

Monroe: ‘Farming is all I know’

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‘Farming is all I know’

Both of Monroe’s parents had agricultural backgrounds. Her mother, Rose, came from a small village in Kenya, and her father, Warren, is a fourth-generation farmer from Junction City, Ore.

Monroe’s parents met through mutual friends when Rose was visiting the U.S., maintained a long-distance relationship and married in 1987.

Warren Harper had one child and adopted Rose’s four children. The couple had two additional children together: Bryan, born in 1988, and Tiffany, the youngest, born in 1990.

From the time she could walk, Monroe recalls helping on the family farm, which at the time grew grains, peppermint and row crops. Monroe hoed, pulled weeds, helped feed the work crew, and when she was big enough, moved irrigation lines.

“Farming is all I know,” she said.

Her brother Bryan, who often worked alongside her, remembers many days in kindergarten and elementary school when the pair would stop at a local shop for sodas and Reese’s peanut butter cups before getting back to the farm.

“For us, it was a lot of fun,” he recalls.

Childhood, however, also brought challenges.

As Monroe grew, older siblings went different directions, and when Monroe was in third grade, she and her brother Bryan were sent to live with their aunt and uncle in Bend, Ore., while their parents filed for divorce. The siblings lived there five years.

“It was not the easiest experience for us growing up,” said Harper.

Monroe agreed: “That was a hard time.”

She plucked a sprig of leaves from a bush and rolled it in her fingertips as she spoke.

Eventually, the brother and sister moved back to the farm.

Finding her voice

As a teenager, Monroe began to find her footing — and her voice.

She became more interested in science, and in high school she joined an organization that changed her life: FFA. The youth organization, focused on agricultural education, taught her public speaking skills and prepared her for leadership and a career related to farming.

“She absolutely excelled,” said Harper, her brother. “She became a state officer, traveled, got a scholarship to college. It clearly was huge for Tiffany.”

After high school, Mon-



Tiffany Monroe drives past a cattle pasture with her son, Tommy Lee, on her lap.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Hazelnuts grown by the Monroes.

roe’s passion for agriculture led her to Oregon State University. Supported by a USDA scholarship for minority students, she studied crop and soil science with a minor in horticulture, graduating in 2015.

OSU faculty and staff say that from practically the moment she entered college, Monroe stood out for the curiosity that drove her research, her willingness to take on projects beyond expectations and her passion for educating the public about farming.

“What really made her stand out for me was her fearlessness,” said Wanda Crannell, an instructor in OSU’s leadership academy and an adviser to Monroe during her time at OSU.

Taking flight

After graduating, Monroe left Oregon to pursue a master’s degree in community and leadership development with an emphasis on agricultural education from the University of Kentucky.

While in Kentucky, Monroe participated in a program called the National Society for Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences, or MANRRS.

Quentin Tyler, now extension director at Michigan State University and former assistant dean at the University of Kentucky’s College of Agriculture, oversaw Monroe in MANRRS and said it was a privilege to watch her grow

into an agricultural leader.

After graduation, Monroe said Tyler helped her land a job as the first Black female agriculture and natural resources extension agent in Kentucky history. From there, she went on to work in the office of marketing and product promotion for the Kentucky Department of Agriculture.

Although her professional career was taking off, personally, it was a painful time in her life. While Monroe was in graduate school, her mom died. She says it was a heart-breaking period.

“My mom was a phenomenal and empowering woman,” said Monroe. “It was hard to lose her.”

Then, as her career was kicking off, her dad battled cancer. Monroe didn’t want to be far from home while her dad’s life hung in the balance, so, summer of 2018, she returned to Oregon.

Coming home, starting anew

Back in the Willamette Valley, Tiffany met her now-husband, Cord Monroe, on her family’s farm, where Cord was working as a mechanic and operations lead.

“I think Cord likes you,” Bryan Harper told his sister.

Harper was right. The pair started dating in September of 2018 and married soon after. Their son, Tommy Lee, was born in 2019.

