of 74 percent – and has stabilized in that range.

■ Family-owned farms still make up more than 90 percent of the total, which puts the lie to the notion that China or some other country is buying up all the land. Even so, the total number of U.S. farms has dipped below 2 million, a seven percent decline since the 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture, which is taken every five years.

■ Total acres in production declined two percent, and the average family farm is 463 acres. The Barth farm falls in that range, just a few acres larger.

■ Hired farm help has risen slightly in recent years. Here's the key statistic. Nearly two-thirds of hired farm workers are of Mexican or Hispanic heritage. About half are U.S. citizens. Ask yourself: What will happen to production and food prices if America follows through with the threat of mass deportation of these crucial workers?

The foremost issue in this political year, as usual, is about the economy. Specifically, rising prices of staples like fuel and food. Economists would argue much of the inflationary pressure occurred due to pandemic shutdowns, too much money pursuing too few goods as production ramped back up, and disruptions in the supply chain. Not politics. This much is certain, though: Farmers aren't getting rich along the food chain.

Here is a breakdown of where your food dollar goes: To the farmers, 7.8 cents; food processors, 15 cents; packagers and shippers, six cents; wholesalers, 9.1 cents; retailers, 12.6 cents; energy, finance and advertising, 10 cents; and food services (that's restau-

rants and fast food) 36.7 cents. Not only do Americans spend too much money eating out, it's making us a portly pack in the process.

By the way, trend lines are going in the wrong direction, at least for farmers. Remember, on our farm, we raise corn and soybeans. The price farmers get for beans has fallen by around 40 percent in a year. For corn, it's the same story, approaching a 50 percent drop. Meanwhile, our cost for inputs – think seed, fertilizer, herbicide – last year rose nearly 10 percent. One need not have a degree in agricultural economics to understand that poses a scary scenario.

Farmers are a tough and independent lot, though, so they're not crying for compassion or rescue. They just work harder, with the eternal optimism that next year will be better. And maybe it will. Or not.

A little understanding, however, would be welcome from the vast majority of Americans, who think food grows on grocery store shelves. A relative handful of people give the masses the plenty they have come to expect. Farmers do it not for the money – there's not a lot of that – but for the traditions and freedoms on the land. Let America's grand intellectual father, Thomas Jefferson, explain it:

"Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bands. Agriculture is our wisest pursuit because it will in the end contribute most to real wealth, good morals and happiness."

(Bill Barth is the former Editor of the Beloit (WI) Daily News, and a member of the Wisconsin Newspaper Hall of Fame. Write to him at bbarth@beloitdailynews.com.)



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Lessons learned in the field

One Edgar County youth is playing a big role on the family farm



Photo submitted by Stevie Drake

For the Drake family, farming is a multi-generational way of life. From left to right are Mike Drake, Dax Drake (center, in front), Jed Drake (center, behind) and Dusty Drake, holding Von Drake.

BY ROBBY TUCKER
rtucker@prairiepress.net

As leaves fall and the weather chills, the term “field trip” takes on a whole new meaning for nine-year-old Jed Drake.

Like most kids, he wakes up, enjoys breakfast and begins working on school assignments. After lunch, however, his day looks quite different during the harvest season – he exchanges his desk for the cab of a tractor, combine, skid steer, truck or any number of other farm vehicles.

Despite his age, Jed is a farmer in his own right.

It’s been that way for “as long as I can remember,” he said.

Some of Jed’s earlier memories include ridealongs with his father, Dusty Drake, and his grandfather Mike Drake – more affectionately known as “Pa Pa.” Jed’s first ventures into agriculture included plenty of teachable moments, especially when he was first given a chance to pull an

“
...IT WAS JUST
MIND-BLOWING
– IT’S LIKE HE’S
BEEN DOING IT
FOR YEARS.”

STEVIE DRAKE
JED’S MOTHER

auger cart at the age of 6.

“I put it (the tractor) in eighth gear. That was pretty bad,” Jed explained. “I went from third to eighth. The tractor didn’t like it.”

Since then, Jed has learned the ropes and displays skill and attention to detail well ahead of his years. This year, he’s dumping grain from the auger cart into a waiting

semi or 10-wheeler with little to no assistance.

“He’s had nobody on the radio coaching him or reminding him what to do. He’s just gotten in and gone, and he has unloaded on his own this year,” said Stevie Drake, Jed’s mother, recalling a recent trip in a family tractor with her son at the wheel. “When we got in the tractor with him on Sunday, it was just mind-blowing – it’s like he’s been doing it for years. He just pulls up to the grain truck and does what he needs to do. He watches and gets (the auger) adjusted, and he unloads it.”

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Robby Tucker/The Prairie Press

At nine years of age, Jed Drake, pictured, already has big responsibilities on his family's farm south of Paris. Drake balances schoolwork with time behind the wheel of tractors, trucks, skid-steers and more.

Initially, Jed's mother was concerned to see her son taking on such substantial responsibilities at his young age, but careful training and a familial knack for farming have relieved some of her earlier worries.

"At first it was nerve-wracking, and I just had to trust that Dusty was going to be on guard and watchful," she explained, later adding. "He's very trustworthy, so it makes it easy to not worry as much now that he's gotten older and can rise to the occasion."

Still, young Jed faces some logistical challenges at times.

"I have to sit on the edge of the seat to push the clutch down... even if it's scooped up," he told a Prairie Press reporter.

