

Working to preserve the land • The language of flowers • Leaving it all on the field
Providing more than a balanced meal • Caring for the little library • It's all about family



She

Many Faces, All Unique

January 2023



Karyl Fritsche

Working to preserve
the land we live off of

By Gillian Pomplun



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No discussion of dynamic women making a contribution in Crawford County would be complete without mentioning the name of United States Department of Agriculture-Natural Resource Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) Resource Conservationist, Karyl Fritsche. Mother of four, and businesswoman to boot, Fritsche has helped countless farmers and landowners in the county pursue their conservation goals.

Fritsche grew up in Serena, Ill., southwest of Chicago in LaSalle County. Her father ran a custom corn shelling business on the family farm, and her brother and family have joined the family business there as well.

"Being raised on a farm, with an intimate knowledge of how much work it takes to care for the land, everything from walking beans to de-tasseling corn to scooping corn cribs and hauling grain, shaped my career to help producers do the best they can," Fritsche said. "I have always been passionate about science and ecology, and doing my best to help others."

After graduation from Serena High School, Fritsche went on to obtain a Soil and Crop Science degree from UW-Platteville, with a minor in horticulture. After college, she worked for Case-New Holland in their research tractor division in Burr Ridge, Ill.

She began her career with USDA-NRCS in 2002 as a Soil Conservationist in Roosevelt, Utah, focusing on salinity reduction and rangeland improvement in the Uintah Basin. Since 2002, she's worked in various locations across Utah, Wisconsin and Lithuania, most recently from the Prairie du Chien Field Office.

Fritsche's boundless energy allows her to combine a career in natural resources conservation while parenting her four children, and running several businesses in Crawford County as well.

Her oldest child, Clare, 19, is a freshman at UW-Madison studying environmental science. Her other three children are in high school and middle school in the Prairie du Chien School District. Hannah, a high school freshman, playing soccer and basketball; Clark is in seventh grade, participating in football, wrestling and baseball; and her youngest, Harper, is in the sixth grade, participating in archery, boy scouts and baseball.

Fritsche's businesses range from a lash studio in Prairie du Chien to restaurant and bar businesses in Ferryville and Prairie du Chien. Her 'Joe-to-Go' business, located next to the Aldi's grocery store, offers coffee and sweets for breakfast, and fast, healthy lunches, all in a convenient to-go format. Both of Fritsche's daughters work at the establishment.

"I started the lash studio because I wanted something a little more feminine in my life," Fritsche explained. "In my work with USDA-NRCS, the vast majority of the clients I work with are male, so the lash studio offers a little she-energy to balance that out."

Her latest business venture, The Drake Piano Bar, will open in early 2023. This establishment, as well as the Ferryville Sportsmens Bar, are well known for their locally-sourced menu items.

"It is important to me that the businesses I run have as small a footprint as possible," Frit-

Fritsche | see Page 10

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Cas Kirschbaum *The language of flowers*

By Joe Hart

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There's just something about working with plants.

"It's... the organic-ness of it. It really grounds you," Cas Kirschbaum explained, for once almost, (but not quite), at a loss for words. "It's such a stress reliever, and so far from the corporate grind. You're working with your hands, being creative, and getting down to your roots—all puns intended."

Kirschbaum is the owner, sole proprietor, creative director, flower-arranger, bill-payer, and event-planner at Willow & Ivy Design, which opened its doors in 2019 in downtown Boscobel. The store is much more than a flower shop, although it offers floral arrangements in all shapes and sizes. Kirschbaum also serves as a wedding planner and provides rental options for events.

In the few short years since she opened the shop, Kirschbaum's reputation has spread. Scrolling through the copious five-star reviews of her fledgling business will make you blush: "Amazing," "wonderful," "beautiful," "I can't say enough..."

In a world where Karens have notoriously dialed up the misery of service professionals—driving them to quit in droves—Kirschbaum appears to have the magic touch. But her explanation is simple: "It's not about the money," she said. "This work feeds my soul."

Kirschbaum describes herself as a "true Midwestern girl," and she's got the dimples and charm to prove it. But it doesn't take more

than a passing conversation to recognize the smarts and the grit that got her where she is today.

Her's is a story that began when she was still a teen and progressed with single-minded determination.

"I took this required class in high school," she explained, "and every time we did a career-choice test, I always got 'flower arrangement.' I don't even know why."

She started to understand when she signed up for a botany class. "It sparked my love for flowers and plants, so when I went to college, I decided to take it further, and I majored in horticulture and business."

Somewhere along the line, she fell in love with a cop. Sid Kirschbaum was looking for work, and Cas said she would settle wherever he could find a job. Boscobel needed a patrolman, and so they landed here.

With her degree from Platteville in hand, she bounced around from a plant nursery to a greenhouse to retail jobs, and eventually netted a part time gig in the floral department of Boscobel's Piggly Wiggly.

