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Makamson Farms

Karen Edwards and her father, Garry Makamson, farm in Leflore County, Miss. They are working together to transition Garry's operation to Karen, who will continue the farming legacy. Read their story on Pages 14 and 15.



Makamsons transitioning farm to next generation

BY BRAD ROBB

Farm Press Editorial Staff
brad.robbs@farmprogress.com

SINCE 1918, THERE have been three generations of Makamsons growing cotton around Morgan City, Miss. Garry Makamson has managed his 5,000-acre operation for the last 42 years, but he is starting to see his retirement sun setting across the Delta horizon. “My grandfather moved his family from Sturgis, Miss., to this area when my father was eight years old,” says Makamson. “They were in search of new financial opportunities.”

Makamson’s father and grandfather were sharecroppers. When the Great Depression hit, Garry’s father, Loyce, began supplementing his sharecropping income through the use of his keen hunting and fishing skills.

“Dad would sell animal meat, furs, and fish to bring in extra money that helped support his family. Those were difficult times,” remembers Makamson. “Dad passed away in 1983, the same year Karen was born. After my mother’s death in 1990, the estate was settled and the land was split among all the siblings.”

Garry looks back with amazement at everything his father accomplished and how he gave each of his children an opportunity to farm.

When Garry and his wife of 43 years, Connie, had their daughter Karen, they eventually realized the farm and farming were the last things on her mind. “Karen



Though not out of the farming picture yet, Garry Makamson is beginning to take a more background role in certain aspects of his farming operation as Karen positions herself to assume control at some point in the future.

was a girl’s girl. She loved clothes, make-up, getting primped up and looking pretty,” remembers Makamson. “Although she didn’t mind doing her chores or working, she never showed a real interest in learning to farm.”

Garry made her cut the yard and do some spot spraying periodically, but Karen couldn’t wait to get back inside and make purses, or mix and match her outfits. “I graduated from Mississippi State University with a degree in fashion design in 2006,” says Karen. “I also earned a degree in cosmetology in Dallas, Texas, mar-

ried Stephen Edwards in 2007, and cut hair for a while.”

Karen moved from Dallas to Colorado where her husband worked as an attorney. Her brother, Steven, worked on the farm for three of the years Karen was gone, did a little farming on his own, but his love for coaching and the ministry pulled him away as well.

While in Colorado, Karen became a mother to her first child, McKenzie. The two would fly back to the farm every few months, and Karen would always get a comforting feeling when she rounded the

curve of the blacktop road as the house where she grew up came into view. “I just felt like I was home. It was a good feeling,” she remembers. “After being away from the farm for eight years, I realized farming wasn’t in my future – or so I thought.”

She knew Garry was nearing his golden years and could not keep farming forever. The culmination of those thoughts and the impending reality of her father’s farming career ending sent chills through Karen because she had long recognized his passion for it. One day she approached him about her returning to farm and eventually taking over the operation. “It was scary, but my father and I have always been like-minded,” says Karen. “He told me to let’s give it a try.”

Garry had been a member of Family Farms Group for a few years. The member-owned network of agricultural experts, family farm operators and suppliers was founded to provide a variety of support services including helping to preserve family farms across the country.

Helping family farming operations through generational transition periods is another service they offer. From expertise and support in multiple farm business categories and farm-related training, to connecting with peer farm operators across the country, Family Farms Group gave Garry and Karen the direction they did not realize they needed or that was available.

“I was completely blown away after Dad asked Stephen and me to attend one of their meetings,” says Karen. “I never

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knew so many women were so intricately involved in farming across the country, and I don't mean just in accounting or secretarial positions."

RECOGNITION AND INSIGHT

Being cooped up in a small office staring at ledgers or answering phone calls was the last thing Karen wanted. When Family Farm Group liaison Kyle Morgan visited Garry Makamson Farms one day, he posed several farm-related problem scenarios to Karen, allowing her to offer solutions. He was immediately impressed by her recognition and insight into the business side of farming.

Garry had a difficult time accepting the changes that were desperately needed to move the operation to the next level. "I initially balked at having an outsider come in and tell me I had to run my operation differently," says Makamson. "Karen was bringing to the table expertise in establishing and tracking employee goals and responsibilities. We had people working for us that just wanted to do enough to get by and get a paycheck," remembers Garry. "That had to change."

One employee wanted to make more money, so they gave him more responsibility. Goals were established he had to meet and at the end of the year, they brought him in, conducted his performance review, and showed him where he fell short. "It was difficult to let him go, but when we showed him on paper where he shrugged off his responsibilities, he understood completely," says Karen. "I didn't want to get a reputation around town of being a cold-hearted person undeserving of respect, so we were transparent with our new style of farm management."

A new course was charted for Makamson Farms. Everyone had a charge and was ranked on their performance. Attendance was tracked and some performance factors were tied to cash incentives.

The Family Farms Group advice and input formalized a new direction. Even before Karen came back to the farm, Garry was changing the long-established mom and pop way of doing things. "I just sped up that process," says Karen.

NEW DAY

Two years ago some land became available. The father/daughter duo bid on it and got it. They farmed the land separately, but all bookkeeping was consolidated. The next year Garry made Karen track her own expenses. "It was just a natural step in the sequential order of change," says Garry.

Seeing money flying out of her bank

account was an eye-opening experience for Karen. "It was shocking to see the specific costs involved with my operation. It really made me appreciate what dad had been doing for over 40 years," adds Karen.

She does not currently see herself living on the farm permanently. The agreement made between the father and daughter farming team seems to be working. It allows her to drive from Jackson, Miss., twice a week where she lives with her husband and two children.

Many aspects of today's business environment have become so electronic that many owners successfully monitor operations remotely once their team is in place. "I have a good relationship with our staff. They've even told Dad, they wish I were here more often," says Karen. "At least when I leave, they don't say, 'Thank God, she's gone!'"

Five or so years down the road Garry will transfer more aspects of the farm to Karen and become comfortable enough

to focus on retirement. "If there's a farmer in my shoes reading this story, they'd better contact their accountant and work out a financial plan," says Garry.

"This is a process that must be conducted carefully over time, or taxes will eat your lunch."

He doesn't know what it will take to get those mental scissors in his head to sever the ties with the farm, but Garry Makamson likes the way that retirement sun is starting to warm his face.

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