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Groundswell event inspires involvement in rural communities

The Wisconsin Farmers Union 87th annual State Convention kicked off today with a Groundswell Conference that encouraged attendees to step up as leaders in their communities and local government.

Keynote speaker Sarah van Gelder urged the crowd of 100-plus family farmers and rural advocates to consider the legacy they want to leave for future generations. “What kind of future are we building in our world and in our country?” she asked. “Is it a future that is regenerative, where one generation after another can have a good life? Or is it extractive, where you pull the wealth out of an ecosystem and never replace it?”

Van Gelder shared stories of rural vibrancy and renewal from the cross-county road trip that led to her book *The Revolution Where You Live: Stories from a 12,000 Mile Journey Through a New America*. Throughout her trip, van Gelder discovered the power local communities can create to take on climate change, economic rebuilding and racial injustice.

One of her stops was at the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Montana, where she visited with locals about efforts to stop the Otter Creek mine, which would have been the largest coal strip mine in the state. In Cincinnati, Ohio, she discovered community members working together to fight poverty, create jobs and build a better food system. In state after state, van Gelder discovered two typical scenarios in rural communities: either pockets of people who felt isolated and lonely or, alternately, vibrant areas where people were coming together and forming a sense of community that bridged racial and economic divides and gave them the power to take on challenges together.

“People sometimes ask me what it takes to create change,” van Gelder said. “It’s not that things have to get ‘really bad’ before change can happen. Change happens when people feel connected. When people are actually connected, even in relatively small groups, that’s when they start building power.”

She challenged the attendees to spend less time on social media and invest that time in intentional relationships. “Ask more questions,” she added. “Don’t just get together – listen to each other.”

Creating connections

Groundswell attendees also heard a panel focused on Do-It-Yourself Economic Development featuring John Adams of the Bayfield Foods Cooperative; Sue Noble of the Vernon Economic Development Association (VEDA); and Bill Schierl of CREATE Portage County.

Noble shared the story of how her community built a more vibrant path forward when news broke that a local manufacturer and major employer in Viroqua was closing. Rather than letting all of the jobs slip away and the lot stand vacant, VEDA purchased the 100,000 square foot facility in 2009 and transformed it into a multitenant food aggregation, storage, processing, marketing and distribution center. The building now houses 20 tenants and 75 jobs, many of which are centered around local food and are putting healthy, local food on tables around the community.

“It’s up to all of us to step up in our communities,” Noble said. “Take the call to leadership, get motivated, find some resources to help you and get engaged. If you don’t do it, who will?”



Adams credited his local UW-Extension ag agent for playing an instrumental role in the development of the Bayfield Foods but also called on farmers to step up as organizers in their neighborhoods. “That’s why I find value in being a member of Farmers Union – because it’s farmers organizing together,” he said.

Schierl encouraged people to include the arts and culture advocacy when thinking about ways to enhance their rural towns.

“When we think about the problems many rural communities are facing, like depopulation, one consideration is that the next generation wants to be in places of creativity,” Schierl said. His group’s work in Portage County is engaging and connecting citizens through culture – with concepts like murals, neighborhood mapping, and makerspaces.

Part of connecting people to their community comes from experiences, Schierl added. “Most rural communities have an older building that is just sitting empty,” he said. “We have started to bring artists into those buildings for an evening to show their work, have some donated food and gather people together in a place they might not otherwise go.”

Stepping up as leaders

In a panel on Engaging in Local Government, Farmers Union members shared their knowledge from their roles on county boards. Featured were Tom Quinn, Dunn County; Kriss Marion, Lafayette County; Hans Breitenmoser, Lincoln County; and Mark Liebaert, Douglas County.

Quinn, who serves as WFU executive director, said pushing oneself to become a leader may not come by nature. “It doesn’t come naturally to me at all,” he said. “But I was a dairy farmer who absolutely fell in love with rural life, the lifestyle and the entrepreneurial spirit of our small towns – I wanted to pay that back.”

Quinn said he views engagement in town or county boards as a chance at experimentation in democracy. “Really, we need a movement to make change; you need to provide people with an opportunity to experiment in democracy, and that kind of social and political engagement happens in local government.”

Marion, who runs Circle M Market Farm near Blanchardville, is running for her second term on the Lafayette County Board and says she’s learned you can create a remarkable amount of change in county government roles.

“Many of us get engaged when we have a big concern like water quality, livestock siting or some other issue we bump up against,” Marion said. She urged people to show up at local meetings and develop relationships with their board members before an issue arises. “Even if you don’t want to take time off your farm to serve on a county or village board, just showing up is huge – it lets you see who in the community is also engaged and who cares about the issues that matter to you.”

Liebaert raises grass-fed beef on his South Range farm and has served on the Douglas County board for 18 years. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that if you want a certain outcome, you better show up,” Liebaert said. “At the county level, you really can direct the process and effect change.”

Breitenmoser said he ran for the Lincoln County Board after receiving some sound advice from his wife: “You’ll be more irritated not having a seat at the table than if you were there and able to do something about it.”

“I really think farmers have something to bring to local government,” Breitenmoser said. “We’re problem-solvers.”

The panel agreed that there has been an undermining of local government in recent years and stated that there needs to be an organized effort to re-strengthen local control and keep important issues impacting rural communities in the hands of local government.

The WFU Convention continues through Sunday in Wisconsin Dells.



Wisconsin Farmers Union, a member-driven organization, is committed to enhancing the quality of life for family farmers, rural communities, and all people through educational opportunities, cooperative endeavors, and civic engagement. For more information visit www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com.

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