

Ag Math, Ag English,

She once turned her nose up at the smell of manure; now, this city girl advocates for agriculture, saying farmers and overalls are no longer synonymous.

by **Paige Nelson**, field editor

Not your average farmer's wife. In love with Jesus and life. Humor + coffee are nonnegotiable," reads Lauren Arbogast's www.paininthetownag.com blog. Arbogast invites her readers to "Come on in and meet the farmer's wife," a title the former city girl now proudly touts.

Arbogast; husband Brian; and sons Branson, 5, and Jackson, 4, work to manage a 380-head commercial Angus operation and a flock of 900,000 broiler chickens.

The Harrisonburg, Va., farmwife is one of five recipients of the 2014 National Agriculture in the Classroom National Excellence Award and is also the 2014 Virginia Agriculture in the Classroom Teacher of the Year.

Arbogast is currently in her first year as Farm to Table Coordinator for the Virginia Cooperative Extension in the Northern



PHOTOS BY LAUREN ARBOGAST

► Lauren Arbogast used signs and other methods to set Farm Fridays apart from other school days.

District Office. Although she absolutely loved teaching and taught for seven years, Arbogast says she felt a calling from God saying there was something else in agriculture for her. In her new position, Arbogast is even better positioned to extend agriculture's influence to the people in her area.

"It's allowed me to work with multitudes

of schools instead of just the one where I was teaching," she says.

Arbogast sees a disconnect between today's consumers and modern agriculture, and as a former novice to ag, she connects with the disconnected.

"If you would have asked me as a teenager or as a young adult to describe a farmer, I



► One Farm Friday, Arbogast used live props to teach her students the difference between farm and city pets.



Ag Social Studies



► My American Farm bags, stuffed and ready for teachers and students at the 2014 Farming in the City event.

probably would have said, 'a white male who wears overalls and drives a tractor,' but it's so important to me to be able to show people that that is not a modern-day farmer. There are men and women and minorities, people from all walks of life that farm with one acre and they farm with hundreds of thousands of acres. There's just so many facets of

agriculture; you really can't say 'overall, that's a farmer right there,'" Arbogast laughs.

Arbogast says her first-date tractor ride and now her role as wife of a "modern-day" farmer gave her a light-bulb moment about agriculture.

"As a teacher, I started thinking curriculum and bringing ag into the school and into the classroom, and that's really when agriculture took off for me," she explains.

Surpassing the standards

Common knowledge of food and food process is really lacking, Arbogast believes, so she carefully integrated agriculture into her special-education preschool class.

"We have this curriculum. We've got certain guidelines. We've got standards, but there are so many ways that agriculture ties into the curriculum. If you're counting, well, let's count with cows. Let's use something that represents agriculture," she says. "Then, when the kids ask questions about it, use that as a tangent into a lesson or as an interest into making another lesson that's relevant to the standards but involves agriculture."

Tying beef production into third-grade science is not always an easy task, especially

► **Left:** After about two months of farmed-up Friday activities, other teachers wanted in on the fun.



► Arbogast, husband Brian and their sons manage a 380-head commercial Angus operation and a flock of 900,000 broiler chickens.



for teachers trying to meet certain preset standards for their classes. Being in the teaching system for seven years, Arbogast knows adding extras isn't easy.

"Teaching is hard, especially when you get into the upper grades. It's just crazy the amount of pressure that the teachers are under. So you say, 'Hey, I've got this agriculture lesson,' and they look at you like you've got three heads. But, when you can explain to them that it covers this standard and this standard, it ties directly in with this curriculum or this part of the pacing guide, little things like that can get your foot in the door for agriculture," she explains.

How it's done

In 2013 Arbogast borrowed an idea from another teacher, who, like Arbogast, was bent on bringing ag into her classroom. Through email correspondence and her own bright ideas, Arbogast founded "Farm Fridays."

"Before Farm Fridays it was just working ag into a four-week farm theme, which is great, but it wasn't a continuum," she explains. "I started thinking about how I could make agriculture relevant to every theme that we were doing in preschool and

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also tying it into the standards. That's where Farm Fridays were born."

Like any good teacher, Arbogast equipped herself with a visual map of ways her pacing-guide themes could be intertwined with fun agriculture facts. She also reached out to the community for support from experts in the field.

"I don't claim to be an expert on ponds and rivers," she states, "but I know people who are, so I was able to bring in the Department of Game and Fisheries expert. The dairy princess came when we were talking about dairy farm production. My little girls' faces when the dairy princess entered the room with her tiara were just amazing."

Farm Fridays were made even more special with the little details added by Arbogast. She displayed posters advertising the day. She set out toys and manipulatives relating to agriculture. She brought out farm books from the library. School-wide emails circulated announcing the focus of future Farm Fridays.

After about two months of farmed-up Friday activities, other teachers wanted in on the fun.

"Throughout the year, we partnered at least once with every grade for cross-grade-level lessons. It was amazing," she shares, adding that the days with the fourth-grade class provided a big-brother, big-sister opportunity. "They were doing the lesson together. The fourth graders were helping the preschoolers."

