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Bringing Young Farmers Together

by [Ronda Payne](#)

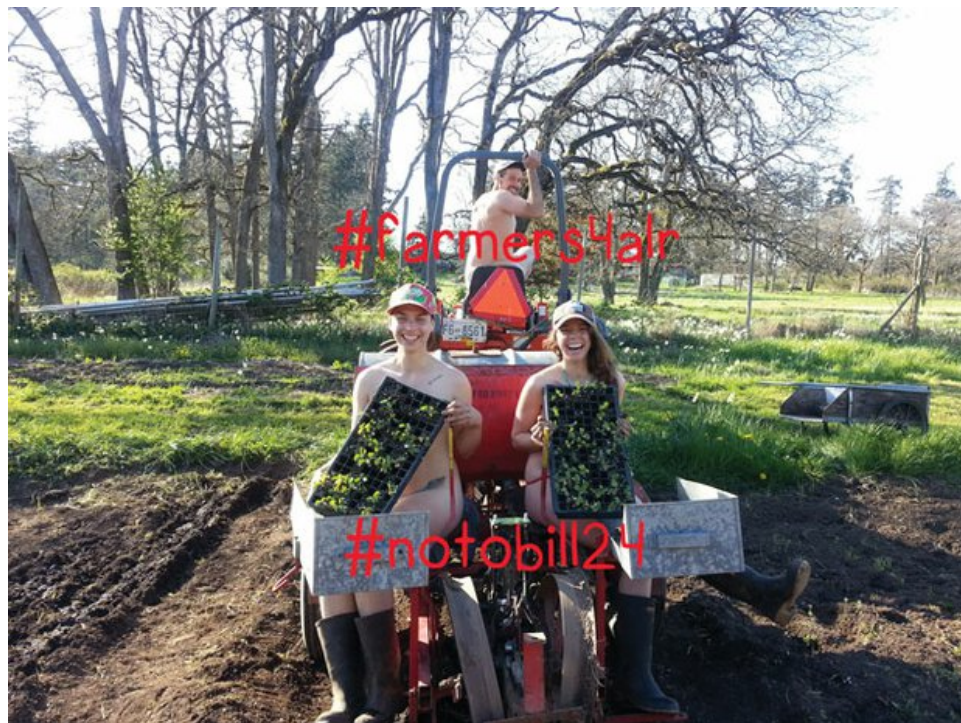
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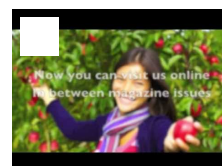


Sara Dent, BC coordinator of the Young Agrarians, explained the primary role of the organization is bringing farmers together both online and offline.

“It’s kind of like creating a family for farmers,” she noted.

Farmers of the past may recall the distance between farms felt like less of a hurdle when weekly barn dances, socials and impromptu meetings at the store created a community effortlessly. The age of deliveries, online shopping and busy lives has removed many of those natural gathering options. The Young Agrarians

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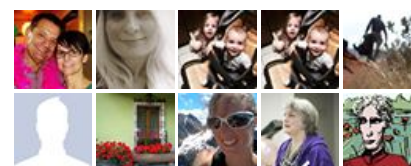
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officially came about in January of 2012 to fill a void created by some of the world's efficiencies. To date, the group has held about 50 events such as potlucks, farm tours, mixers and educational workshops.

"My experience in rural farming is that farming can be quite isolating," Dent said, who spent a little over three years farming in the BC interior.

"We're not trying to recreate anything [with Young Agrarians]," she added. "We're just fostering what's already happening to get more new people interested in farming. It's a sign of the times. What we need now are strong networks."

Young Agrarians generally creates programs and events for those in BC, but recently the group held an event in Alberta.

"We just had 65 people in Red Deer," she said. "We networked all the people together. That's how we [farmers] lived for a long time. Just knowing our neighbours."

Despite the organization's name, Dent says, "It doesn't actually matter who comes to the events," but added attendees are generally small scale farmers and growers aged 20 to 35. "I'd rename it All Agrarians if I could," she jokingly added, saying she wants all farmers to feel welcome.

Through youngagrarians.org and organized events, Dent and others in the group are bringing farmers together and are exposing them to one another. The idea is well received and growing.

Growing takes on a variety of meanings.

"We had our first baby born in January," Dent noted. "The couple got together at a Kelowna mixer."

Baby Ave is the first child born as a result of Young Agrarian events. Michelle Tsutsumi and Tristan Cavers, Ave's parents, farm at Golden Ears Community Farm in Chase.

"We had something like 800-plus people to our events in March," Dent said. "We had as much traffic in March online and offline as we did in all of 2012."

Another huge accomplishment for the group is the completion of their land access guide. Dent says it outlines different aspects of getting into farming.

"It's a guide to 'so you want to start farming' and then 'so you want to get on land'," she said. "It spells out options and provides checklists."

There have been about 600 downloads of the guide so far with dozens of hard copies additionally handed out at events.

"There's just a real need for certain things, like learning about how to access land, bringing people together, that kind of thing," Dent noted. "We are capturing a wave of people (who) are becoming stewards of the land."

Participation with the Young Agrarians is free and will help those who are already in agricultural groups reach out to new people.

"A couple of young farmers that had their first growing season this past year told us 'it would have been a really hard season, but we had a community to connect to' and because they had resources through that community their first year went well," Dent added.

One of the major strengths of Young Agrarians is the drive to help farmers overcome issues like finding land, funding, information, or accessing tools.

"I feel like a switchboard operator," Dent said of how she talks to people and connects them to others. "Our strength is in bringing people together."

This connectivity is particularly important when faced with the province's continually rising land costs (especially in the southwest region) and the difficulties that new, 'wanna-be' farmers are facing.


"Everyone is concerned with that young farmer demographic," she noted. "We are working together to find solutions as less than five per cent of farmers in BC are under 34."


To that end, the activities Young Agrarians are focused on for the latter half of 2014 are land linking workshops and providing business mentorship programming.


The workshops will bring land owners and land seekers together online and in person with the tools to help them create mutually beneficial arrangements. This includes leasing and licensing information in plain English. There will also be strategies as to what to look for in productive land and understanding the implications of certain arrangements given the theory that most new farmers will go into small-scale


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farming.

Mentorship will ensure there is support for farmers who are already on the land and in production. Dent wants to see a collection of business tools from the best sources brought together for mentors to use with new farmers.

“We can make some broad statements [about what Young Agrarians has done to date] but mentoring will deliver a more specific, measureable impact, though still on a small scale,” she said.

You may have seen Young Agrarians participants in the news lately around the changes to the Agricultural Land Commission and Bill 24.

“We wanted to make a statement on social media so people can see it,” noted Dent. “It’s #FARMERS4ALR. It’s a photo of a farmer making their [statement] and using social media as a tool.”

What’s next for this dynamic organization? In addition to 50 or 60 events, Dent wants to see specific services delivered to farmers just starting up; what she calls “game changers.”

“I would like to see greater intensity around the networking to obtain resources,” she said. “To find what they need in their community and find tools to build their businesses. I want to see us do something that is really, really practical, like hands-on training for start-ups.”

Under the charitable designation of Farm Folk City Folk, the Young Agrarians are moving swiftly and will perhaps meet Dent’s dream of going national one day.

“I would love to go nationwide, to build a more visible voice for young farmers across Canada.” ■

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