

MWAF Champion's Interview

Brenda Lee Schoepp

Title: Director of Creative Thought, Global Food Lead

Education:

MA Global Leadership, Royal Roads University (2019)

FAO of the United Nations Rural Community Development & Communication (2018)

Nuffield Scholar (2012)

What are the main milestones of your career?

I took an entirely different path than most by being an independent all of my career. I started managing the family dairy and then moved into managing the feedyard for 11 years. I am to the best of my knowledge the first woman in Canada to manage a feedyard.

As an independent market analyst I was honored to have clients across Canada and as a columnist I was well received eventually being awarded for my work in Canada and internationally, at World Food Day in the UK, SIA in Paris and the World Economic Summit in Mumbai.

Early milestones came in the recognition of my expertise in both animal health and in animal welfare (which resulted in feed and water pens at points of sale). My marketing approach was widely recognized in industry as well. Later milestones were on the ranch where our field days brought education on rotational grazing, animal welfare and solar systems to the public.

My client base grew and I was asked to do more consultancies and mentoring. This is the major part of my agricultural portfolio today as I now mentor up to 40 individuals in eight nations.

My industry leadership involved distribution of over \$27 million for agricultural research through several boards of which I was member, chair or vice chair, and in being an advisory in the development of University of Calgary School of Veterinary Medicine, developing the inaugural First Nations Agricultural Conference and being named one of Alberta's 50 most influential people.

The memorable milestones were really quiet, private moments. When I learned that my client was encouraging his daughter to be cattle boss this seemed to validate my life's work. The day I was awarded my Nuffield Scholarship was important as it was the beginning of a stronger international connection. Achieving my MA Global Leadership at 60 years of age was a good thing.

I cannot take credit for the success of others but it has been so very rewarding knowing I was part of the team.

What were the reasons for your milestones?

Certain goals I set out to do, such as being a columnist. Truthfully, milestones happened because I worked hard and was committed and authentic.

What motivates you in good times and through road blocks?

I am exceptionally close to my adult children and to my grandchildren. I have, throughout my adult lifetime, laid all discussion bare to my children and to this day they continue to be my wise council, inspiration and my anchor.

I am determined, maybe too much so, but when you are a sole provider with children to feed and a ranch to run, a job to do and an audience to inform, you must be determined.

As a woman of faith I trust implicitly in the future. Little children bring me joy and often at the darkest of times if I can be near children then I am lifted. A great and challenging conversation is a motivator for me. I see such talent in so many – it amazes me and pulls me forward.

Did you see yourself taking a leadership role in this field before?

Even as a little girl I saw myself as a leader. What or who I was leading was undefined.

I did see myself in front of an audience and my presentations came to reality. I did see myself making a difference in people's lives and I still struggle with that. I question: Have I done enough?

I did not know that I would be a mentor to so many and at such a deep level. That is truly an honor.

Why are you involved with gender issues in Ag?

I bring a very balanced approach to gender issues. My definition of gender equality is: *"Gender equality is not about separating men and women. It is standing up for the excellence of each other so each may contribute with the gifts they were given."* (2012)

There is no doubt I struggled in the early years. As a woman who drove a big truck, managed a lot of cattle and was deadly sharp with her marketing – I was upsetting the status quo. That's OK, I just did my best every day and "cowgirdled" up through the comments. I don't think we should expect our girls and women to accept or cowgirl up to what I went through. The acceptance of talent is important. As is the knowledge that women are not a diverse group – we simply are!

Please comment on what's been going with women in ag up to now. What's going on now? What do you see happening in the future?

In some circles of agriculture we still have the "rah rah you can do it" type of seminar or meeting. This is very degrading. The point is – women already are doing what they are destined to do locally, nationally and globally. We need the good news stories not the motivational speakers. We do not need special treatment – we need equal and fair treatment. I

know in speaking with many young women that this is still a challenge out in the field, particularly in ag sales.

I like what I see unfolding. Young women are taking leadership roles, older women are opening up to sharing their journey and their expertise and men are asking to share with a new found openness.

What are you doing now? Why?

I just completed my Master of Arts in Global Leadership and am designing leadership programs here on Vancouver Island where I now live. After a life time of extensive travel and hundreds of presentations it is time to be rooted and engage at a deeper level. My MA project, *Three Times a Day – Critical Questions toward a New Dialogue in Food Leadership* will be expanded for global interaction, I am working locally with food security hubs and my mentees are flying in for private sessions (and a little time in paradise).

I am also singing, playing basketball, working with classes at the University, mentoring outside of agriculture, active with the Canadian International Council, visiting and supporting the homeless in the area, supporting families in in developing nations, planning agricultural tours for international guests and coaching (by invitation) victims of life altering circumstance to tell their story.

Why? I am here because this is where I am meant to be at this moment in this time. I believe in the people around me and in the transformation of self through experience.

What would you like to leave behind you after retirement?

I don't see myself retiring. I will continue to challenge myself and build my leadership, sharing my experience with others through design and mentoring. I plan to learn another language and to get in step with more dancing, write a few books which I have outlined, learn all I can about the island I live on (which is an agricultural mecca.).

If I leave anything behind it would be a that folks thought of me as kind and compassionate, courageous in my life and clear in my vision, true in my love and in particular for my beautiful family, proud of being a Canadian and welcoming to all people at all times. I would want them to feel that when I walked beside them on their journey in business and in life that I cared about them and their success, their happiness, and appreciated the honor of those shared pathways.

I hope I challenged conventional thought and action and took agriculture to a higher plane through dialogue and my through my own practises.

I hope I am to be remembered as an inspiration.

What do you think are the most important characteristics good leaders should have?

This is best answered in my personal leadership statement: *“I inspire and nurture the growth of individuals through mentorship with compassion, integrity and authenticity. I believe in and promote equality - the standing up for the excellence of each other, and in dignity - the acceptance of all individuals and their gifts - and am accountable to these values. I promote literacy, gender equality and health as foundations for the future of food and as a global leader empower people through an ecological regenerative approach to grow food, protect environments, strengthen trade and secure financial independence for themselves, their families and their communities while respecting the natural and cultural space in which they live”.*

What do you think is necessary to engage industry in gender conversations and make progress for the women's file in Canada?

I have done some pretty comprehensive work and asked deep personal questions of men and women in agriculture in Canada and around the world and have a waiting list of people that have requested to be involved in whatever it is I take on next. When you build trust, women and men are anxious to be heard and willingly cooperate in these deep dives. It does not stop there. From getting women ag workers recognized and protected from the sun in India to helping a Canadian dad with the on boarding of his daughter and all things in between I challenge people to authentically engage and carry through – holding them as they claim “with their feet to the fire”. This is about results that benefit women, families and communities. The key is the preservation of dignity at all times.

We need to take gender out of the conversation. (She is a farmer – not she is a woman farmer). We need to ensure financial literacy is available for girls and boys. We need to nurture healthy communities and focus on local economies to ensure a strong global presence for agriculture. For families we need universal health care and help on boarding women into agricultural businesses particularly is succession.

We need to truly care enough to lead by walking beside someone regardless of their beliefs, gender or culture.

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