

LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

2022 Q4



Women of Impact

Jill Elmers

by Anne Brockhoff,
photo by Steven Hertzog

A woman with glasses and a white sweatshirt is smiling and holding a red tool. She is standing in a greenhouse. The background shows the structure of the greenhouse and some plants. The text 'Certified organic' is visible on her sweatshirt.

Certified
organic

**Jill Elmers,
Common
Harvest CSA,
is shaping
the local food
system with a
focus on putting
sustainably
grown local
foods on
the plates of
Douglas County
residents.**

Farming, in the collective imagination, is a solitary enterprise. Farming, in Jill Elmers' world, is anything but.

To be sure, Elmers spends plenty of hours working solo on her Moon on the Meadow operation east of Lawrence, near the Lawrence/Douglas County line. But she approaches farming with a spirit of cooperation that prioritizes engagement with producers, organizations, civic and governmental leaders, and others throughout the community.

"I consider myself part of the food system, and that system is made up from all different kinds of people," Elmers says. "I'm always more interested in collaborative work than in doing something on my own. We can move mountains when we work together."

Not that it's easy. Farming is notoriously grueling, and produce growers such as Elmers have little time during the season for anything other than planting, managing, harvesting and marketing their crops. That Elmers has through the years carved out time to serve on numerous organizational and advisory boards, and participated in countless food-policy discussions—all with an eye toward putting more sustainably grown local food on Douglas County plates—is impressive, Kevin Prather says.

"The day-to-day operations (of farming) are pretty all-encompassing," says Prather, who with his wife, Jessi Asmussen, owns Mellowfields Farm, in Lawrence, and is one of Elmers' business partners. "But she still makes time for all these other aspects."

From Bucket List to Dream Job

Elmers is originally from St. Louis, and she considers herself a Midwesterner at heart even though her family moved to Dallas when she was a grade-schooler. She earned an electrical engineering degree from Valparaiso University, in Indiana, then worked in Chicago before a newspaper ad for an acoustical design company drew her to Kansas City. She then moved to Lawrence. Elmers didn't have an agricultural background, but self-sufficiency had always appealed to her. When she had the chance to take a sabbatical, she decided to check "organic farming" off her bucket list by spending a summer working for Mark Lumpe on his Wakarusa Valley Farm, south of Lawrence.

Elmers was hooked. She accepted Lumpe's offer to continue farming a small parcel of his land and, in 2000, launched Moon on the Meadow. She bought 3½ acres in 2006; a year later, she started a CSA (community-supported agriculture) group. In 2013, she flipped her career to farm full time and do audio-visual design consulting on the side.

"I love growing food, and I love the community around the food system," Elmers says. "It's like having your dream job. I wake up most mornings feeling very happy."

Elmers grows certified organic flowers, tomatoes, beets, greens, potatoes, asparagus, strawberries, cauliflower, peppers, garlic, fennel, ginger and more. Some is planted in open plots; she also has four large high tunnels (unheated, plastic-covered structures sometimes called hoop houses) and seven smaller ones to extend the season and help control for the unpredictable weather that climate change has brought about. Elmers sells much of her harvest at the Lawrence Farmers' Market, where she has been a vendor for 21 years and now chairs its board of directors.

From that vantage point, Elmers sees how the pandemic and rising inflation affect both producers and consumers. The first sparked increased demand for local food. To meet it, the market has been "recruiting vendors like crazy" and is considering the possibility of a permanent location, she says. The second has some locals relying more regularly on the area's farms for fresh produce.

"This is the first year ever in my life when people come to the market and say, 'This is the cheapest place to buy food,'" says Elmers, who also offers delivery of online orders within Lawrence city limits. "If we can figure out how to keep (food purchases) here, we're all going to be better off."

The Power of 'We'

We. It's a word Elmers uses a lot when describing her operation, especially when outlining the contributions made by her five seasonal employees. Those workers are often, in fact, apprentices, some of whom she met through the Growing Growers KC program, which connects beginning farmers with established sustainable operations.

"In the farming world, it feels like there's a lot of competition, and I don't understand that," Elmers says. "If I know how to do something, why am I not teaching everyone else? Why are they not teaching me?"

That many of her apprentices have gone on to grow similar products and sell them in the same venues as Moon on the Meadow might worry some people. Not Elmers.

She knows that "people in this area eat way more fruits and vegetables than local producers can grow," says Tom Buller, who is executive director of the Kansas Rural Center (KRC). "She's not interested in eliminating the competition but in growing the pie for everybody so we have a bigger local food system."

He would know. Buller and his wife, Jenny, own Buller Family Farm, in Lawrence, and was one of Elmers' early apprentices. They became partners when Elmers and the Bullers together purchased 28 acres of land in 2010, enabling both farms to expand. As Elmers' CSA grew, she diversified its offerings by joining forces with the Bullers and Red Tractor Farm, which was owned by Jessica Pierson (also a former apprentice) and Jen Humphrey.

