

Four Women Who Found Their Way to the Nebraska Ag Industry... and Love It!

Say the word “agriculture” and many people have visions of a farmer planting corn or a rancher herding cattle.

While production agriculture continues to be the backbone of Nebraska’s number one industry, the career opportunities in agriculture go far beyond the farm gate. Advances in technology, the expanding world of bio-sciences and the growing demand for ag education are among the reasons agriculture is fast becoming desired employment for more and more students.

Four women who hold positions in the agriculture industry in Nebraska, didn’t always know they would land professionally where they have. Some have a deep-rooted family history in agriculture, some knew little about agriculture when they entered college.

But all four have embraced Nebraska agriculture and continue to forge their path in the industry. Here are their stories.

The Agronomist

Hannah Gaebel grew up in Ashland, population 2,566. Even though the town is surrounded by corn and soybean fields, Gaebel considered herself more of an urbanite growing up.

She went to high school in Gretna, just outside of Omaha, the city where Gaebel spent a lot of her social life. Both of her parents were employed outside of agriculture. Her dad sold cars, and her mom was a business teacher. But farming wasn’t totally foreign to Gaebel. Her family heritage is dotted with farmers throughout many generations. In addition, her family owns some farmland in northwest Missouri where she was able to spend time on occasional weekends.

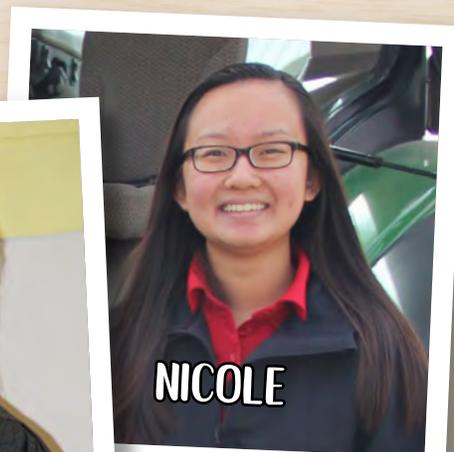
Time spent on the farm gave Gaebel a love for being outdoors. She also enjoyed plant sciences while in high school. Those two passions led her to want to study horticulture when she headed to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL).



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"I got involved in as many ag organizations and groups as I could," she said. "I was involved with the UNL Agronomy Club and the Nebraska Agricultural Youth Council. I also would go to friends' farms on the weekends to help them work cattle or harvest crops."

Board, a USDA ARS research lab at UNL, Monsanto and the Rural Futures Institute and eventually was able to land a job with [Ward Laboratories, Inc.](#)

The Kearney-based company conducts services such as soil analysis, as well as feed, water, manure, fertilizer and plant testing. The lab has a wide range of customers who include farmers, ag retailers, home owners and even craft beer brewers.

Gaebel serves as a support agronomist focusing on customer outreach and consultation. She answers a lot of inquiries and provides information on Ward's numerous services.

"I just started this past fall and have made it a goal to be out more in the field this coming spring and summer," said Gaebel. "I look forward to being able to provide our customers with answers when agronomic challenges arise."

Soon after she got to UNL, Gaebel realized she was more interested in agronomy than horticulture and became fully involved in classes offered through [UNL's College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources](#) (UNL-CASNR).

Because of the lack of a strong agricultural background, Gaebel immersed herself in activities and opportunities to learn more about crops and livestock.

Internships also became extremely important to prepare Gaebel for her career in agronomy.

During her first two summers of college she secured an internship with a farmers' cooperative in Giltner where she spent time in fields doing follow up work and scouting.

During college, Gaebel added internships with the Nebraska Wheat

The Teacher

When she was just a sophomore in college, Toni Rasmussen started receiving phone calls from high schools in Nebraska wanting to know when she would graduate and be available to teach agricultural education classes.

"The schools that contacted me were close to the area I grew up so they must have heard through the grapevine I was studying ag education," said Rasmussen. "That just shows you how strong the demand for ag teachers in Nebraska is."

It's estimated that approximately 14,000 students in Nebraska take agricultural education classes each



year with more than 185 schools in the state offering such a curriculum.

It's no surprise that Rasmussen became an agricultural teacher given her background is about as "farm kid"

as it gets. Growing up on a farm in the Boone-Platte county area in northeast Nebraska, she was fully involved in helping out with the livestock and crop operations at home that included her dad, mom and two brothers.

While attending high school, first at Newman Grove and then at Boone Central, she was

very active in FFA and attended the [Nebraska Department of Agriculture's Nebraska Agricultural Youth Institute](#) for two years. By the time Rasmussen



got to UNL, she was committed to a career in agricultural education.

