

SUE COUNTS

RETIRED, FORMER WATAUGA COUNTY
EXTENSION DIRECTOR



A BRWIA Profile Written by Tathel Miller

When I first met Sue Counts in 2005, it was a conversation over the phone. Her voice then was full of energy and enthusiasm while talking about women in agriculture—particularly Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture. And eighteen years later, here I sit in the midst of her company along with two other founding mothers of the organization. There’s a mountain breeze blowing—the birds are singing, and her voice is still the same. And her heart—still deeply immersed in the importance of working together to make a difference.

In every story told—every conversation recorded there is a constant theme in the writing of the history of Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture (BRWIA). Simply put—there would not have been a Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture without Sue Counts.

“Sue Counts was an incredible catalyst for so many things that have happened,” founding mother Judi Scharns says. “Her tenure at the Cooperative Extension really made a big difference. She did a whole lot of things and was so good about reaching out and connecting people.”

Diane Price, founding mother and writer of the first grant for BRWIA remembers working with Sue throughout the years with the organization, 4H, and the community.

“When I met Sue at the extension office that was one of the best things that ever happened to me,” Diane says with a teary smile. “She would start these things and I would jump on board!”

In 1993 Sue began working as the Project Coordinator for the Southern Leadership Initiative on Cancer Project and then moved to serving as the Family and Consumer Science agent for the Watauga County Cooperative Extension office. Five years later, the position of the Watauga County Extension Director opened, and Sue applied along with other candidates—all experienced men in the field. Sue was awarded the position and made history as the first woman to ever serve as the county director in Watauga County. The position didn’t come easy and was met with some resistance and criticism.



“I wanted the job, and I knew I could help people,” Sue explains. “I love helping others and I knew I could make a difference if I was given a chance. So, I wasn’t concerned about the criticism.”

Under the leadership of Sue as the Watauga County Cooperative Extension Director, she was instrumental in leading the county in agricultural and economic growth introducing organic growing techniques, agritourism, sustainable development, and as one of the founding mothers of BRWIA.

Sue and Judi fondly still refer to the infamous “road trip” as when the spark was flamed for the birth of BRWIA. On the ride down to Winston Salem to the offices of Z. Smith Reynolds to present a grant request for Mountain Keepers, they began talking about the need for an organization to advocate for women farmers and address their needs.

“The idea of Blue Ridge Women in Ag could not have settled on two better people to move it forward than Sue and Judi,” explains Diane. “It fell in place because of them.”

Sue grew up in the mountains of Virginia and one of her greatest inspirations as a child was her grandmother. Widowed at a young age with seven children and a fifty-acre farm, her grandmother endured hard work and overcame many obstacles.

“It occurred to me on that road trip that my grandmother was probably the most inspirational person in my life,” Sue says. “She made such a mark on me because of her strength. She was very resourceful, and she knew she had to make a living for her seven children. They had fruit and nut trees, chickens, horses, sheep, and huge gardens. She made jams and jellies and canned vegetables. And every Saturday she would load her goods on her horse and wagon and go three miles to Haysi to sell her goods.”

Sue recognized the work her grandmother did during that time was still the same for many women in the Appalachian Mountain communities and an organization to help women farmers would serve as a great encouragement and resource for them.

“These women in the Appalachian Mountains (that’s where my grandmother was from too) are so resourceful in running their farms. And their husbands may have jobs outside the farms. The women are really doing much of the work. If we could start something for these women, that would really be wonderful.”

“Sue recognized the work her grandmother did during that time was still the same for many women in the Appalachian Mountain communities and an organization to help women farmers would serve as a great encouragement and resource for them.” -Tathel Miller

In the early beginnings, BRWIA had ideas and visions for the future and as with any new organization, they were not sure how it would all be accomplished, but Sue knew eventually they would come to fruition.

“I think we had ideas but didn’t know how they would come about,” says Sue. “I’m really not surprised at all that BRWIA has done so well. But I am pleasantly surprised. I really believed it could happen. Making local food available to everyone and giving people the opportunity to buy local and healthier food through the Food Hub—everything they are doing—it has all been amazing.”

When asked, what has it meant personally to have been there twenty years ago and now be here celebrating 20 years of BRWIA— Sue answers emotionally with tears—her hand placed on her heart.

“Wow, every time I hear what is happening with Blue Ridge Women in Ag, my heart is filled with joy. The work I did, and my job, was a pleasure. It was so joyful to create together. Any news I hear or read or when I pass by and see the Extension office—it all gives me a good feeling in my heart.”

Sue lived in Boone for 37 years before retiring in 2008 and moving to Kernersville. She is enjoying life with her family and still grows vegetables and donates her harvest to a local non-profit organization. She also loves to travel and recently spent time exploring Africa.