



Farmer Nikki and her GIANT celery!

FARMER SPOTLIGHT: NIKKI JOHANSON, *PHEASANT FIELDS FARM*

You may know Nikki Johanson in many roles, most notably perhaps as the owner of Pheasant Fields Farm in Silverdale—home of the famous Corn Maze, Pumpkin Patch, Wild Woods, and Farm Camp. For years, she has welcomed elementary students to her farm for field trips, fellow farmers for classes and workshops, and community members during the Harvest season and Annual Kitsap Farm Tour. A generational farmer on Clear Creek Road, Nikki is truly a Kitsap legend.

She is also a founding member of the KCAA and the Poulsbo Farmers Market, a former Board Member of the Kitsap Conservation District, Kitsap County's 2016 Farmer of the Year, and a pioneer of Agritourism in our community.

Today, Nikki serves as an Advisor to the KCAA Board of Directors, offering guidance and perspective shaped by decades of hands-on farming and advocacy. We are deeply grateful for her dedication to both KCAA and agriculture in our community!

We recently caught up with Nikki to share a glimpse into her farm's history, and to gather some hard-earned wisdom for fellow farmers. KCAA Vice President Karissa Holcombe—who has counted Nikki as a farming mentor for many years—asked the questions, and we hope you enjoy her thoughtful answers.

Nikki - you've lived in Kitsap County your whole life. Where did you live before your family moved onto the farm? I was born in the city of Bremerton in November 1941, and had just entered the 2nd grade in 1948 at Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic School when my parents bought the farm in Silverdale.

What is your earliest memory of the farm? My father first brought me to the farm in the fall of 1948, during an early cold spell, to check whether the house pipes had frozen or broken. The snow was so deep that we had to park up on Clear Creek Road, and my father carried me down from the highway because I couldn't walk in it. We officially moved to the farm in January 1949, after the snow had melted. I had just turned 7 years old.

What are some of your favorite memories of growing up on a farm? We often invited friends from Bremerton out to the farm, and one of our favorite adventures was skinny dipping in Clear Creek on the neighboring Levin farm (present-day Petersen farm). On our own land, we discovered an old buckboard wagon and pushed it up the long driveway, then rode it down the hill. It's a wonder none of us were seriously hurt!

I remember the harsh winters, with deep snow and power outages that sometimes lasted two weeks. On those cold mornings, my father and brother would get up early and haul water from Keyport's Wally's Service Station to the chicken houses—laying hens can't survive without water or they will molt. Because of those winters, my father installed a 10-kilowatt gas-powered generator in the early 1950s.

My father and his brothers spent countless hours repairing the farm's outbuildings, while our three cousins played alongside my brother and me. We had purchased the farm from the Cloud family, and by the time we moved in, it had fallen into serious disrepair. Mr. Cloud had heart problems and was bedridden, and one of the long chicken houses had partially collapsed when heavy snow broke its foundation. It took a tremendous amount of work to get the farm back into operating condition.

Right - A view of the Johanson family's farmhouse, originally built in 1929 by Conrad and Olga Peterson as a kit home from Sears & Roebuck.



Farming is a family affair—what roles did you, your parents and brother play in the work of the farm?

That's a funny question, because I quickly invented a job all my own: naming every pullet when we moved them from the brooder house to the laying houses! We worked at night, just after dark, when the pullets were settled on the roost. My father ran the beak trimmer, my mother handled vaccinations, and I was the chicken catcher and de-wormer—I simply pushed a big pill down their throats.

We processed two or three loads of pullets each night, about one hundred pullets at a time, placing each one into a cage after processing. Then we hauled the cages up to the laying houses on "Junior," our old 1936 Ford flatbed truck. Those were long nights, especially since we raised close to 1,000 birds at a time—back when baby white Leghorns cost 30 cents apiece and feed was just three cents a pound.

My first official job on the farm was helping my father nail the floors back down while preparing the laying houses for new pullets. That's how I learned to drive nails and picked up so many practical skills along the way. We'd also make trips in our big International box truck to Discovery Bay to haul wood shavings for litter on the chicken house floors.



Laying hens and Muscovy ducks in the farm's last remaining original chicken house - affectionally called the "August House"

What was it like to grow up on a bustling egg ranch? Any funny or unforgettable chicken stories? In the early days, our chickens were on open range, and without high fencing they laid eggs all over the farm! That, unfortunately, encouraged the skunk population to grow out of control. My father and his friends would go "skunk hunting" at night. Mostly, they drank beer—and I never remember seeing any dead skunks in the morning!

We definitely learned—and earned—a strong work ethic. There was never a dull moment on a working farm, and we learned early that you never quit a farm job until the animals were taken care of first.