For Arbogast, even more important than the kids' excitement was getting the staff and teachers excited. She saw a transformation in her coworkers and began to see them take stock in what she was doing for her students.

Farming in the city

Farm Fridays were fun, but Arbogast wanted a culmination event for the school. She wanted to bring a farm field trip to the students. In 2012, with full support from administration, Arbogast rounded up Patti Studwell, the school's instructional coach, and began planning "a hands-on field-trip experience connected to the standards test" for H.W. Keister Elementary.

"Because of standards and curriculum and the way that things are, I wanted something



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that the teachers knew they could use within their lessons, within reports, demonstrating how they were teaching certain subjects and certain standards," she explains.

The two "Farming in the City" organizers went to work compiling grade-level standards, writing grants, petitioning community ag businesses and commodity groups, presenting at faculty meetings and planning a first-ever experience for their students.

April 2013 saw the event take place. Ten booths in total made up the event. Approximately 700-800 students attended, along with staff, teachers and excited parents. Adding an extra highlight to the event, local food was available.

"We were able to offer a mostly local lunch with direct ties back to farmers that were actually at the event," shares Arbogast. "For example, the lettuce that was on the hamburgers and in the salad was sourced from the farmer that was nearby who grows hydroponic lettuce all year round. The kids were really able to make the connection about the logistics of agriculture."

Thanks to grant money from the district education foundation and Virginia Council on Economic Education, teachers and children were given a goodie bag with materials for the classroom, but also stuff to take home, Arbogast says.

An even bigger Farming in the City event happened in 2014, with 17 interactive booths and sponsorship from *My American Farm*, a program funded through the American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture that teaches agricultural literacy through interactive computer games. Farming in the City was one of five nationwide events selected by *My American Farm* in 2014. At the *My American Farm* booth, students had 15 minutes in the computer lab with Angela Mayfield, education director for the American Farm Bureau Foundation, playing the games.

"The students were able to sit and experience the game. The teachers were able to hear how these games were appropriate for their kids. We received a lot of really good feedback on that," says Arbogast.

"Both years I made it a point to just wander around and listen to the expressions from the kids, and that, literally, was the most rewarding for me out of everything," she adds.

Farming feedback

Harrisonburg's population is extremely diverse. Arbogast describes a class of 18 preschoolers consisting of 13-17 students who do not speak English or use English as their second language. Parent/teacher conferences were a bit tricky. Yet, once again, Arbogast cleverly used her students' differences to teach agriculture.

"The parents that I could communicate with, either through English or through an interpreter, because of Farm Fridays, would tell me stories about farming in their home country. We actually used that to play into a geography lesson — talking to the kids about what country they came from, and what farming looks like in that country."

Farming in the City brought its own channel of feedback.

"The first year people were really skeptical, and that's ok. The same day and the day after our first Farming in the City, the teachers were like, 'That was amazing! When is it next year? What are we doing next year?'"

“Any city parents that were there were saying, ‘This is awesome!’ But actually, a lot of them would say, ‘I remember growing up on my grandpa’s farm, or I remember working in the garden with my grandma.’”

Arbogast used those moments of recollection as a segue into deeper conversation with the parents.

“If they said, ‘I remember doing this on my grandpa’s farm,’ I would say, ‘Where is your grandpa’s farm now? What’s happened with it? Is it still in production? Is it covered in houses?’”

Currently, Arbogast has four more events similar to Farming in the City planned for the spring.

“I’m constantly amazed that it has caught on and is now spreading to other schools,” she says.

Extending her reach

Arbogast doesn’t consider herself the reason for the agriculture enthusiasm explosion in Harrisonburg, but some others might.

She started her blog in 2013 as just one more outlet for agriculture because she never stops spreading the good news of ag.

“I started the blog just as a step to be able

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— *Lauren Arbogast*

to put resources out there that other people could use practically in their classrooms or with their kids,” she explains.

Real-life farm stories about her kids, her husband and her extended family are a large part of her blog, as well. She uses the farm stories, she says, to “show people that we’re not some oddball, overall-wearing people. We’re people just like everyone else, we just happen to be 2% of the population.”

All the hard blogging work, the event planning and the lesson planning is paying

off. One day Arbogast was in a store with her two sons.

“This lady at the other end of the toy aisle kept staring at me,” Arbogast laughs. “Finally I just smiled at her and said, ‘Hello.’”

“The lady asked, ‘Are you that girl with the blog? Are you the one that was a teacher?’”

“She runs a preschool daycare out of her home. She told me, ‘I want to tell you how much you inspired me to do a farm theme for my preschool, and it was amazing.’”

“What excites me then,” says Arbogast, “are her students and those students that I’m working with around the region that are then going to take that ag knowledge into their homes and into their personal circles.”

“They will have a hand in teaching their parents and people in my generation,” she adds.

Arbogast’s passion for agriculture helped her dream of spreading the word and using education to promote the industry that supports her family. Her dream is reality in Harrisonburg, Va.



Editor’s Note: *Paige Nelson is a freelance writer from Rigby, Idaho.*