"I realized I don't want to be working all these part-time gigs. I want to build something for me. I want to be creative on my own terms."

While she started working on her business plan for Willow & Ivy, she also started planning her wedding to Sid: the flowers, the dé-

Kirschbaum | see Page 8

Julie Baumgartner

Providing more than
a balanced meal

By Jason Kreul

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As I walk into Sunset Field Apartments in Fennimore to interview Julie Baumgartner, the meal site manager there, there sits Julie with a resident in a wheelchair putting a puzzle together and talking with each other. It confirmed what I had been told about her, how she cares for and goes beyond her food serving at the apartment building.

A lifelong Fennimore resident, Julie first assisted with the elderly while working at the then Good Samaritan Nursing Home in Fennimore. She loved talking with them and even back then, was willing to do extra to accommodate the residents there.

In 2010, Julie was hired as a meal site manager for ADRC and worked in Boscobel, Montfort and Fennimore meal sites as needed. This is where she became familiar with the Sunset Fields Location.

In 2018 the Fennimore meal site manager retired, and that familiarity landed Julie the position, which she has held for the past five years.

Although Julie only works from 9 a.m.

until 1 p.m. as the meal site manager, she can be found volunteering her time for residents at Sunset Fields in her non-working hours. She is there every day at 7 a.m. ready for "coffee talk" with the residents, where they take turns supplying donuts and the sit, talk and listen session.

Listening is one of the main aspects of care Julie provides with many residents hard of hearing and many also having family far away, the residents love their time talking with Julie. They tell her stories, their current health issues, other problems or issues they may be experiencing, and in return, Julie listens, and "guides them in their choices," as Julie explained.

"And most importantly, we have lots of laughs," she reiterated.

As the Fennimore meal site manager Julie oversees the congregate meal site located at Sunset Fields, as well as the Meals on Wheels program, which serves homebound seniors in Fennimore Julie can often be found, sitting with the residents during

mealtimes, making sure they have everything. The dining room is their "common place" so to speak. Every holiday Julie decorates and while there, Valentine's Day was in full force, as much so as Christmas was.

And of course, her care goes beyond the dining room. Julie is there for the residents, whether it's helping them with laundry, cleaning their apartments, making beds, etc.

Julie also has given residents haircuts, taken their garbage out, run errands for them in town, and also taking some to and picking up from appointments.

Julie only lives two blocks from Sunset Fields, and it's not uncommon for a resident to call Julie and for Julie to come there, whatever time of day or night to help them with whatever need they may have.

Julie says she has every resident's phone number and they have hers. Which is what family does, and that is what Julie considers the residents there. "They're like family to me," Julie explained. "Many of them don't

have family close to them, so I don't mind stepping in, which isn't hard for me. I believe in acts of kindness."

Every holiday, Julie is sure to get her "family" trays and/or plates of candy, cookies, special holiday themed food, etc. Again, not because she is required to, but because she cares so much about those residents who are close to her.

Julie knows everything about all the residents there, and they all know everything about her, which is what makes up a good family.

As one resident told me, "Julie makes one feel like this is your own home, and you'll be taken care of. She can laugh at herself, she shares her sibling stories and jokes with all of us. Julie Baumgartner is one special lady."

As I interviewed Julie and listening to her tell about the residents there, I could help but think of the old Olive Garden slogan "When you're here you're family." It maybe a marketing term, but for Julie, it's just in her nature.



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Kloee Chamberlain

Leaving it all out on the field

By Charley Pruesser

The young woman seated in front of me may have torn her ACL (Anterior Cruciate Ligament) playing rugby, but it seemed she just couldn't stop smiling as she remembered the just-concluded rugby season.

Kloee Chamberlain sat in the Independent-Scout office earlier this month with her knee immobilized in elastic bandages and her crutches propped against a nearby desk. She was describing the season of her UW-Eau Claire rugby club team that concluded with winning the NCAA Division 2 National Championship.

With just two minutes left in that championship game against Marquette, Chamberlain planted her foot to make a cut and juke past her opponent, when she heard her knee pop.

Highly qualified medical personnel present for the game were quickly on the field and almost as quick to diagnosis the injury as a torn ACL. The anterior cruciate ligament is one of the strong bands of tissue that help connect your thigh bone (femur) to your shinbone (tibia).

The injury occurred during the championship game played in Houston on Dec. 3. Chamberlain was taken to a nearby hospital's emergency room, where she received treatment.

An operation to correct the damaged knee took place back at a clinic in Eau Claire on Dec. 21. Kloee has spent her winter break from college back at her mom's house in Gays Mills.

One of her main sources of entertainment during the winter break has been watching her younger sisters, the Chamberlain triplets, play basketball for North Crawford High School.

Kloee graduated from North Crawford in 2021, as the school's valedictorian. She played four sports (volleyball, basketball, cross country and track) and was the president of three clubs. Now, she attends UW-Eau Claire, where she studies kinesiology and plays rugby. Well she played until her injury. She also held a job at a nursing home, working as a Certified Nursing Assistant.