“We were on the fast track,” said Monroe. She laughed.

Cord and Tiffany Monroe both came from farming families and wanted to continue farming, but neither owned a large plot of land on which to start a new operation together. In Tiffany’s family, her brother Bryan was in line to inherit Harper Farms. Cord didn’t own significant farmland either, so the young couple started by farming land owned by Cord’s parents and relatives.

Today, the couple continues to work the land owned by Monroe’s in-laws — growing timber, hay, scarlet flax seed and about 100 acres of hazelnuts, including the new PollyO variety they recently planted that is resistant to Eastern filbert blight, a fungal disease.

They also keep 14 cows, one bull, four goats, barn cats and a Great White Pyrenees dog named Winston.

The past few years have brought many challenges, including drought, winter freezes and shipping difficulties. Monroe says she tends to the farm with “hard work and lots of prayers.”

Meanwhile, Cord and Tiffany Monroe are working toward building their own operation. In 2020, the couple bought a house in Junction City: Monroe Farms. Over time, they plan to buy land as it comes up for sale, stringing together a business.

“Starting with so little is tough,” said Monroe.

But she isn’t starting alone. Harper Farms has supplied the young couple with used equipment. Some family members have also aided the fledgling farm financially. Monroe said she’s especially grateful for the support and encouragement of her mother-in-law, Stephanie Monroe.

Advocate for minorities

Monroe’s work as a mother and farmer consumes much of her time, but she still has a heart for advo-

cacy — both inside and outside the farming community.

Within the agricultural community, Monroe tries to educate other farmers about the challenges that come with being Black in a majority-white state and industry. She is also part of several organizations aimed at helping minority farmers and migrant farmworkers succeed.

Her role in the Black Food Fund, a nonprofit, is about helping Black farmers achieve their dreams in the agricultural sector. She has also volunteered for the College Assistance Migrant Program, or CAMP, designed to support college students whose backgrounds include migrant or seasonal agricultural work.

“Tiffany has found a way not only to voice concerns for those communities, she has also helped the CAMP students find their voice,” said Crannell, the OSU instructor. “Speaking up for somebody else is good, but helping them find their voice is probably even better.”

Monroe is also an adviser on the Letitia Carson Legacy Project, an Oregon history project about a Black pioneer homesteader named Leticia Carson.

Educating the public

Outside the farming community, Monroe educates the public about agriculture and natural resources through writing columns, teaching workshops and testifying in the state Legislature.

For example, when the Legislature recently passed a law requiring overtime pay for farmworkers, Monroe testified against the bill, saying it would hurt family farm businesses and have unintended negative consequences for the workers it was meant to help.

Monroe said she believes the public often misunderstands agriculture and views farmers as “the enemy” in



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press
Tommy Lee, Tiffany Monroe’s son, reaches out to touch a young PollyO variety hazelnut tree. Monroe calls this young block of trees “Tommy’s orchard” because he helped plant the trees and now helps tend them.

issues related to labor, climate change, water quality and land management.

“Lane County in my lifetime has not been natural resources friendly,” said Monroe. “Having a seat at the table matters, but farmers and foresters are not always included and heard.”

Monroe says her goal is to help bridge the political divide between urban and rural Oregon, finding common ground and healing misunderstandings.

Those who know Monroe best say she’s already doing just that.

Tyler, who was her adviser in Kentucky, said Monroe is a peacemaker who treats people like they matter even if they disagree with her.

“A lot of people look for differences. She looks for commonalities,” said Tyler.

Harper said his sister has “a positive way of communicating agriculture’s story without sounding like she’s shouting from a bullhorn on top of a hill.”

Cooper, of the Oregon Farm Bureau, said Monroe is “a person of incredible faith and incredible kindness” who has earned respect in both liberal and conservative circles.

“People really listen to her,” said Cooper.

Monroe has even caught the eye of Oregon Gov. Kate Brown.

“She’s incredibly knowledgeable; she’s incredibly engaging; she is very well-informed,” said Brown. “And she is an incredibly effective advocate.”

