



Tara Barrett-Duzan consults the combine operator's manual ahead of harvest.

From Tragedy to Legacy

Farmer's daughter urges others to plan for the unexpected.

As a local television news anchor, Tara Barrett-Duzan was building a successful career sharing stories of both tragedy and triumph. Becoming a full-time farmer wasn't in the career plan—until tragedy struck and life deviated from the script.

A 90-minute documentary film released earlier this year called “The Farmer's Daughter” digs into the roots of her determination to keep the Hume, Illinois, farm in the family after the passing of her brother and father.

Her story of trading the news desk for a tractor seat is one of resilience. But, Barrett-Duzan will be the first to say that it is also a cautionary tale about the need to talk about the “what-ifs” and plan for the unthinkable.

“Tomorrow isn't promised. ‘Do it today’ is something many of us say, but we tend to avoid the planning to deal with the day-to-day,” Barrett-Duzan says. “There's no way to remove all the drama of those emotional moments, but it sure would have helped if we had talked more about the future.”

> TIME TO TALK

The story begins in 2009 when her brother, Cory Barrett, died in a motorcycle accident on the very day he was scheduled to begin farming full time. In 2011, her father, Ron Barrett, surprised his daughter by asking if she'd consider coming back to join the farm operation. The opportunity meant more time with family and a way to juggle new motherhood.

“I grew up on the farm and thought I knew what it meant to be a farmer. And, I worked hard during

the first years after coming home, but I was still mostly a helper,” she says. “Dad kept suggesting I needed to learn some of the deeper aspects of the business. I kept waiving him off and saying we had plenty of time for that. But we didn’t.”

In 2018, Ron was diagnosed with cancer and was gone within six months.

“I remember being at the hospital during some of his last days and trying to fill in a few of the business details. Fortunately, Dad was meticulous about his recordkeeping,” Barrett-Duzan says.

“I have often thought back to times when he said he was heading into the office, and I joked about him ‘not working,’” she recalls. “Turns out he was doing the most important job on the farm.”

➤ BUILD A RED FILE

Ethan Smith, a farm family business adviser with Pinion, says many families overlook a powerful planning tool he calls the “red file.” This curated collection of essential documents is designed to help guide family or business partners through the process of settling affairs.

“It’s not just about documents, passwords or wishes. It’s about providing clarity and reducing stress. It’s about making sure business and legacy wishes are honored,” Smith says.

This information could include unique documents and instructions that reflect the business, such as a copy of a will or trust documents, buy-sell agreements, succession plans, insurance information, account numbers, lists of assets (land, equipment, business holdings), passwords and personal notes or letters to family members.

Barrett-Duzan found her father’s list of trusted people vital. “I leaned into those people, especially in those early days,” she explains. “Still, there are so many details he took with him that never made it into writing.”

➤ LEARNING THE ROPES

Questions about what would happen to the farm came as early as her father’s visitation. She was on the phone the following day informing three bank managers that she intended to continue farming the 1,400-acre



□ *Cory and Ron Barrett's graves (above) are adjacent to a field that Barrett-Duzan still farms today. Tara (below) greases the combine ahead of harvest.*

enterprise. The family owns 80 acres, but the remaining is cash rented or leased.

Returning home wasn’t an obligation as much as a resolve. “My son wants to farm like his grandfather. I’d like to give him that chance,” she says.

Barrett-Duzan called on Stephanie Bowyer, at ADM Grain, in Hume, to help her understand the basics of grain marketing. “Tara is unique because she isn’t afraid to ask questions and to study to learn what she needs to know,” Bowyer says.

Nutrien Ag Solutions crop consultant Matt Morris helps Barrett-Duzan work through the agronomic side of the business. ➤



“Tara is always intent on learning the chemistry and ‘why’ behind what we are doing,” Morris says. “She’s done a good job of keeping the foundation of what she learned from her dad, but she’s not stuck in the rut of always following that.”

Journalistic tendencies to probe for answers run deep, Barrett-Duzan agrees. “I may be the only one ever to read a John Deere combine manual,” she says.

“But, I’ve also benefited from people like my mom who believed in me. I watched her go back to school at age 40 to become a nurse. She showed me what is possible if you want it bad enough,” she adds.

Her husband, Jared Duzan, came back to farm full time in recent years. However, this fall, the farm encountered another setback when a 320-acre parcel that had been farmed by the family for nearly five decades was sold and leased to another farmer.

“We love this land, even if it isn’t ours. It hurts to think we won’t be farming it again,” Barrett-Duzan says. “But, in the back of my mind, I can hear Dad telling me to put my head down and figure it out.”



Jared and Tara Duzan (above) carry on the family’s farming legacy along with their children, Colton and Callie. Tara (below) tends to farm paperwork. Her office chair was fashioned from the seat of her father’s combine.

> TIPS FOR SURVIVAL

The amount of paperwork, phone calls and changes that come with a quick transition of a business is enormous, she notes.

“Having a plan in place doesn’t take away the work, but it will help you feel more confident about what to do and how to do it. That’s especially true if you are also dealing with grief,” Barrett-Duzan observes.

She encourages young farmers to learn about all daily farm operations, not just those in the field. Get exposure to crop insurance, grain marketing and seed selection, and meet the people such as landowners, farm managers, accountants and input suppliers.

That requires elders to give the younger generation an opportunity to learn and have skin in the game, she adds.

“Have the conversations. Take notes on what the hopes are for the future and talk about contingencies if things don’t go as planned,” Barrett-Duzan says. ///

Editor’s Note: “The Farmer’s Daughter” documentary, directed by Scot England, is available to rent or purchase from Amazon Prime Video and free on Tubi TV (<https://tubitv.com/movies/100043576/the-farmer-s-daughter>)

