

A Woman's Place  
by Shelli Manning

There's been a lot of focus on women in America lately. Amidst the din of marches and media, many women are celebrating their independence and opportunities by quietly and gratefully going about their lives.

One of those women is ANIMART employee, Carissa Merfeld. Carissa is a Territory Manager, working with dairy producers in Northeastern Wisconsin. In addition to being an asset to the company and clients she serves, she's much more... mom, wife, daughter, sister, friend, Christian, volunteer, farmer and friend of farmer. It's a lot of hats for one woman to wear, but somehow Carissa manages them all, and with grace.

Growing up outside of Columbus, Wisconsin, Carissa had somewhat of a unique upbringing. She's the fourth born of six daughters, all of whom were homeschooled. The 20 year gap between her oldest and youngest siblings allowed her to gain both independence and leadership skills. While benefiting from her older sisters' experience, she got to help guide the younger ones.

The ingenuity she developed through homeschooling served Carissa well, and it served her early. At 12, she became a young entrepreneur, stuffing flyers in the mailboxes of her rural neighbors, announcing she was for hire for yardwork, cleaning and the like.

A neighbor responded to the flyer and it would forever alter Carissa's path. First she was hired for simple chores like house cleaning, then a couple years later, to work at the neighbor's Madison-based custom framing shop. By the time Carissa graduated high school, she already had five years of work experience.

When the time came to consider colleges, Carissa had a dilemma. What she really wanted was to become a veterinarian, but she didn't have a way to pay for such an expensive education. She considered enlisting in the military to help pay for schooling, but her parents weren't keen on the idea of their little girl joining the armed forces. Then the neighbor who'd given Carissa her start had another opportunity in mind. She offered to pay for Carissa's college classes, as long as those classes focused on design. Carissa knew it was an offer too good to pass up, so off to design school she went.

Carissa wasn't even finished with college when she started to feel a disconnect between her passion and her work. Her projects in school would often lend themselves to the life she craved. Classmates wanted to design condos, she designed a barn with living quarters.

There wasn't any clear-cut reason for the pull Carissa felt to farming and agriculture. Sure, she grew up in the country, but her exposure to ag was limited to the rabbits, chickens and sheep the family





kept. That, plus her dad's work as an agricultural mechanic, wasn't exactly a direct path to dairy farming.

After graduating from Madison College with an Applied Arts degree in Interior Design, Carissa was promoted to the role of Designer at the frame shop and the gap widened. She spent her weekends with then boyfriend, Jesse, farming, hunting and driving trucks, but come Monday mornings, she had to filter herself in the 'what'd you do this weekend' type conversations. She wondered what clients would think of her country girl lifestyle, in comparison to their days full of shopping and manicures. Carissa simply had no desire to 'keep up with the Jones', which is what it felt like many of her clients based their lives on.

Whereas work was becoming a source of angst, things were progressing nicely - and quickly - between her and Jesse. While they'd known each other since they were kids, having met in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade on a 4-H field trip, their romance was new. To hear Carissa tell it, growing up, Jesse was the 'cute boy with the bad attitude' and Carissa herself was simply invisible to Jesse. All that faded once they'd gone on their first date. Two months later they traveled to Iowa to visit Jesse's

extended family and Carissa learned she was the only girl who'd had that privilege. The following summer, Jesse proposed to her at the local July 4th festival. Like a scene right from a movie, just as the light show was starting, a spotlight shone down on the couple while Carissa (along with the whole town) watched as her name and the words 'will you marry me?' lit up in fireworks. (She said yes!)

In June 2004, Carissa and Jesse were married. Long before they said their vows, they had a distinct and shared idea what the pillars of their life together would be: family and farming.

Unlike Carissa, Jesse did grow up farming on his parents' dairy-turned-beef-operation. Just before their first child was born, they bought four acres from Jesse's parents and built a home there. As the couple expanded their agricultural initiatives, and their family, Carissa's discord with her work continued to deepen. She found a lack of support for any kind of balance between work and home, no understanding of her parental needs. Her tipping point happened when she was in the hospital after having the couple's second child. Tending to a newborn as well as complications from childbirth would be enough for anyone to manage. When Carissa started getting phone calls from work *at the hospital*, it was clear she needed to make a change.