May of 2017 proved to be perfect timing for both Rasmussen and [Wayne Community Schools](#). She was graduating and the school was implementing a new agriculture curriculum and starting a new FFA chapter. As a result, Rasmussen is the Chapter Advisor and has a full load of agricultural classes she teaches at Wayne.

"All the seventh and eighth graders take nine weeks of an agricultural exploratory class where we touch on everything from plants, animals, natural resources and food products," said Rasmussen. "Our high school students have a chance to take two intro to agriculture classes. We also have an ag business-leadership class that goes all year long."

Rasmussen said she feels that rural and urban Nebraska high

school students are becoming more interested in agriculture because there are more career opportunities.

"I still firmly believe that ag production is the key to all other jobs in the industry," she said. "But the jobs outside of production agriculture are just as important. If we don't talk about those jobs we are missing out on much of our student population."

The Web Developer/Graphic Designer

Even though she grew up in Manhattan, Kansas, Nicole Ramirez didn't want to attend local universities. She wanted to be more independent and reach out on her own. So after high school, she headed to Lincoln to attend the University of Nebraska where she was to study architecture.

It didn't take Ramirez long to realize architecture wasn't the career path she wanted to take so she switched to business and marketing. However, after securing a marketing internship with UNL's Information Technology Services she began doing web development also.

"It really brought back the passion I always had working in the digital world," said Ramirez. "I not only got to do some web development but I began doing graphic design which I really enjoyed."

She got even more web development and graphic design experience the next two years with UNL's Department of Chemistry. As graduation approached she searched for digital marketing jobs.

"I saw an opening for a web developer/graphic designer at the [Nebraska Department of Agriculture](#)

(NDA)," said Ramirez. "Even though I knew very little about agriculture, the job looked like a perfect fit for the type of career I was looking for."

In her job interview, Ramirez said she was asked more about her skill set than her knowledge of agriculture and was told she would be able to "adapt" to the work environment.

Ramirez proved early on just how quickly she could adapt to change. After all, in about a two-week period, she took her class finals, graduated, moved, got married and, oh yes, started her new job.

Two years on the job and Ramirez has learned a lot about agriculture and NDA.

"Since I am the only graphic designer in the Department, I get projects from every focus area," she said.

"That has allowed me to learn just how many different tasks our Department performs. Before I started working at NDA I had no idea that the Department was responsible for inspecting food outlets and certifying



weighing and measuring devices, along with all the livestock and plant responsibilities."

But what has been most enjoyable for Ramirez is getting firsthand experience in the field.

"I have been able to go on ride-alongs with our inspectors and other staff members to do video and photography projects," said Ramirez. "I've seen them do everything from checking the accuracy of gas pumps, to making sure restaurants are meeting food safety codes, to checking animals for diseases."

And what's been one of her most fun experiences?

"Getting to drive a tractor for the first time," she said with a smile.

Do one thing everyday that makes you happy

The Director of Outreach Education

If you were going to pick someone to promote and advocate for agriculture, Courtney Schardt would be a great choice. The [Nebraska Farm Bureau Foundation](#) found that out four years ago when they initially hired her as program assistant for their Agriculture Outreach Education program.

Schardt is now the director for the Foundation's outreach program having gone from one end of the state to another giving presentations on agriculture at elementary schools and working with high school students to become advocates themselves.

A strong connection to agriculture started early in Schardt's life. While growing up in the small town of Table Rock she was able to become very involved in 4-H and eventually showed all kinds of animals including cows, chickens, and her first love, horses.

"When I was young, I asked my parents if I could have a horse and they said only if my grandparents approved since they had a farm close by," said Schardt. "They thought for sure my grandpa would say no, but he surprised them and said yes. That was my start."

In addition to going to fairs and exhibitions to show her 4-H animals, Schardt was an active participant in the leadership program of her Pawnee City High School FFA chapter. That experience served as a springboard for her to major in Ag Education Leadership and Communications at UNL-CASNR.

"I really wanted my focus to be on leadership," said Schardt. "It was also the opportunity to work with a lot of different people on a day-to-day basis."

And while Schardt didn't grow up on a farm, she picked up a true understanding of the processing end of agriculture working at her [dad's meat locker](#) in Table Rock.



In her current job, Schardt has found out that teachers and schools in Nebraska have been very open to presenting their students with more information about the state's agriculture industry.

"It doesn't matter if they live in an urban or rural area, there is a real lack of knowledge about agriculture among many of the students I come in contact with," said Schardt. "This program has really been instrumental in creating a better understanding of where our food comes from and helps make that connection with the students."

Schardt never expected to be doing the kind of work she is, but loves the opportunity to travel around the state and meet so many different Nebraskans.

With one in four jobs in Nebraska tied to agriculture, directly or indirectly, more and more opportunities are opening up for young people to stay in the state. And there is a growing need in the industry for a lot of different skill sets, whether it's in production agriculture or other related professions.