

Tiya Tonn – Farm to Fork

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

“All the world’s problems are solved around a kitchen table.” That statement is based on the belief that sharing food in a family setting can help people bridge their differences. Today we’ll learn about an innovative county organization which has put this concept into practice with a nationally award-winning program called Farm to Fork. It’s today’s Kansas Profile.

Tiya Tonn is county coordinator for Butler County Farm Bureau which conducted this program. Tiya grew up in a farming and ranching family in Reno County and Colorado. Her family later ranched in Butler County.

After college, Tiya became a farm broadcaster in Wichita and Arizona. She eventually returned to the Flint Hills, married, and became a full time ranch mom of four kids. As the kids got older, she took on a part-time position as a county Farm Bureau coordinator and eventually became the full-time county coordinator in Butler County.

“In Butler County, we are uniquely positioned to see the impact of urban encroachment,” Tiya said. “On the west side of our county, we have the rapidly growing city of Andover, but the east side of our county is extremely rural,” Tiya said. “It’s the kind of area that doesn’t even have cell phone coverage.” Eastern Butler County includes towns like Rosalia, population 171, and Cassoday, population 129 people. Now, that’s rural.

Butler County’s combination of urban and rural perspectives created the potential for conflict, but also opportunities.

“We are the county that should lead the state in connecting urban and rural people together,” Tiya said. Using the philosophy that all the world’s problems can be solved around a kitchen table, she suggested to the Butler County Farm Bureau Board that they host a farm event for their urban counterparts.

“We can invite them to our farms and let them put a face on our food production,” Tiya said. “We can help them understand that we are also families that are providing for our families.” The event was intended to connect urban consumers with the source of their food.

The program was titled Farm to Fork and So Much More. It consisted of a one-day tour to a dairy, winery, crop farm, ranch and hydroponic vegetable operations in Butler County, followed by a farm dinner of locally-produced products. “We had a nice crowd of about 30 people,” Tiya said. The board decided to do it again.

In August 2017 Butler County Farm Bureau hosted its second annual Farm to Fork event, and interest boomed. “I worried about filling a bus, but instead we had two full tour busses and cars following behind,” Tiya said. Speakers on the busses explained about the farms and their products. Congressman Ron Estes and all five county commissioners participated. About 160 people attended the dinner that evening at Fulton Valley Farm.

“Everything that we served was produced in Butler County,” Tiya said. Products included beef, pork, vegetables, fruit, breads, honey, cheese, milk, and eggs. (Wow, that’s my kind of county.) Food was prepared by students and faculty in the Culinary and Hospitality Institute at Butler County Community College.

Most participants came from Andover or the city of Wichita. “We had people from all different walks of life, from a minister to mommy bloggers,” Tiya said.

Farm to Fork was so successful that it won a state award from Kansas Farm Bureau. Butler County was one of only 24 counties in the nation to claim a County Activities of Excellence Award from the American Farm Bureau Federation.

In 2018, the tour is scheduled to expand to include an apple and peach orchard, a haying operation, a school district farm, a scenic Flint Hills ranch, and a livestock auction. “Anytime we can share our story, it’s a win,” Tiya said.

Can all the world’s problems be solved around a kitchen table? If so, Butler County Farm Bureau is making a start by building understanding between urban and rural sectors of our population. We commend Tiya Tonn and the Butler County Farm Bureau for making a difference with this outreach to urban neighbors. They are helping bring food from Farm to Fork and fostering fellowship.

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