Those three farms, together with Juniper Hill Farms, launched the Common Harvest CSA and soon added Mellowfields Farm to its list of suppliers. The CSA is still in operation today, although it has evolved. The Bullers now sell all their produce wholesale instead of marketing direct-to-consumer. Pierson and Humphrey are still homesteading on their farm but no longer sell food retail. Juniper Hill has expanded its own retail and wholesale operations, and added on-farm pizza nights and chef's dinners.

Mellowfields, which grows certified organic produce on the eastern edge of Lawrence, remains Elmers' Common Harvest CSA partner. The 24-week CSA grew to 125 shares in 2022 and offers "add-ons" from Sweetlove Farm, 1900 Barker, Wild Alive Ferments, South Baldwin Farms, Stirring Soil Farm and Crooked Bar N Ranch. That Elmers has long worked with so many other businesses should come as no surprise, Mellowfields' Prather says.

"Jill has found (collaboration) to really be an important part of how she proceeds generally in life," he says.

Food System Advocacy

Nowhere is that more true than in Elmers' advocacy for a robust local food system that supports food production, processing, distribution, safety, waste disposal, nutrition and equity. Lawrence and Douglas County are unique in that they joined forces to address all those issues more than a decade ago by forming the Douglas County Food Policy Council (DCFPC), making it the first such entity in the state.

"There is such a wide representation of the food system," Elmers says of the DCFPC, which was established by the Douglas County Board of Commissioners in 2010 and became a joint city-county advisory body in 2013. "People in food sales, restaurant people, farmers, nutritionists, people who work to end food insecurity—it's a real mix."

Elmers was an agricultural producer appointee on the council from 2012 to 2017 and served as chair for two of those years. A main priority at the time: creating a countywide food system plan using both hard data and community input. The result: a 10-year plan that was adopted by both the Douglas County Board of Commissioners and Lawrence City Commission in 2017, and addresses everything from the economic vitality of farming and food access to soil and water quality and food-waste reduction.

"Convincing everyone it was really important to have food-system coordination within our county—that was pretty big," Elmers says.

She worked closely with the food-waste committee, helping to figure out how to collect unsold produce and share it with food pantries. That work spurred formation of Community Organized Gleaners (COG), which in 2020 collected and distributed 2,644 pounds of food from four Lawrence-area farms.

COG in 2021 joined forces with the Lawrence-Douglas County Sustainability Office and After the Harvest, a Kansas City, Missouri-based produce rescue nonprofit, to recover 17,656 pounds of food. A Community Composting and Food Waste grant from the USDA Office of Urban Agriculture financed much of that work, and other partners included the DCFPC, Just Food, The Sunrise Project, Lawrence Community Shelter, University of Kansas Center for Environmental Policy—and Elmers' Moon on the Meadow.

"Through her leadership, (Elmers) engaged on a remarkable level with all aspects of the food system," Elizabeth Keever says of working with Elmers on the DCFPC. Keever was, at the time, executive director of Just Food and a fellow DCFPC member; she is now chief development officer at Heartland Community Health Center.

And Elmers didn't stop there. She and others on the DCFPC worked with city-planning staff to craft an Urban Ag text amendment that better defined urban farms, streamlined the special-use permit process for them and cleared the way for commercial production of crops and some livestock, and on-site sales of unprocessed agricultural products within city limits. The Lawrence City Commission approved that updated language in 2016.

Elmers is also a founding member of The Kansas City Food Hub, a farmer-owned cooperative formed in 2016. It aggregates the production of more than 20 farms within 125 miles of Kansas City, making locally grown produce, eggs, dairy and meats more accessible to restaurants, schools and other wholesale and retail customers throughout the region.

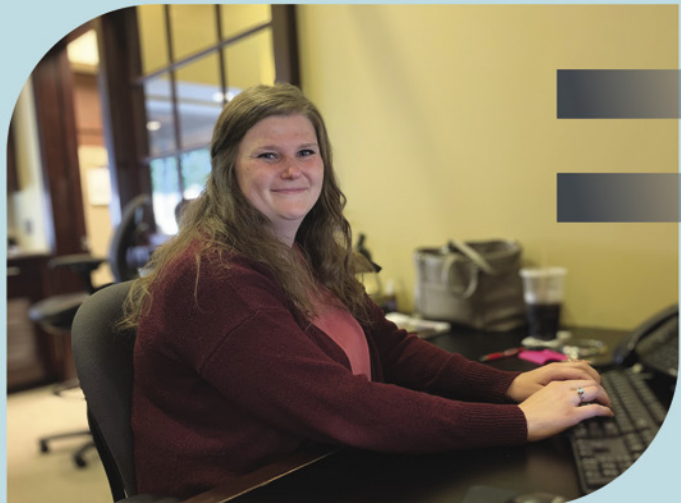
Two great restaurants. One big family. A United Community.