That began what Carissa calls 'the dark years.' She and Jesse were experiencing the growing pains of an expanding family, stagnancy in their careers and frustration of their farming dreams not feeling any closer than when they'd started. All that can take a toll on any marriage and the Merfelds were no different. There was a moment when Carissa didn't even know if they'd make it out the other side with their family intact...

But, thanks to their faith, their family and their focus - not only did they make it through their trials, they emerged stronger than ever.

Part of overcoming the challenges they were facing meant Carissa leaving the only employment she'd ever known. She knew in order to be truly happy, she needed to find something more aligned with her passion. Enter: ANIMART. When she saw an employment ad for an Inside Sales Representative, she applied, thinking it just might be the perfect fit. While she'd passed on becoming

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a veterinarian, perhaps working for a company centered on veterinarians – and farming – would bring her the professional satisfaction she was desperate for.

In November of 2012, Carissa gave her notice at the frame shop, albeit terrified, and started working at ANIMART. She's been climbing ever since. She's held multiple roles within the company, working in various divisions with different customer segments. She'd been the company's National Account Manager for a few months when she learned ANIMART was to acquire Pennsylvania-based Animal Medic. Animal Medic was her biggest competition, she worried what would become of her role since the people she'd been competing against for customers' business in nearly three-quarters of her accounts would now be co-workers. It was that concern which led her to apply for the role she's in now, the one which seems to fit her best of all - Territory Manager.

She's out on farms and she's making a difference with producers face to face. "I love being on farm because I'm able to make a bigger impact with my customers. I see what they're dealing with and hear what they're saying about their operations, and I can make suggestions which will have a direct impact. As a farmer myself, I understand their struggles. That's why I enjoy being in a position to make their lives easier, their farms better and more productive."

When asked if there are any struggles particular to being in Outside Sales, rather than in the ANIMART office every day, she had just one:

"I miss wearing cute shoes."

So just how does Carissa do it all? How does she balance all the roles she has to fill? One word: Goals. She is very driven. Set a goal. Reach said goal. Repeat.

At work, meeting goals means more compensation. "It's not about the money, it's about what the money can do for my family," she says. "It's about providing comfort for my family, it's about doing fun things, and for me, it's about buying cows. Cows make me happy."

At home, there's one clear goal she's striving for: Life on the farm. The idea is to eventually have her and Jesse on the farm full time. They've made significant progress, having bought the rest of the farm from Jesse's parents a few years ago and are actively working on growing their herd. They're up to nearly 100 animals between cows, steers, calves and a few random goats. They're closer, but not quite there yet.

Even the Merfeld kids are showing early interest in farm life; each in their own unique way. Pyper, who's now 8, wants to be a veterinarian, JJ is the most mechanically inclined 5-year-old around, loving to take things apart and put them back together again (using his real tools, of course) and the couple's newest addition, 2-year-old Melynda, gets in on the action for now by helping Mom mix milk for the calves.

Like many women, Carissa still struggles with the 'mom/work guilt,' but she says being at ANIMART makes all the difference. Her supervisor, Senior Sales Manager, Tom Klas understands and prioritizes a great work/life balance. "It's a very family-friendly company to work for," says Carissa.



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The final keys to Carissa's success are balance and faith. "Balance," she says, "because you can't fill up anyone else's cup if yours is empty." And faith because without her faith, none of it would be possible. She's active both in church and in her kids' school, as she feels it's important give back to the community which has meant so much to her family.

So in a world struggling to agree on what opportunity means to women, Carissa Merfeld knows her place. It's wherever her kids are. It's on farm. It's in church. It's with her family. It's at ANIMART.

It's in lockstep with her husband, striving together to reach their goals.

*About the Author:*

ANIMART's staff writer, Shelli Manning, works to share the human interest side of individuals in production agriculture and communicate their passions which contribute to our unique American Story. She is the published author of *Little Fish*, as well as a motivational speaker on women's issues and an advocate for the reduction of domestic violence.