Amber Selman: Growing from what Grandma Marie Planted

Somewhere between the apple trees her grandmother planted and the dairy barn where five generations of her family have milked cows, Amber Selman found her answer to a question people had been asking her for years: What do you want to be when you grow up?

“I finally figured out I wanted to be… my grandma.”

For Amber, that answer is about far more than farming. It is about becoming the kind of woman her grandmother, Marie, was. Marie was a woman who cared for her family, served her community, worked hard, and quietly helped build a legacy that continues today.

Amber is a fifth-generation dairy farmer, part of a family that has farmed the same land for more than 160 years. The house where her grandmother was born still stands. The barn that her grandparents built and milked cows in since the 1950s is the same barn where her family continues to milk today. As time went on pipelines replaced cans, and the bulk tank got bigger. But very little has changed.

“I know I am doing what my dad did, and still does, honestly, and what my grandma did,” Amber says.

Her grandmother may never have called herself a farmer. Born in the 1920s, Marie lived in a time when women were not always recognized for the work they did on the farm. But she milked cows, fed pigs and goats, tended to a beautiful garden, and helped her family. Today, Amber still harvests apples from trees her grandmother planted and uses produce from the garden to stock the family’s produce stand.

The legacy is tangible. But so are the values.

Amber’s father learned resilience early. Just before her parents were married in 1983, Amber’s grandfather passed away unexpectedly, leaving her father, then just 23, to manage the farm alongside his mother. There was no succession plan. There was simply a farm that needed to keep going.

The family endured the financial hardship of the 1980s, living paycheck to paycheck and waiting six years before Amber was born because her parents weren’t sure they could make it.

That experience became part of Amber's inheritance, too.

"Okay, we're here. Whatever happened, happened. This is the situation, so how do we move forward?" she says. "How do we get to where we want to go?"

That grit and perseverance have shaped how Amber approaches farming, family, and life.

Her dairy journey eventually brought her back home with her husband, Ben, whom she met while studying dairy science at Iowa State University. After they both spent several years gaining experience away from the farm, the couple returned to Amber's family dairy six years ago. Their dream was always to dairy together, and today their partnership is woven into nearly every part of the operation.

Amber works with calves, helps milk and move cows, manages farm marketing and communications, and steps in wherever she is needed. At the same time, she and Ben are raising three children, ages 9, 7, and 5.

For Amber, family is her North Star.

Every opportunity, volunteer commitment, and business decision comes back to the same checklist of questions. Is this beneficial? Is this going to help my family, or take away time from my family? If we could only do one thing, what would it be? And, perhaps most importantly, "Have you had your fun today?" a question her mother has asked her since she was young.

These questions lead Amber toward opportunities that bring her family alongside her. One example is the produce stand she started with another local mom. What began as a random idea quickly grew into a successful venture selling produce and baked goods from their farm.

Her children help pick fruit, manage inventory, and learn about money and business.

"It was a great opportunity for my family, not only to make a little extra income, but to show my kids all of this, give them some responsibilities, and help move them into responsible adults."

But Amber is also honest about the seasons when moving forward has been difficult.

After the birth of her second child, she experienced severe postpartum depression. In the middle of winter, with a newborn and a two-year-old, she describes that time simply, “It was dark and horrible. I’m not going to lie, it was awful.”

What helped her through was asking for support. She called her mom. Friends showed up with meals and invited her to simply come sit with them.

Since then, Amber has chosen to share her experience openly through her blog Caring for Calves and Kids, and in everyday life. Women have reached out to her asking if what they are experiencing is normal, whether they will feel better and where to turn.

“Find an anchor. Something that will work for you to help you get through this, whatever that is,” she says. “I get it, I really get it, but it will be okay.”

That willingness to be honest, ask for help and support other women is part of the legacy Amber is building herself. And now, she and her family are looking toward the next chapter.

The family is preparing to build a new two-robot freestall barn. It is a significant investment, but for Amber, the purpose goes far beyond technology. One of them has to miss the children’s ball games because someone always has to be home to milk. Family weddings and funerals mean someone always has to stay behind. Their current system does not offer the flexibility they want for their family, or for the generations who may come after them.

“We don’t want [our kids] to have to choose between the farm and the family,” Amber says.

The new barn represents an opportunity to honor the past while creating room for the future. It can give Amber’s dad the chance to enter a season where he gets to choose how he spends his time after a lifetime of farming. And it can leave the door open for Amber’s children to return someday, if they choose.

Amber knows her grandmother would be amazed by the robots and technology that will soon become part of the farm. But she believes Marie would recognize something even more familiar – a family still caring for cows, working the land, raising children on the farm and finding a way forward.

As the International Year of the Woman Farmer celebrates women like Amber, her message is simple. “It is never easy,” she says. “No one has it figured out.”

And then comes the reminder she hopes every woman in agriculture will carry with her, “If you are doing anything on the farm, you are a farmer.”

For Amber, being a farmer means carrying forward what was planted by the generations before her while having the courage to grow something new.

It means Grandma Marie’s garden, her dad’s grit, her mom’s example, her children’s muddy boots, and a new barn built with the future in mind.

It means remembering where she came from and choosing, every day, where she wants to go next.

This story is part of Taking Root and Growing Legacy, a Dairy Girl Network (DGN) storytelling project celebrating the International Year of the Woman Farmer.

Amber Selman was interviewed by Laura Daniels.

This feature was written by Rebecca Pfeffer.