

https://www.southernminn.com/northfield_news/news/article_53fb4a6d-7eb5-5042-932c-fe288fabf914.html

SPOTLIGHT

Rice County farmer leads the way in promoting diversity

By ANDREW DEZIEL andrew.deziel@apgsomn.com

Mar 10, 2021



Overwhelmingly white and male with an average age of 56, Minnesota's farming sector isn't exactly known for its diversity. Yet one Rice County farmer is trying to open up the doors of opportunity to more women, people of color, young people and LGBTQ+ Minnesotans.

Area farmer Lizy Bryant is currently apprenticing with her Aunt, Lynne Reeck, at Singing Hills Goat Dairy. Located next to Nerstrand Big Woods State Park, Singing Hills is a small farm that produces fresh chevre, feta, curds and yogurt at an on-site cheese plant.

Bryant grew up spending plenty of time working on her grandmother's farm, detasseling corn and doing other odd jobs. After starting her career in the nonprofit sector, she returned to the land just over a year ago.

As a Black woman growing up in small town Minnesota, Bryant faced racial bias from an early age. Now that she works in a profession even more overwhelmingly white than greater Minnesota as a whole, she's more aware than ever of her identity. Bryant attended her first Rice County Farmers Union meeting last year, and said she was grateful to be well received in that space. At the meeting, she felt very aware of her status as a member of the younger, up and coming generation of farmers.

While expressing gratitude for the opportunity to learn from experienced farmers through organizations like the RCFU, Bryant is still faces the kind of discrimination from some people that she's all too familiar with.

"While I was apprenticing at the farm last year, I went outside to grab cheese I was going to deliver in the cities, and a man who was repairing my aunt's porch, before asking my name, before greeting me in any way said "You don't look like you belong here," she recalled. "It doesn't get any more overt than that."

Bryant's awareness of her racial identity was heightened all the more last year, when the death of George Floyd pushed the state's racial inequalities to the top of the conversation. She said that's led to an increase in ugly bias incidents, but she's still hopeful that progress is being made.

"As a Black person who grew up in Minnesota, the idea that I don't belong in many spaces isn't new," she said. "What I am adamant about is that future generations of farmers of color, Black farmers, Black women, do not experience that."

According to the state's 2017 Census of Agriculture, fewer than 1,000 Minnesota farmers are people of color. Most people of color farmers identify as Hispanic/Latino, with just 39 out of more than 110,000 Minnesota farmers listing their racial identity as Black.

According to a recently released report from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Emerging Farmers Working Group, that's no accident of history but a product of racial bias, which pervaded programs designed to help farmers. Bryant was one of 17 statewide leaders chosen to serve on the emerging farmers group out of more than 100 applicants. She was encouraged to apply by Commissioner of Agriculture Thom Peterson and Deputy Commissioner Patrice Bailey, who visited the farm last fall.

The report recommends a variety of strategies to reduce the barrier of entry for new farmers and diversify the farming industry. Most crucially, Bryant said that the state needs to help provide aspiring farmers get access to the land they need to get started.

Other recommendations include establishing a dedicated position for community engagement within the MDA, creating a budget for translation and bilingual services, and creating a new program to provide training and funding for emerging farmers.

With sufficient support, Bryant believes that southern Minnesota can be a great place for women, people of color and LGBTQ+ individuals to get started in farming. Of course, most of the initiatives proposed by the EFWG will require significant state funding.

Under legislation offered by Rep. Jessica Hanson, DFL-Burnsville, the emerging farmers group would receive \$20,000 in funding over the biennium and would be able to accept private donations through the Commissioner of Agriculture. Rep. Todd Lippert, DFL-Northfield, who authored legislation to create the group last session, said he supports funding the group.

"We have new American communities who are interested in farming, we just need to help them get started," he said. "It's something that will be good for the whole state."

Reach Reporter Andrew Deziel at 507-333-3129 or follow him on Twitter @FDNandrew. © Copyright 2021 APG Media of Southern Minnesota. All rights reserved.

Andrew Deziel