

FEMALE TRAILBLAZERS

SUSAN SINK: FARMER, MOTHER, FUNDRAISER

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→ OWNER AND VISIONARY BEHIND CHRISTIANSBURG'S SINKLAND FARMS,
HAS SOWN SUCCESS IN MANY FIELDS.

I F YOU HAVE A VISION OF WHAT a farmer looks like, Susan Sink defies it.

She leans against her undulating granite-topped kitchen island in gold loafers, silver hoop earrings and tapered black and white slacks, her nine-month-old, perfectly groomed Shih Tzu dancing at her feet.

If you have an idea of who a brewery owner is, Sink will upend that, too. Her cattle-barn-turned-brewery is way more shabby chic than stainless steel.

That's because Sink has spent most of her 65 years rattling stereotypes. She's a Franklin County farm girl that earned her bachelor's and master's in business administration, a Christiansburg local who for more than a dozen years worked full-time in Washington, D.C. She's presented papers in Hong Kong, earned millions of dollars for national organizations. She's often been the only woman in the room during her years of fundraising for universities and nonprofits. Yet every October she welcomes some 30,000 people to her 125 acre

farm to pick pumpkins, meander through a corn maze and snuggle bunnies.

Sink owns a farm yet can't drive a tractor. She owns a brewery yet cannot brew beer. She doesn't need to. What Susan Sink, owner and manager of Sinkland Farms — a pick-your-own pumpkin farm, brewery, and wedding and event venue — has is vision. And drive.

Those traits have given an almost Midas quality to whatever she has touched. Despite setbacks and stress, Sink has turned nearly every endeavor she's tried into triumph.

"I've always felt like I should be able to look back and see that I've accomplished something at the end of every day," she explains. "I guess it's just inside of me that I love to be so busy. It's just the way I'm built."



Sink was not destined to be a farmer. She had a head for numbers and a way with people that paved a path for her in the fields of fundraising and communications.

But the man she loved — Henry Sink, her friend from junior high and her beau through college — he's the one who wanted to work the land.

They were in their 20s when they set out to find a farm of their own.

A dairy farmer in Christiansburg offered them land and house, barns and cows. They would pay him back as they earned their way. The couple jumped at the chance.

It was a struggle from Day 1. Growing the feed, weathering the unpredictable, turning a profit even as regulations stood in the way.

Susan worked at Virginia Tech until their first child arrived and then their second. While Henry tended to the cows and the milking, Susan looked for other ways to chip away at their debts: a pick-your-own strawberry patch, a stand of Christmas trees.

After five years at home with her babies, Susan headed to the College of Engineering development office at Virginia Tech. She missed the sense of achievement she found in the workplace. Her family missed her salary.

By the early '90s, the Sinks had welcomed a third child and happened on a new way to pay the bills: a little-tried concept that would come to be called agritourism. Every fall, they opened their farm to anyone who wanted to pick pumpkins and reconnect to rural roots.

"We started the pumpkin festival to be able to make ends meet, to be able to keep the land," Sink says.

No one could have predicted its success. After a decade, the event's profits outpaced the entire dairy operation. The Sinks sold their cows in 2005, worth less than when they bought them in 1980.

By then, Sink was a rising star. She was tapped by talent-finders who lured her to weekdays in Washington, first at the prestigious National Academy of Engineering.

"It's helping people accomplish their dreams," Sink describes her affinity for raising money. "Many people want to make a difference and leave a legacy, that's what it's all about."

Then, in a matter of moments, everything changed.

It was Mother's Day 2009. Susan and Henry had set out for a week at Myrtle Beach. Susan drove ahead and Henry followed on his motorcycle. On the final leg of the trip, Susan glanced in her rearview mirror and saw ... nothing. Henry had crashed. He died in the hospital after his motorcycle crash and would never go home.

Before they'd even left the Columbia, S.C., hospital, her three grown children asked Susan not to sell Sinkland Farms.

What followed were dark days. Sink gave up her job, then at the Nature Conservancy in D.C. She returned to Riner Road to grieve and to run her farm, alone.

A family friend offered to grow that year's pumpkins so the festival wouldn't lapse. He's grown them every year since.

Day by day, Sink emerged from her loss. She was tapped by Radford University to lead their capital campaign. Then she made her way back to D.C. as vice president of development at American Farmland Trust. All the while, she not only continued the festival, but grew it exponentially.

Today, the Sinkland Farms Pumpkin Festival is an epic undertaking. All three Sink children travel home for a month to help Susan, despite jobs and partners and children of their own. These days there is music and on-site food. Sink welcomes 8,000 students who take part in the farm's educational field trips.

"I will just tell you, she really likes to entertain," says Lisa Sink, Susan's oldest, who leads tours overseas and in the Roanoke region. "I feel like that really shows through with all she does on the farm."

At Sinkland Farms today, there is art around every corner: oil tanks transformed into pink pigs, blue bottle trees shimmering in the sunlight, chandeliers spun from old equipment. The farm is Sink's canvas now.

In November 2017, Sink retired from her D.C. office job. She came back to Christiansburg and opened a brewery in the old cattle barn. For years, the Sinks had grown barley as a cover crop after the pumpkins were harvested. Sink decided she wanted to turn the grain into beer rather than plow it into the soil.

So, from Thursday to Sunday, year round, the beer flows, the music plays, the Karaoke beckons.

Thirty weekends a year, Sink hosts weddings on the farm. In her latest bout of magic, she transformed the dairy parlor into a posh, two-bedroom honeymoon suite.

"At my age, I should just stop," she says, standing on a cement patio with her farm-turned event space all around her. "But I still have all these dreams."

So, her cell phone beeps incessantly. Neighbors, helpers, employees walk in and out of her artfully cluttered kitchen. She talks of what her next project will be: Opening a farm store? Learning to brew her own beer?

"I have all of these ideas I'm contemplating right now."

She wouldn't have it any other way. ☆