Chamberlain | see Page 11

UW-Eau Claire's Kloee Chamberlain takes off on a breakaway to score a goal, or 'try,' on the way to her team winning the conference championship game 29-0 over Marquette.



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There's the old saying, "you can always go home again," but for Cathi Smith upon becoming the director at the Dwight Parker Public Library in Fennimore, she "went home again" without leaving Fennimore.

A lifelong resident of Fennimore, Cathi graduated from Fennimore High School in 1989 and went to Viterbo College, graduated there in 1994.

Having prior experience working at the college library, Cathi upon graduating, moved back home and became the librarian at the children's library of the Dwight Parker Library.

Although a job she thought she would have for a short time, Cathi ended up loving the job, staying on for eight years getting to interact with the kids thru the story time programs and other programs the library provided.

As much as she loved the job, nights at the library cut into her family time, so she took a position with Southwest Child Care Resource Referral, a non-profit organization that work with families finding quality childcare, as well as helping daycares in a five county radius get started up and certified so they can provide the quality care families search for.

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Cathi Smith

Caring for the 'little library'

By Jason Kreul



Although rewarding, after 16 years, Cathi was ready to move onto to something else, and through chance, during a reference check for a job she was applying for, her previous library director, Trudy Freymiller, looking to retire in the near future, contacted Cathi to gauge her interest in the director position.

Others in the Fennimore commu-

nity had also suggested to her about returning and in June 2018, Cathi return to the Dwight Parker Library, this time as the director.

Initially nervous about jumping back into a profession she was 16 years removed from, the transition did go well. Cathi said it was due to the "welcoming, kind community of Fennimore" that helped make her

transition back so smooth.

Her new position also in way, "re-introduced" her to the community by interacting with the community again; Cathi found herself helping and volunteering more. Her previous job's location had started in Fennimore, but office moves to Lancaster, and then to Platteville, although still living in Fennimore, did take some

"community feeling" away.

What started as volunteering turned into Cathi becoming a member of the Optimist Club in Fennimore, as well as a member of the Fennimore Tree Board.

And although a somewhat separate entity from the library itself, Cathi is also involved as an "unofficial member" with the Friends of the Fennimore Library, doing fundraisers and other volunteer work as needed.

But it all comes back to the library. While interviewing Cathi, her care and commitment to the library is noticeable in her description of what all goes on there.

During our sit down interview at the library, a few sets of people came in and Cathi knew what books they would be interested in next, offering suggestions and asking how they enjoyed the ones they were returning. She also makes "delivery runs" on her lunch breaks to area people who have trouble making it to the library.

Cathi's feeling is that the library should be "welcome to everyone; with no biases." She loves helping people everyday, because as she asked "Where in this day and age can anyone go and get free entertainment?"

And it's just not about the books, as many people use the library for other resources. Surprisingly, not ev-

Smith | see Page 8

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DeEtte Thomas

It's all about family

By John Ingebritsen

There are people whose personality is to blend in rather than stand out. That doesn't mean their life story is any less interesting to tell.

DeEtte Thomas, who has worked at the Richland Observer in Richland Center since 1969, is one of those people who for most of her life has avoided the spotlight, but boy has she led an interesting life. When you're from as big a family as she is, being loud and crazy might be the only way to get noticed and some on the Winchell family farm in the Village of Wilton had that personality. Not so for DeEtte. She discovered young in life that it was kind of easy as one of 10 children with eight more step-siblings added when she was 10, to hide in plain sight. During the many weekend gatherings on the family farm she would find a quiet place to read a book or she would duck out away from the chatter in the house to ride her horse King. She has loved riding horses, especially on the back of King. He was so smart and gentle she never needed



a saddle or a bridle. If she wanted to turn a certain direction, she would just tap him on that side of the neck.

While she isn't about being front and cen-

DeEtte Thomas' workspace at the Richland Observer is filled with photos of members of her family, including her great grandchildren, which are on holiday cards, sports team photos, and other occasions.

ter, there is something about DeEtte that makes her the glue to so many things. She has been that way in the Observer printing and newspaper business by picking up all kinds

of jobs as have been needed, either filling in or taking over a new role. It's also likely she's part of the reason why there's been a Winchell family reunion the last week in August every year for more than 50 years that brings in around 150 relatives for camping that Thursday through Sunday in the summer.

DeEtte's first day on the job was Oct. 10, 1969. She had three young children at the time when she was called by long-time publisher Erik Olson's step mom, Madaline, who was managing the business at the time. "It's all Madaline's fault," said Thomas. "I was minding my own business and she called me at home and said 'can you come in for a while and help out.'"