Despite this and other difficulties, Jed makes known his desire to be in the field with his dad and grandfather or driving one of the vehicles in the family fleet, many of which have earned callsigns and nicknames. The Drakes' semi-truck now goes by "Eagle" and the family 10-wheeler is now dubbed "Buzzard."

"Any chance he gets to go with dad, he's bolting out the door," Stevie Drake said.

Jed's interest in helping on the farm developed naturally according to his mother.

"When he was younger and not in the fields, he was playing with his tractors and reenacting what he saw the big guys do on the farm," Stevie Drake said.

"Then it's like he wanted to apply what he did in his play into real life."

Jed's adventures on the farm also include helping fix mechanical issues and hiccups. What Jed calls "redneck engineering" was the skill needed to fix a loose auger camera on his prized cart.

For Jed, balancing studies with farm work is only possible because he is home-

schooled, especially since Jed gets home as late as 9 p.m. during harvest season. Stevie Drake was quick to voice her appreciation for Jed's current schooling situation.

"I very much appreciate that aspect of homeschooling. He's not stuck in the classroom looking out, watching the farmers in the fields nearby," she said.



Photo submitted by Stevie Drake

Jed Drake pauses for a photo during a workday on the farm. Drake recently started pulling the auger cart to help his father and grandfather.

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A combine empties its reserves of soybeans into an auger cart pulled by Jed Drake.

Photo submitted by Stevie Drake

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That flexibility has allowed Jed to follow in his father's footsteps, as well as the footsteps of his ancestors. Jed is the seventh generation to help farm the family ground, some of which has been in his family since 1881 when John Henry Drake and his wife Ellen Thompkins received the original plot as a wedding gift.

"He (Dusty) enjoyed (farming at a young age) and that's where he thrived in helping. And I see that in Jed too... he just has a passion for it," Stevie Drake said.

Jed certainly has big shoes to fill, but he's

shown he is up to the task despite his young age.

"I think young boys thrive with big responsibility. So whether it be him helping on the farm or whatever the dad does, I feel like boys are naturally drawn to that," Stevie Drake explained. "As they grow and mature, obviously they interact with the world and their interests evolve. But I guess if you have a strong enough desire to do it and be helpful, then they just lean (into those learned skills)."

"He (Jed) said once, 'I want to be everything my dad is,'" she said.

Even though the future may bring change for Jed, today he's committed to carrying on his family's legacy, even if he has to reach a bit further than most to hit the clutch.

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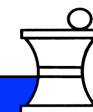


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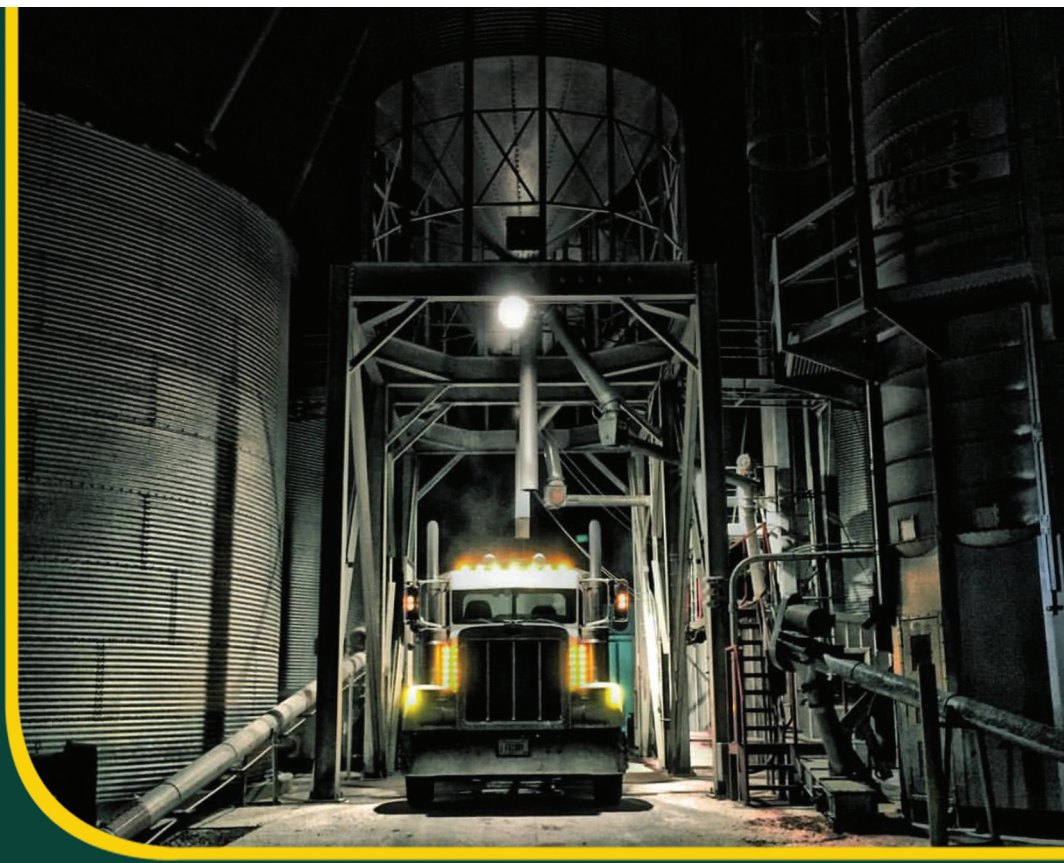


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