



FINDING COMMON GROUND

When asked to choose a profession for career day, 8-year-old Wyatt Nance

stood before his class and announced he wanted to be a farmer, just as 10 generations of his family before him. The other children in the class raised their hands to ask why he'd choose such a difficult job.

"He said, 'It's something everyone needs. And if I don't farm and no one else in our school farms, how are you going to eat?'" relays Caci Nance, Wyatt's mother. "Another little boy replied, 'We can get it at the grocery.'"

A grassroots network of women in ag wants consumers to see them as the face of food production.



Top Kristie Swenson on the farm in Minnesota. **Bottom** Caci Nance with son Wyatt.

It's these kinds of misperceptions that fuel Caci's passion for educating the public at large about the food they eat. In addition to her day job as York County Government water quality educator and her role as full-time mother of three—Wyatt; 3-year-old, Waylon; and 1-year-old Carter Ann—the South Carolina resident also volunteers her time with an advocacy group that utilizes her farming experience. That organization is CommonGround.

Borne of a partnership between and funding from the United Soybean Board and the National Corn Growers Association, CommonGround pulled together a network of 200 women farmers across 19 states to educate others on how food is grown. "The biggest strength is the desire for these farmers to have



conversations with moms who have great questions and concerns about their food," explains Missy Morgan, associate director of CommonGround. (At this time, CommonGround does not have a presence in Canada.)

According to Morgan, CommonGround members take to the airwaves, blogs, local events and social media to provide knowledgeable advocates and science-backed research. Also, in a male-dominated profession, CommonGround volunteers offer a unique vantage point.

"Our women farmers really have compassion for moms, because for the most part our farmers are also mothers," Morgan explains. "They know how much moms care about giving their children the best, safest foods because they care about that too."

MASTERING THE ART OF LISTENING

Lending an ear is something Kristie Swenson has honed over the years in her role as assistant vice president at Farmers State Bank of Trimont in Minnesota. "It's always interesting to hear what

other people think and what they're doing on their operation," she says. "Listening is always a good skill to practice."

The skill has come in handy since Kristie joined CommonGround in 2010. "People are so far removed from the farm and from how food is grown," she says, "and they tend to listen to people and sources that share their viewpoints. So, when the majority of what you hear is telling you something's good or something's bad, or do this/don't do this, it's really easy to accept it at face value rather than looking for other sources of information."

Kristie's husband, Trelin, farms full time alongside Kristie's parents on an 1,100-acre corn and soybean operation, and Swenson is also the third-generation on her family's land. While her husband is in charge of daily operations, Kristie keeps books and does much of the farm's marketing.

Together, the couple discuss management decisions alongside Kristie's parents, and Kristie and Trelin raise two young boys, Teagen, 4, and Talic, 1. This blend of skills makes her a perfect CommonGround volunteer. In her tenure, she's sat on panels, participated in TV and radio discussions, and worked CommonGround booths at local events.

Of their many contributions, CommonGround volunteers often find themselves addressing misconceptions, from how they raise their animals to production methods. The Swensons, for instance, are a conventional operation that raises genetically modified crops. "But whether you're conventional or organic, it's clear we have the same goals in mind," she says, "growing safe food, treating our environment with respect and receiving fair value for our crops."

"One isn't right or wrong; they're just different," believes Swenson. "Just as there are lots of ways to share our stories, there's a place for all of us in agriculture."

EDUCATING THE PUBLIC

Across the country in South Carolina, Caci Nance found CommonGround through the state soybean board director. She'd already been blogging about farming and raising a family, and educating was part of her job too.

Recently, a commenter on a CommonGround blog post raised the issue of nitrate poisoning in runoff. Nance swiftly addressed the issue, relying on her agriculture knowledge and her expertise as her county's water quality educator.

"From a farming standpoint, I talked about >>

what we do to ensure nitrogen doesn't run off, and also talked about it in the realm of homeowners buying bags of fertilizer," says Nance. "It's easy to blame the person who they see applying large amounts of fertilizer. Farmers work very hard to ensure what they apply to their fields stay in their fields," she continues.