DeEtte's husband James was working at the Observer as a printer at the time and those two have been together in the business now for more than 50 years each. DeEtte had been asked to fill in as a cleaning person had left and in a printing operation like they had at the time, it was very important to try to keep the floors clean from paper dust and ink residue build up. Not long after she started, there was a print job that needed assembling and she was asked, "Can you do that?" She could and she did for years, not just assembling the books, but stapling and binding them as well. "We printed a lot of books then," she said. "Do you remember the Uplands tourist guide

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WELCOME Paige Carter

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Paige Carter was raised in Richland County, the daughter of Tony & Jennifer Carter. She graduated from Richland Center High School in 2019, completed Fall 2019 Semester at UW-Richland, and currently attends Southwest Tech to receive an Accounting Assistant and Tax Preparer degree in May 2023. In February 2023, she will complete a course for Funeral Assistant Apprenticeship and has plans to continue onto become a Funeral Director.

Paige is engaged to be married to her fiancé, Chris Kunz, and their daughter, Violet, is the highlight of their life. She has deep roots in Richland County, growing up in the Carter Family village has led to interests including hunting, drawing nature scenes, and simply spending time with family.

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everyone in these times owns a computer or being a rural community, has proper Internet access.

Cathi said she has given many a walk thru on how to use computers, or help people with job searching, even providing templates for resumes for people being introduced to applying for jobs online for the first time. Indeed as she stated, "Our little library is always busy."

Which leads us to Cathi wanting to make that "little library" a little bigger. Even with becoming part of the Southwest Library System in 2021, which allows for greater access to books, etc., not in the library in Fennimore through a shared system, Cathi is looking to expand the "little library," wanting it to as she said, "Move the library forward so it can grow with the community."

In the early stages of planning, Cathi hopes to expand to the current building make the library itself bigger, with better handicapped accessible and making the building more of a community center.

Cathi hopes this will allow for more "young adult" to "adult programs" to take place there with an expansion. Cathi wants to have a community survey out in the next months to gauge how the community would like their "little library" to grow.

She

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cor, and even the day-of coordination. The day went off beautifully—and friends and family took note. A few of asked for help with their own nuptials.

"We started out with just a few weddings, and the next year we had seven, and the next year we had twenty," she said. "It just blossomed into this fulltime business."

With her wedding business expanding, Kirschbaum needed a physical location for her operations. She settled on a building at 100 W Le Grand St, just of Wisconsin in downtown Boscobel. She purchased the building in 2018, remodeled, and opened her doors the following year—just in time for the global pandemic.

"We didn't even have a full year in, and it was like, 'Y'all gotta close down,'" Kirschbaum remembered. "At first it was terrifying, but we started offering no contact deliveries, and it turned out that we were insanely busy."

With in-person gatherings and travel on hold, many people turned to florists to fill the void left by the loss of face-to-face contact.

"They were like, 'I can't be there in person, can you send my family member something special for me.' We'd do ding-dong-ditch with a delivery on the front steps. We wouldn't have survived without it," she said.

With the pandemic finally abating, Kirschbaum celebrated a grand re-opening last summer with a block party, complete with vendors and entertainment. That event proved so pop-

ular that she's planning to repeat it annually. Somehow, in the midst of booking 40 weddings a season and running her floral shop, Kirschbaum also finds time to care for her two toddlers, Roland, 4, and Kolby, 2. Still, she years to connect with other would-be entrepreneurs to help them achieve their dreams as she did hers.

"I want to be that person who inspires others," she said.

So what inspires Cas Kirschbaum? She runs her own business, tracks and plans dozens of events, manages a young family, keeps the lights on and pays the bills—whatever else it may be, the life of an entrepreneur is anything but stress-free.

What keeps her going? "I have this thing," she explained. "From the very first time I coordinated my first wedding. There's always a moment, a point at which I cry. I could barely know this couple, barely know this family, but it still gets to me," she said. "It means so much for me to mean so much to them. I was just meant to do this."

Ultimately, she said, it's her passion for independence and to serve as a pivotal helper in other's lives that makes all the hard work and risk pay off. And the satisfaction of doing that, while being her own boss, never gets old.

"When we first got the idea for this business, we were checking the boxes and moving up and growing... And all of a sudden, I realized, 'This is my life!' You walk into your shop and you say, 'This is me. This is feeding my soul.' And when your feeding your soul with your career, it takes everything to a whole new level."

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in Dodgeville," she asked. She certainly did remember it as she would wear out several pairs of shoes stepping on a stapling machine for hundreds of thousands of books over the years.

Eventually DeEtte would move from the back shop area to fill in where needed. She would often help when an employee took a break or was on vacation in the front office. Eventually when an employee left, she was asked to take over and she did. That didn't mean she stopped helping with assembling because she didn't, she just added more to her day. She learned how to put plates on the big press, catch papers and stamp them to get ready for mailing, as well to help James with the weekly printing of the papers and she would opaque the negative on the film shot of each page of the paper to get rid of any marks on the negative. That production process had to be done until 2007 when the paper was sold to Morris Newspaper Corporation of Wisconsin and the printing was moved to Lancaster. By then, DeEtte was full-time in the front office.