Stay strong. Stay safe. Stay healthy.
Whether it's our place or yours, we're here for you.

Johnny's North | Johnny's West | Johnny's Topeka | J. Wilson's
785-842-0377 | 785-843-0704 | 785-329-5541 | 785-312-9057

Your Partner in Possible.



emprisebank.com
785.838.2001
Member FDIC

The Sunrise Project also benefited from Elmers' energy. Programs include community meals and events, a community garden and orchard, a porch pantry and youth programs—all things that bring people of diverse cultures, neighborhoods, ages and socioeconomic statuses together in a former garden center at 15th and Leeward streets, which is now owned by Sunrise Green LLC. Although Elmers is no longer on The Sunrise Project's board of directors, she's a neighbor of sorts (Moon on the Meadow leases a greenhouse from Sunrise Green) and remains an enthusiastic supporter.

"(Elmers) has that same generosity of spirit with a lot of her work throughout the food system," Buller says. "A lot of the time, she's not just looking out for the best interests of her farm but for the whole community."

Expanding Community

That community is growing larger as Elmers becomes more involved in statewide groups including the Kansas Rural Center. The nonprofit was founded in 1979 and uses education, research and advocacy to support the long-term health of the land and the farms, ranches and communities on which it relies. Elmers has long participated in grant-funded KRC projects (such as high tunnel research, farm-to-school programs and beginning farmer and rancher resources) and joined its board of directors in 2021.

Elmers was also drawn to the Kansas Farmers Union, the state's oldest active general farm organization, because of its commitment to shaping policies that benefit small farms while fostering sustainability. On a federal level, the National Farmers Union addresses agricultural industry consolidation and monopolies, the Food and Drug Administration's Food Safety Modernization Act and other policy issues.

Elmers joined the KFU board in 2019 and is a county chair for the northeast Kansas chapter, which holds tours and other events in Douglas, Atchison, Franklin, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Leavenworth, Miami, Osage, Shawnee, and Wyandotte counties. Locally, she works to increase membership and create opportunities for other small farmers.

Expanding the local farm base is essential, Elmers says, as climate change and economic uncertainty disrupt existing food production and distribution channels. Weather extremes such as the extended drought in California will make it harder for farmers there to reliably grow commercial produce, while high shipping costs and supply chain

issues affect distribution of what is grown. Rising interest rates, inflation, environmental worries, geopolitical instability and other factors will likely further impact the food industry. The solution?

"We need to get more of our food from Douglas County," which means the county needs to attract more farmers committed to using sustainable practices, Elmers says.

Next Generation Farming

The 2017 Census of Agriculture (the most recent year for which statistics are available; new data will be released in 2024) did show a slight uptick in the county's farm numbers, from 945 in 2012 to 998 in 2017. But many of those are traditional grain and beef cattle operations where the cost of land and equipment pose formidable barriers to entry.

Kansas farmers are getting older, too. In 2017, their average age was 58, and only 0.01 percent were under the age of 35. That statistic doesn't reveal how many of any age are new to the industry because the state numbers don't distinguish between young and beginning farmers, however the 2017 Census shows that 27 percent of the country's 3.4 million producers had been farming for 10 years or less.

What's all that mean for Douglas County? That while there's plenty of demand for local food here, Elmers isn't sure who will be growing it.

"I'm in the process of learning what that next generation of farms looks like" she says. "I don't think they look like what we see now."

They might be urban or micro farms or something entirely different, operated by people in their 20s and 30s who want a more balanced lifestyle than agriculture typically allows for.

"Farming is hard work. It's not a glamorous life," Elmers says. "I think we're going to have more small farms, and a lot of them, so people can have that work-life balance."

Whatever their aspirations, Elmers wants to assist beginners by transitioning Moon on the Meadow into a teaching farm over the next three years. While she's still working out how to do that, Elmers is certain about one thing: more local food is good for consumers, farmers and the region's economy because it keeps dollars circulating in Lawrence and Douglas County.

"The local economy we have is thriving, and I want to keep it that way," she says. "It's amazing to watch the dollars stay." ▲



Women's Health Reimagined



LMH Health is changing the patient experience with convenience, innovation and technology.

The LMH Health Women's Center located at the LMH Health West Campus provides a streamlined service of multidisciplinary care in one place.

This means you can set up convenient same-day appointments to check-off multiple yearly screenings in one trip.

Call 785-505-3800 to schedule an appointment or learn more at lmh.org/womens-health.



A partner for lifelong health