"Many complete soil tests to make sure they apply just what is needed instead of 'a little bit of everything.' Only applying what is needed to a field in the correct amount helps to reduce runoff. And in all our fields, we have a buffer between the field and any roadway or waterway to catch any accidental runoff."

Part of Nance's daily life is on the family's diversified operation, which includes a 100-cow dairy, 250 beef cattle and 1,000 acres of small grains, hay and forage crops. "I'm the fill-in girl," she chuckles. "When someone is going on a trip or sick, I feed calves, milk, I'll help on weekends and after work hauling hay and getting silage up. I do all of our farm's social media accounts and just make sure everyone has what they need."

EDUCATING THE VOLUNTEERS

CommonGround prides itself on keeping its volunteers up to date on agriculture. "Volunteers attend a national conference, where they have the opportunity to hear the latest consumer research and insights, and also meet women farmers in the program from other states," says Morgan. "Our state partners often have state-level conferences where they plan local activities for the year."

Minnesota farmer Billie Gervais is fairly new to the group and recently attended the Washington, D.C., conference. She stays busy on her family's 2,000-acre farm, planting beans, loading pigs and helping to raise the blended family's five children.

"I try to reach out to make our farm more transparent," she says. "If we can connect with other women making food choices for their home, that's No. 1. A lot of us are working on the farm so we're able to bring that story to them on a one-to-one level."

CommonGround volunteers and its sponsors say they use messaging approved by USDA. "It's approved through USDA," says Gervais of the group's messaging. "They're the ultimate check source at all packing plants/processing plants. They are what consumers hopefully trust to provide them with the safest food."

But agriculture and the politics of the plate go far beyond the Department of Agriculture or any professional growers' association. "CommonGround utilizes women in the best way I've seen to make conversations relatable and real," Nance says. "Women are much more likely to reach out and connect in a conversational manner."

And, she adds, "No matter what kind of farmer we are, we care not only about the bottom line, but also the environment, the livestock. We all want to take care of what we have." **FL**

■ To learn more about CommonGround, visit FindOurCommonGround.com and on Facebook [@CommonGroundNow](https://www.facebook.com/CommonGroundNow).



ANOTHER THING THAT UNITES MANY in this network of CommonGround women—aside from farming—is AGCO equipment, including Massey Ferguson® red, the telltale crisp lines of the White Planters™, GSI® storage and handling facilities, and AGCO orange.

"Everyone knows how to get to our house because of the Allis Chalmers flag," says Minnesota CommonGround volunteer Billie Gervais. "Every piece of equipment we own, except our 4-wheel-drive, is AGCO." That includes an AGCO LT75A and a DT225B, a Massey Ferguson 7724 and an MF8650, Sunflower Disc and Disc chisel, a Gleaner S68 with draper head and a White Planter.

Jackson, Minn., volunteer Kristie Swenson and husband, Trelin, run an 8500 Series White Planter with a 24-row, 22-inch row width. "The center-fill makes it easy to fill the planter," Swenson says. "It does a good job of not having skips or planting doubles, and it's easy to clean out the row units and change the plates when switching from corn to soybeans."

The Swensons also own a Challenger MT765 they use to apply anhydrous ammonia. "The ultra-wide frame goes out to 132 inches, which is a little wider than the typical frame," says Kristie. "This allows our planter tractor and sprayer to use the same wheel tracks, giving us the option to use the same tractor to pull equipment during different seasons. We also like that the tracks are narrow enough to fit our 22-inch rows."

For grain storage, the Swensons rely on GSI. "They make good quality bins with nice access doors," Kristie adds. "It's easy to empty the grain out."

South Carolina CommonGround volunteer Caci Nance's family owns a Massey Ferguson 135, MF175 and an MF6608. "The 135 is our 8-year-old, Wyatt's, first tractor," says Caci, whose extended family owns Nance Tractor & Implement Inc. "We are using it to help him learn how to work on tractors by making him keep it cleaned up and in good working order."

And, adds Nance's husband, William, "The MF6608 is just the right size for many of the jobs at the dairy. We use it for loading feed, putting out hay, as well as turning the pack barn and rebedding. It's probably one of the most used tractors on the farm, and it's holding up well to the demands we put on it."