She's helped in the dark room with film processing, she composed pages, she has answered phones, waited on customers, taken and recorded subscriptions, made deposits daily and since COVID, has proofed pages for errors, she even took care of the ads for a few years that went into the paper.

"All these years kind of blend together," she said. "I've enjoyed it all. The people, they've become friends." In fact when she walks into the bank for daily deposits, she feels like a princess. "They are always yelling my name, saying hello and some come over and give me a hug," she said.

Her can do work ethic started at a young age and the circumstances of her life might have led to her rolling up her sleeves and doing what needs to be done with a look ahead and not behind approach to life.

When talking about her past, she says it's just family stuff and probably not interesting to most, but when shared it's clearly not been a breeze through life experience.

She has had to deal with a lot of family heartache. Her mom died at the age of 46 of

a stroke when DeEtte was 9. Her dad died of heart failure at the age of 54 when DeEtte was 18. He had two previous heart episodes prior to his death and that meant DeEtte handled milking and cleaning the milk house chores before the school bus picked her up at 7 a.m. and then she would feed the cows and the milking after school her senior year.

When she was in high school she went out for everything she could from forensics to cheerleading to "get out of this 'shy'ness." Until her senior year when the farm duties became her priority and she dropped every after school activity.

It was during that exhausting time in her life that she met James. One Saturday night, she had already gone to bed when her sister called and said "Get up we're going dancing." In that time, DeEtte said there were house parties where the living or dining room rug rolled up for dancing and eating. James happened to be at this one particular house party. He never said a word to DeEtte, but she said they both noticed each other. "He saw me and I saw him. We didn't talk. I wasn't into boys. I didn't know Royall boys," she said.

She had gone to Wilton and he had gone to Kendall schools but there was a combining of schools her senior year and they were all going to Royall for the first time her senior year. After that house party, James would stand around at school and talk to a girl that was a friend of DeEtte. She thought he was interested in her friend. He came over to her on Homecoming day, she was sure to ask about the other girl. "He took my hand and that was it," she said.

James was only a junior at the time and so they had to wait a year to get married. She graduate in the spring of 1964 and they were engaged in December of '64. "I waited for him to turn 18 to get married." According to DeEtte, boys couldn't get married until they were 18 in Wisconsin then even with parents signatures. In the same month as her engagement, her father died. "He approved (of James)," she said.

DeEtte said her dad was one of those people who assisted those in need and there were always a lot of people around, not just family. "Dad would bring in hard luck cases. Not just one of them, it would be their whole family," she said. And they might stay for a

week or two while she tried to get their lives back in order. "He helped everyone."

DeEtte and James have been helping a person in Richland Center for the last couple of years, giving her rides, shoveling her walk, getting her groceries and every Monday putting out her garbage. She believes that spirit of helping might have come from her dad.

Losing her parents young weren't the only tough moments in her life dealing with family tragedy. About a year after her mother died in 1956, she lost a brother, Bob, to a car accident in 1957. He was 21, living in Florida, and in the Navy at the time. DeEtte was 10. She said she didn't know him that well, but knew he liked to drive fast and used to race trains from Union Center to Elroy, crossing the tracks in Elroy before the train passed. He was driving too fast when he died in the accident, she said.

When DeEtte was 21 she dealt with the murder of her sister, Goldie, who was shot and killed by an ex-boyfriend. Goldie and two of DeEtte's brothers lived in Janesville where the shooting took place. The brothers were called right away but Goldie passed away at the hospital shortly before they arrived.

DeEtte said Goldie's youngest boy, Jimmy, saw it all. He was only 5.

In a family with 18 total siblings and half siblings there's going to be a lot of end of the life cycle situations to face. DeEtte has lost five of nine siblings and seven of eight half-siblings. She also has in the last couple of years lost one nephew after another, five in all now.

"I guess it makes you stronger," she said of the family losses. "You have to move on. They don't want you to sit around and mourn."

So that's exactly what James and DeEtte do, filling their weekends with antiquing and their week nights with watching their great-grandchildren in sports and in plays and any other school activity. James is the avid collector with an eye for anything different. He particularly has a thing for steel wheels, said DeEtte. If there is no rummage sale, there's

always antique stores. "He knows every one of them in the countryside," she said.

"The only thing I collect is old pop bottles, ones I've never heard of," she said. DeEtte collected a Valentines (name of company) bottle some 15 years ago and would add more if she could find them. Every year James will get her flowers and put them in that bottle on Valentine's Day. The bond between James and DeEtte is as strong now as it was that first Homecoming day he took her hand. It's clear from talking with DeEtte that family is important and it's likely she and James have not missed many of those moments in their six grandchildren and six great-grandchildren's lives.

The farm DeEtte grew up in outside of Wilton is still in the family. "A niece bought it so I can still go home," she said.

