

Erin Mark – Farm Safety 4 Just Kids

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The combine moves through the soybean field, gathering the fall harvest. Harvest can be a hectic time on the farm, and it can also be a time when farm accidents can happen. Safety on the farm should be a priority year-round, and one rural Kansas woman is helping lead an effort to encourage farm safety. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Erin Mark is the Kansas outreach coordinator for a program called Farm Safety 4 Just Kids. The mission of Farm Safety 4 Just Kids is to promote a safe farm environment so as to prevent health hazards, injuries, and fatalities to children and youth. Farm Safety 4 Just Kids is an independent organization doing educational programs across the nation.

The organization began in Iowa in 1987. An 11-year-old farm boy died in a grain wagon accident on his family's farm. In her grief, the boy's mother set out to launch an educational program so that no other farm family had to undergo such a loss. That effort became what is now known as Farm Safety 4 Just Kids.

The organization works through a network of state outreach coordinators. The coordinator in Kansas is Erin Mark. Her position is sponsored by Cargill.

Erin grew up in a family of custom harvesters from south central Kansas. Her dad followed the harvest each year from Texas almost up to Canada and was active in the U.S. Custom Harvesters Association.

One year at the custom harvesters' annual meeting, Erin saw a display for an organization called Farm Safety 4 Just Kids. The organization was having a photography contest, and Erin submitted a photo of her baby brother playing with a toy combine in a wheat field. That photo ended up on the organization's brochure.

Years later, while preparing to graduate from K-State with a degree in animal science, Erin learned that Farm Safety 4 Just Kids would be hiring a state outreach coordinator for Kansas. She applied and got the job. It sounds like it was meant to be.

Erin is now employed as a bioscience aide at the USDA research center in Manhattan and works for Farm Safety 4 Just Kids as a part-time position. During the course of a year, she will participate in more than 20 educational events to inform kids about farm safety. Those events might include fairs, festivals, and field days.

She partners with groups such as schools, 4-H clubs, libraries, county Farm Bureaus, other farm groups, Extension, businesses, and community organizations to do educational programs. "We cover farm safety, but we also try to reach an urban audience," Erin said. "They need to know about ATV safety, for example."

In fact, a good friend of Erin's perished in a tragic ATV accident just recently. "It's so sad. It makes me want to work even harder," Erin said.

"If you need someone to come in and speak about farm safety, I'm your girl," Erin said. "Or, if you need resources sent to you so you can do your own safety program, we can do that too."

"We are a non-profit organization," Erin said. "There is no charge for me to come in and speak or to send information." She emphasizes that the organization is not a regulatory agency but instead takes a constructive, educational approach. "We're here to help, not trying to hinder," Erin said. "We want to help people be safe and continue to enjoy the farm."

Erin knows the importance of farm and rural life firsthand. She went to school in the south central Kansas town of Norwich, population 543. That's rural, but there's more. Erin's family actually lived near the town of Rago, population 18 people. Now, that's rural.

Various types of safety information and resources are available on the organization's website, [www.fs4jk](http://www.fs4jk.org) (as in Farm Safety 4 Just Kids).org.

The combine moves through the soybean field, gathering the fall harvest safely. Thanks to the efforts of Erin Mark and others, Farm Safety 4 Just Kids is making a difference by encouraging safe practices on the farm. We look forward to a harvest that yields both productivity and safety.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.