Despite these accolades, Monroe says her work is far from over; she still sees a disconnect between natural resources communities and public perceptions. Monroe plans to continue growing her family’s farm, being an advocate for both farming and minorities and teaching little Tommy Lee how to cultivate the earth so that he too can one day run a farm.

In Monroe’s eyes, “there’s no nobler occupation than to care for the land.”

Air: Dairies have already voluntarily adopted best management practices

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collectively release more than 17 million kilograms of methane every year, equivalent to the emissions from 318,000 cars.

Miller said not only are methane emissions exacerbating climate change, but pollutants can also cause health problems for employees and nearby communities. She said more than one-third of all dairy cows in the state are in Umatilla and Morrow counties.

The largest dairy, at Threemile Canyon Farms, has 70,000 cows about 15 miles west of Boardman along the Columbia River.

Mary Anne Cooper, vice president of public policy for the Oregon Farm Bureau, said the petition is a new tactic from groups that have long opposed large dairies.

In 2017, legislation was introduced in the state Senate directing the EQC to establish a dairy air emissions program. That bill, SB 197, died in committee.

Cooper said dairies have already voluntarily adopted best management practices to minimize air emissions, such as a methane digester built

PETITION TO EQC

Twenty-two organizations have petitioned the Oregon Environmental Quality Commission to create a dairy air emissions program that would regulate farms with more than 700 cows. Petitioners include:

- 350 Eugene
- 350 Deschutes
- Animal Legal Defense Fund
- American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
- Beyond Toxics
- Center for Biological Diversity
- Center for Food Safety
- Columbia Riverkeeper
- Comunidades Amplifying Voices for Environmental and Social Justice
- Environment Oregon
- Humane Voters Oregon
- Farm Forward
- Farm Sanctuary
- Food & Water Watch
- Friends of the Columbia Gorge
- Friends of Family Farmers
- Mercy for Animals
- Northwest Environmental Defense Center
- Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility
- Pendleton Community Action Alliance
- Public Justice Foundation
- World Animal Protection

at Threemile Canyon Farms, which is used to generate electricity and renewable natural gas.

The petition, Cooper said, claims to address so-called “mega-dairies,” yet the threshold of 700 or more cows is “very much family-scale operations in this state.”

“You cannot support a family on a couple hundred milk cows,” she said. “Their costs already exceed what they’re getting on the market for their product.”

Between added costs due to inflation and the passage of a state law mandating farmworkers be paid overtime, Cooper said it has already been a difficult year for producers.

“This (air emissions program) will have a real impact on people and on families,” she said. “We have an industry with such tight margins. They’re already trying to figure out how to accommodate a number of new regulatory burdens this year alone.”

Borer: Nurseries need to be vigilant scouting for signs

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with what we bring into the state,” he said, hypothesizing it could have been accidentally imported via firewood from out of state.

One week after the initial sighting on June 30, members of the nursery industry gathered for a virtual meeting with the Oregon Department of Agriculture to learn more about emerald ash borer, and how to identify possible infestations.

“That’s really been our message — if in doubt, don’t ship it out,” Stone said.

Chris Benemann, nursery and Christmas tree program manager for ODA, said the state has 11 inspectors for approximately 2,800 licensed nurseries. She said the first line of defense is outreach and education.

In addition to ash, Benemann said the pest can also affect olive and ornamental white fringe trees.

The first sign is typically a thinning canopy, followed by distinctive S-shaped galleries where the insects have bored into the wood.

ODA is considering a small, temporary quarantine in Washington County where the emerald ash borer was first spotted, Benemann said. It would limit the movement of possibly infested wood. That may affect some local nurseries, though she did not know exactly how many.

“That has not been finalized yet,” Benemann said. “If a grower is located in Washington County, but doesn’t sell (those species), the quarantine wouldn’t impact them at all.”

Stone said nurseries will need to be vigilant scouting for signs of emerald ash borer to reassure customers and protect the industry’s reputation.

“We certainly don’t want to exacerbate the problem,” he said.