Many families generational family bond fades as years pass, especially with so many gone, but DeEtte said that's why they have their reunion every year to stay together and keep that connection strong. What used to be on the farm by a trailer home her brother had there, eventually moved to the Wilton Village Park. Now they take up one end of the park and put campers in a circle so they can stay up all night and get loud with the noise staying inside the circle and not bothering others. One of DeEtte's nephews plays guitar and puts on a live show for them during the reunion. They also rent out the community center, which was the old high school gym, so there's plenty to do for the large contingent of family members.

She said those four days are exhausting, but she looks forward to the reunion every year. She won't likely be out front singing with her nephew, but she most definitely will be soaking it in and will have supported all that went in to making it happen.

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sche explained. "The more items I can source from local farmers and businesses, the smaller the environmental impact of my business is, and the more I can do to support local farmers."

'She' energy

Speaking of 'she-energy,' Fritsche has also been involved with a program funded by USDA-NRCS aimed at working with women landowners and producers in the last few years.

Wisconsin Women in Conservation (WiWiC) WiWiC is a state-wide collaborative effort led by the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute in partnership with Renewing the Countryside, Marbledseed (formerly MOSES), and Wisconsin Farmers Union. A three-year multi-faceted project funded by NRCS, WiWiC brings together Wisconsin women landowners to connect and learn about conservation practices, resources, and funding opportunities.

"WiWiC is a great avenue to reach a growing demographic of women farmers and landowners looking to implement conservation projects on their land," Fritsche said. "It has been rewarding for me to work with this group and help this historically underserved population access NRCS' technical expertise, connect with resources and pursue funding for their projects."

Fritsche participated in several WiWiC events in the summer of 2022, and plans to continue her work with this group in coming years. WiWiC recently concluded their virtual 'Conservation Summer Camp' series, and is launching a 'Winter Conservation Camp' series starting in February. You can sign up at <https://www.wiwic.org/upcoming-events>.

Lithuania trip

Most recently, Fritsche took advantage of a unique opportunity offered by USDA-NRCS — the 'Embassy Science Fellowship Project.' The project connects NRCS employees to producers around the world under the U.S. State Department's umbrella.

"I had the privilege to serve as an Embassy Science Fellow for the Vilnius, Lithuania Embassy in the fall of 2022," Fritsche said. "As part of the fellowship, I was able to spend almost 30

days in Lithuania promoting regenerative agriculture and soil health."

Fritsche's work with Lithuania led her to spend time with the Baltic Environmental Forum (BEF), a non-governmental organization with the mission of 'protecting nature together with people.'

BEF was founded as a technical assistance project aiming to strengthen the co-operation among Baltic environmental authorities by the Baltic Ministries of Environment, Germany and the European Commission in 1995. BEF has contributed to the process of integration of countries by organizing workshops and training visits for specialists of state institutions. Since 2005, BEF has offices in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Germany.

"While in Lithuania, my work with BEF showed me how groups like theirs are working in Europe to create a positive image for agriculture and its role in environmental protection," Fritsche explained. "One thing that came out of my meetings with them is the realization that agronomic support needs to be improved in the European Union."

Working with the Embassy and BEF, Fritsche launched a series of activities and plans for her time in Lithuania. These would include a presentation to the Lithuanian Minister of Agriculture, submitting a grant proposal to the U.S. Embassy for a large soil health event, a field day with farmers offering soil health demonstrations, participation in a 'Good Farmer Championship Field Tour,' technical assistance with prescribed grazing planning and more.

"The Lithuanian Minister of Agriculture knew all about the work of NRCS, and referenced the 'Kiss the Ground' movie," Fritsche remembered. "It was perfect timing as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack had just authorized the U.S. to import eggs from Lithuania, which will help egg producers there who lost markets in Russia and China since the war in Ukraine started."

Good Farmer Tour

One of the highlights of Fritsche's time in Lithuania was participating in the second annual 'Good Farmer Championship Tour.' Farmers are nominated to compete based on their current level of stewardship. The contest is judged by a committee of resource professionals.

"This event was likely the most rewarding and remarkable part of the entire trip," Fritsche said. "What was most remarkable about the

tour was the apparent scar left on the landscape from Soviet and Nazi occupations, and it is remarkable how the country has taken steps to recover in their short 32 years of independence from the Soviet Union."

"During the Soviet occupation, Lithuanian homes and land were seized and redistributed as collective farms, the homes buried, and people relocated to new towns," Fritsche learned. "Most of rivers were straightened, wetlands were tiled, and most of the forests are uniform in size and height, with very few tree species."

Fritsche said that today, most Lithuanian farmers do not live on their farms.

"With all these hurdles to address, they are dealing with pretty high goals like climate change mitigation and greenhouse gas reduction," Fritsche observed. "It is humbling and inspiring to see this level of resiliency."

