

TWO ACRES, TWO WOMEN, ONE FARM

By Melea Reicks Licht

Maggie Howe has found her own place in agriculture by partnering with her mother to create natural bath and body care products from the herbs grown on their two-acre farm.



Photo: John Gibney

Maggie Howe's products are a bit different from those of most Iowa farmers.

Handmade, natural bath and body care products and luxury pampering items like "magic mud" are among the offerings created from the bounty of her herb farm Praireland Herbs, near Woodward.

Howe and her mother and business partner Donna Julseth are at home with

other niche farmers in her area, as well as conventional farmers. As she says, they all strive for the same goal.

"We are taking our land and skills and using that to create a sustainable livelihood. Everyone wants to do that whether they grow sheep or corn or vegetables," Howe says. "We can learn a lot from each other."

Howe ('98 public service and administration in agricul-

ture, environmental studies), and Julseth have been growing herbs for their bath and body products for nearly 13 years on the two acres Howe grew up on.

Their products contain no synthetic colors or preservatives, and Howe says they are made with ingredients found in a typical kitchen. Olive oil, cooking oil, flour, honey, oatmeal and beeswax round out their list of ingredients. They are not certified organic, "too much paperwork," Howe says, but they buy

certified organic, fair trade and locally produced ingredients whenever possible.

Their key to success has been finding a loyal customer base online and creating products they need and want. Praireland Herbs offers difficult-to-find products like natural hair, baby and pet care that "come up high in Google search rankings" according to Howe. They do offer their products at local farmers markets, but 75-80 percent of their business is done online with orders placed from around the world.

"Since we're literally in the middle of a cornfield we always knew we couldn't rely on people walking in the door," Howe says. "We know our customers through our blog, Facebook and e-mails. We take Midwest friendliness and put it online."

Howe says working with her mom is "fantastic." Howe focuses on product development, marketing, promotion and the farm's online presence. With a background in conservation education, Julseth is especially suited for growing the herbs and dealing with customers. Julseth also teaches classes and brings in other educators to offer how-to sessions on making lip balm, natural dying, growing herbs, drying herbs and cooking with herbs, among others.

From a young age, Howe always knew she'd be her own boss. And she has used her education and inherent can-do spirit to find her own place in agriculture.

"There's many different reasons women come to niche agriculture today, but to succeed they have to believe in themselves and partner and trust others in their agriculture network," Howe says.

Value-added and niche enterprises seem to hold special opportunities for women entrepreneurs. Howe has seen it first hand. ■