Your family's farm has changed a lot over the decades. What inspired you to introduce hogs and cattle in the late 1970s? When I came home fresh out of college in 1965, our farm was struggling. My parents purchased some bad feed. I took five hens to the Western WA Experimental Station in Puyallup, where they were found to be healthy, and was advised to have the feed tested. The results from Louck's Testing Lab in Seattle showed the feed was "unpalatable" and contaminated. My parents eventually received a settlement from the feed company, but it didn't cover the damage to the chickens, which cost them thousands of dollars—and that was just the first of three feed

companies we had problems with! Those experiences taught me two important lessons: hire a lawyer when you think you'll need one, and never put all your eggs in one basket. That's what led me to diversify the farm by raising hogs and calves—and to be cautious about trusting feed companies. It's also why many large poultry operations eventually developed their own feed businesses. When egg production is your livelihood, you need absolute consistency in feed supply, and that's something you can't always count on from a single feed company.

What crop or animal has been the most fun to raise? Small piglets and goats! They are such a joy to watch.

You and your husband, Allen, inherited the farm in 1987.

What were those early years like as you built the next chapter of the farm together? In those early years, my focus was on my family—Allen and our two daughters, Jennifer and Jeanine. Along with managing the Clear Creek farm, we grew our cattle business at our two additional farms in Poulsbo and Kingston. Raising my children taught me a lot about learning challenges and hyperactivity, and I became an advocate for the Learning Disabilities Association of Washington. I didn't return to farming vegetables for resale at Silverdale until the late 90s.



A growing corn maze at sunset - Pheasant Fields Farm

(Nikki, cont.)

Are there particular farming skills or lessons you learned directly from your parents that you still use today? The biggest lesson I learned from my parents was a strong work ethic. You're not a "sissy" when you farm! You learn to handle almost everything yourself because you often can't afford to hire it out. You become a part-time vet, electrician, carpenter, plumber, accountant—and sometimes even a psychologist. You need to know how to castrate, dehorn, worm, vaccinate, delouse, and more—but also when to call a real veterinarian. Farming teaches you to be self-sufficient—and to learn very fast!



Nikki, on her family's Massey Ferguson tractor, smoothing out fields before planting her annual corn maze.

You attended WSU, and then came back to take on your family's farm. Did you always want to be a farmer? When looking back, I believe I made the right choice. I have no regrets. I could have been financially better off if I wasn't farming, but looking back, that isn't my nature.

Pheasant Fields Farm is known in the community for its corn maze, pumpkin patch, and historically - Wild Woods during the harvest season. What's your favorite part of the agritourism experience? I love seeing children and adults come to the farm, explore the animals, and take part in tours. It's especially fun to see the adults acting like children! I got into farm tours in the late 1990s. I had a storyteller, Kristen Nelson, sit on hay bales while preschoolers sat in a circle and

played with sticks in the dirt! Their parents were standing behind them—completely engrossed in the story! I thought, *"There's a real market for this!"* That moment was a major inspiration for my agritourism work. Some of the hardest moments, though, are seeing adults glued to their phones during tours—it's tough to witness when they're missing the experience.

Can you share what first motivated you to get involved with local government in advocating for farmers?

In 1992, county officials declared that agriculture no longer existed here in Kitsap County, and that no land qualified for agricultural zoning (Kitsap is the only county in the state without any ag zoning!) I was shocked that this happened without any public notice and saw it as a signal that the county was being handed over to developers. By 1999, I had the time to get involved and began advocating for local farmers.

What accomplishment in your agricultural career are you most proud of? I'm proud to have helped form KCAA in 2005 and been part of the group that started the Poulsbo Farmers Market. I've also worked to encourage agritourism in Kitsap County—though many farmers had already been hosting events on their farms and were the true pioneers. Offering a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) is agritourism at its finest! For me, it was about creating experiences for families, which is why I started the corn maze—just for fun and to bring people to the farm.

What legacy do you hope Pheasant Fields Farm will carry forward for the next generation? I hope to sell the farm to a family who will continue providing local food and embrace agritourism. My farming days are over for health reasons, and selling to a developer is the last thing I want. I'm waiting for the right buyer to come along.

Finally, do you have any advice for younger farmers in Kitsap County, or anyone who is wanting to get started? First, work for at least one full season on a productive farm—if that's difficult because of insurance or employment, try an internship. Then, try another farm for a different perspective before deciding what you want to do on your own. Farming requires a lot of work, so start small when you go out on your own. You don't want to take on more than you can handle. On the other hand, you may find the total joy of farming life that you always wanted to be a part of!

Thank you, Nikki!