On the tour, Fritsche traveled to eight of the 13 farms on the tour over the course of three days. Sites visited included:

- a Limousine grazing operation incorporating composting building and an on-farm slaughter facility
- an organic hemp grower and processor
- a biodynamic farm with a permaculture planting
- a no-till cash grain producer who is president of a no-till association
- a female asparagus and mushroom producer
- a regenerative no-till cash grain producer
- a vegetable grower that processes products in a mobile commercial kitchen.

"What I found most profound about this tour are the similarities between American and Lithuanian farmers," Fritsche said. "These farmers are facing the same obstacles that ours are — lack of connection with consumers, lack of market access, and increased costs due to war and inflation, What I really learned is that a farmer is a farmer is a farmer."

On her last day in Lithuania, Fritsche presented a soil health workshop to 58 producers in a hometown of one of the contest entrants. The bilingual nature of the event presented some challenges, but they were able to foster a great discussion among producers. A key discussion revolved around how to handle residue in a no-till winter wheat system, and how to address slug pressure.

U.S. versus Europe

One of the key things that Fritsche learned in her time in Lithuania is the differences in agri-

cultural commodity support between the U.S. and the European Union (EU).

"In the EU, as much as 50 percent of farm incomes come from commodity support through a 'single payment scheme,'" Fritsche said. "Lithuanian producers are used to making changes in their operations to maximize these direct payments."

In addition to the direct payments, producers can engage in optional 'ecoscheme' operational changes to be eligible for further support. Fritsche's analysis of Lithuania's 2023-2027 draft Strategic Plan for Agriculture revealed that the goal is to slowly reduce direct payments and transition funding into additional conservation adoption for increased payments.

"My analysis of the plan identified a few glaring omissions in the lack of emphasis on soil testing and nutrient management planning, and a lack of resource planning data to ensure uniformity in implementation," Fritsche said. "One big thing that came out was that their definition of no-till is different than ours, and basically just means that the operator does not use a moldboard plow to till."

In the U.S., a farmer uses a no-till planter to create a narrow furrow just large enough for seed to be placed. By not plowing or disking, post-harvest residue remains on the surface, protecting the soil from crusting, erosion, high summer temperatures and moisture loss. Additionally, the soil structure remains intact and improves every year.

No-till farming increases the amount of water that infiltrates into the soil, organic matter retention and cycling of nutrients. It can reduce or eliminate soil erosion. Done in conjunction with cover crops, it increases the amount and variety of microbial life in the soil, which makes soils more resilient and full of nutrients.

In summary

In Fritsche's report on her time in Lithuania, she summarized the rewarding nature of the experience of being an Embassy Science Fellow.

"I found the experience to be challenging and extremely rewarding. It was rewarding to share knowledge with both policy makers and land managers," Fritsche said. "I had never been exposed to the level of diplomacy that I witnessed, and I brought back some ideas I hope to implement back home like mobile milking facilities and using remote sensing data for commodity support program participation. I hope that should another opportunity like this arise, I will be able to participate."

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MAKING SENSE OF INVESTING

Chamberlain

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Ironically, Kloe's field of study, kinesiology, is the study of movement of the human body. At this point, the young college student entertains thoughts of becoming a physical therapist or an athletic trainer someday.

College and rugby

College restarts for Kloe on Jan. 30. She'll be taking the bus instead of walking around campus because of her injured knee.

Of course a spring season of rugby, which she played as a freshman is out. The big rugby season in the fall is called the 15s and is, you guessed it, played with 15 players on a team. A spring season, called 7s, is played with just seven players on a team and features lots of running.

In 15s, there are two, relatively uninterrupted, 40-minute halves. In 7s, there are two seven-minute halves, but multiple matches are usually played at an event.

So, what did the college freshman from North Crawford know about rugby, when she arrived at Eau Claire in the fall of 2021?

"I had no idea how to play rugby," Kloe readily admitted. "I knew absolutely nothing about the game. I didn't know what rugby was."

It all started with a chance encounter with a girl from LaFarge, who recognized Kloe from her days of playing high school sports. After all, the former North Crawford athlete had competed in volleyball, basketball, cross country and track.

"Abbey Jacobs from LaFarge remembered me from playing against me in high school," Kloe recalled. Abbey urged Kloe to come to a rugby

practice and join the team.

It was the fall of 2021 and the girls at Eau Claire were rebuilding the rugby club team after seeing it essentially shut down during the COVID pandemic. Jacobs invited Chamberlain to the practice and it took off from there. With about 30 to 40 girls recruited, the team was ready to play.

Kloe said her basketball experience helped give her an idea of the teamwork necessary in rugby. Other girls on the team drew on their experience playing soccer in high school.

In the 2021 season, the UW-Eau Claire team won the conference championship.

In 2022 with Kloe playing a center position on the team, the UW-Eau Claire Rugby Club team won every match of the season. In fact, with only a couple of exceptions, they held their opponents scoreless. They were not scored upon in any of the three games in the national tournament, which culminated with 78-0 win over the Marquette team.

Chamberlain was there, but couldn't stay to celebrate the victory with her team due to her injury. At that point, she was on her way to a Houston hospital emergency room for tests and treatment.

With just two minutes left in the season, she had torn her ACL and recovery would take nine to 12 months with lots of rehab.

Future in the sport

The spring 7s season was out, but could she return for next fall's 15s? Perhaps. Only time will tell.

To say Kloe Chamberlain has a passion for playing rugby is probably an understatement. After playing all those sports in high school, Kloe has found her niche on the rugby pitch, the field upon which rugby is played. The sport is filled with unique terms, like 'the pitch,' based on its English origins. Scoring five points for a goal achieved by

crossing the opponent's goal line with the ball is called a 'try.' The game features plenty of direct physical contact with tackling and blocking.

"It's definitely different than other sports," Kloe explained. "The team chemistry is so much different. It's a different feeling. It's your own community of people. It's definitely different than any other game I have played."

Kloe explained the team functions as its own huge community on campus and girls on the team hang out together, when they're not playing.

So for now she's left to take the rehab seriously and hope she can return to play next fall. Her first chance to be evaluated will be in August.

Kloe understands she could be also start next fall with some non-contact practices. She's aware that she might miss some games in the early season, but hopes she can be ready by the time the tournaments start at the end of October.

Love of the sport

Probably nobody knows the depth of Kloe's passion for playing rugby better than her parents Stacey and JoEllen Chamberlain.

"In her love of sports, there's something about rugby that she's really, really coveting," her father said.

"Kloe played four sports and liked them all," Stacey Chamberlain said. "There's something about rugby that appeals to her— maybe it's the physicality of it or something."

Kloe acknowledged the physical contact of the sport was a draw. Rugby has lots of tackling and blocking involved in moving the ball up and down the field. Passing is limited to passing backward.

"And, there's the team togetherness," her father added. "They really have each other's backs. It's really a team sport. It's not one person that wins the game."

Stacey Chamberlain knows his daughter and what drives her.

"She doesn't like being complacent," her father said. "She's studying kinesiology, playing rugby and working as a CNA at a nursing home."

After her fine year, she was invited to play on Midwestern All-Star Rugby Team, but obviously couldn't because of her injury—another disappointment.

Kloe's mother Jo Ellen Chamberlain sees the same things in this situation as Stacey does.

Like Stacey, she's sees the tremendous bonding of players, like having a group Thanksgiving dinner—just like a family.

"There's this comradeship not only on the field but off the field," Jo Ellen noted. "They are there for each other in college life."

Jo Ellen, like Stacey, realizes that her daughter is

driven to play rugby.

"She'll go back into it again, as soon as she is able to run," Joe Ellen said. "And as soon as she can play, she'll be playing. Even with all the risks you can't take that away from her."

"The team is her family," Jo Ellen said. "She has a part-time job; she goes to school and she plays rugby—not necessarily in that order."

Kloe is hoping to return to playing in eight months. She will work hard to rebuild her strength with conditioning.

"Hopefully, she makes a good choice," her mother said. "She strives to do the best. Even as a high school athlete she was always giving 125 percent. Kloe doesn't do things halfway. It's all or nothing."

Confident leader

Kloe Chamberlain's tenacity and leadership on the field is not lost on her teammates.

Fernanda 'Fern' Diaz is a friend and teammate of Kloe Chamberlain. She went to high school in Sheboygan before landing on the UW-Eau Claire rugby team with Kloe.

"Off the field, she can seem a bit shy or even timid," Fern said of Kloe. "But on the field she is very confident. She is a leader on the field that pushes the team."

"Kloe is very athletic," Fern noted. "She is at the gym every single day. She pushes herself more than most of the team does."

Like Kloe, Fern is very oriented toward the team.

"As a team we work really well together," Fern said. "We're all friends off the field."

"We work together. We don't focus on mistakes or which person was responsible," Fern said. "We focus on our mistakes and work together to fix them."

It's that idea Fern expressed that draws Kloe and the other players to the team.

"Kloe has a big role as leader on this team," Fern said. "Next year, we will pick new leaders and don't be surprised if Kloe is picked as the new club president or the team captain."

What about her injury?

"We've had some captains with the same injury as she has right now," Fern noted. "I talked to her and if the therapy goes well...you know Kloe she will push herself to get better."

Kloe Chamberlain seems to have a bright future playing rugby or working toward a career based on her kinesiology studies. Either way, she is obviously driven to succeed.

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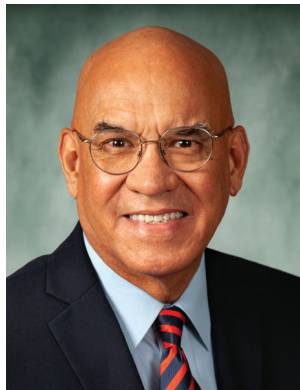
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