

NINA MOINI: I'm Nina Moini and this is *Minnesota Now* with a special edition of the program recorded at the New Moorhead Public Library. Yay! For our listeners, this building has high ceilings, big windows. It's nice and cool. But for this next conversation, I want us to imagine we're out in the heat. So right outside, on a day like today.

Insects are buzzing around. There's rich, dark soil under our feet, and green sprouts are pushing up from the ground. Which means it's go time for farmers like my next guest. Noreen Thomas and her family operate Doubting Thomas farms near Moorhead. They produce vegetables, flowers, grains, eggs and seeds. And you may have come across some of their goods at a grocer, a bakery or a brewery near you, or perhaps at an award-winning restaurant. Noreen, thanks so much for being here today.

NOREEN THOMAS: Thank you for having me. I wish I would have had you out at the farm today. I probably would have put you to work.

NINA MOINI: Oh, yeah?

NOREEN THOMAS: 95 degrees. We can do it.

NINA MOINI: Well, on another day, I might come and join you. You just never know. What is going on for you this week? How does it work when it's so hot out like this? You still got to get the job done, right?

NOREEN THOMAS: You still have to get the job done. And the farm in itself is kind of a crazy little place. We have probably six farms within our farm. We have everything from a honeybee keeper that comes and has us honeybees that help our lush buckwheat grow-- because when we have honeybees, we have doubled the production.

NINA MOINI: Wow.

NOREEN THOMAS: We have herbologists that comes and picks things like red clover. So if you get inflamed, drink red clover. She makes a tea from it. We have a cattle person that-- I really hate to mow. Who likes to mow when it's 95 degrees? Anyone?

NINA MOINI: No hands. No hands.

NOREEN THOMAS: So we have the cattle graze so I don't have to mow. So within our farm, it's also a community place. We've had over 8,000 people on our farm in five years. So you may have been on our farm. If you have, thank you. And if you haven't, you're missing out.

NINA MOINI: So the farm, though, has been in your husband's family for five generations. That's incredible. How did you develop your own approach to farming when you and your husband took it on?

NOREEN THOMAS: That was very different. I landed on the farm. I married the farm, and I married Lee. And with that came-- I just thought very differently. And looking around, I said, you know, maybe we can do some different things. I want to grow food that we can eat. So we went on this journey.

NINA MOINI: Goals.

NOREEN Goals, yes. Because soybeans are kind of tough, on your teeth to eat. But we do grow those for Japan, actually.

THOMAS: So we converted the farm. And it was a little bit painful. I was a little naive, too, on that. But I came from a different background. I was working as a chemist in Bismarck, North Dakota. Didn't grow up on a farm, so I just saw things a little differently.

And I think women are also more community-minded. So we might call someone or talk to someone and say, what do you think about this? Whereas to me, farming, when I landed in it, it's very independent. It's by yourself. And I was like, this is kind of lonely out here. So we started having events and people kept coming and they really enjoyed it. We have everything from foraging to mushroom growing to bird watching.

And my husband thought this was so crazy. Like, who's going to come? He goes, no one's going to come. And I said, OK, no one's going to come. And then he said, hey, there's a bunch of people on the lawn. Can you-- so we went out there and it's just been a delight. We do a lot with the universities.

One of my pet projects is working with kids from the homeless shelter who are Native Americans. So we bring back culture. We grow seeds from the tribe that are sacred. And we just have a blast. I mean, sometimes we have water fights because you can.

NINA MOINI: [LAUGHS] So you're also mentoring people. What is the advice that you give to people? Because not everybody would go their own direction. Sometimes a lot of people rely on how it's been done in the past.

NOREEN Exactly. So I'm a senior fellow at the University of Minnesota. I talked them into it. And I said, if we can do 10

THOMAS: farms, I can prove with a mentor that we can outperform the market. And they said, I think she's just crazy enough to do that. So we are developing markets right here, Fargo-Moorhead, with direct sales to New York, to Manhattan, to California, to a cracker company.

Because when you get older, you're fearless. You don't have all this junk that says you can't, you won't. You're just like, you know, I think I can. And who's going to-- you just do it. You become scrappy. A lot of them are women under the age of 30, and they're coming back to their family farms and they're looking for their place. So together, we can share machinery, we can share seeds, we can share market.

And I'm just enough scrappy to go into the banker and say, you know what? She deserves a loan. I can show you the paperwork. And usually they kind of listen to me because I think they get sick of me coming in and talking to them. Or USDA, any other programs. We've got onboarded over \$180,000 that we got back from USDA money because I said, I think the women deserve this, and we got it.

NINA MOINI: I love what you're saying about being fearless. And I feel like-- I'm not there yet. But I feel like part of being fearless is because you've had some quote unquote "failures," or you've had some things that didn't go well or some things maybe you experimented with. And you're like, oh, we got to pivot or switch directions. How do you handle those moments throughout all of your experimentation and your career here?

NOREEN Those are teachable. I am constantly pivoting. One of my fun stories is that my husband had oats. So we're going

THOMAS: to make rolled oats. Because I decided that, you know, I think this is great. Grandpa ate. It's 400% more nutrients than anything on the shelf. And we got wild oats in there.

Now, if any of you farm, if you say wild oats, they all squinch. Like, oh, that's a weed and it's going to take over and blah, blah, blah. So I said, you know what? I think we should try it. So we took the wild oats that he had cleaned off, that he would have just put on the compost pile. And I tasted it and I said, these are great!

So I sold them to a chef in New York. And he said, do you have any more? And I didn't dare tell my husband because he was like, wow. So it's pivoting and looking at things differently. You're going to fail. That's part of life. Don't be afraid of it. It's experience.

One of my other things that I kind of failed at is that I started rolling things, flaking a cereal. And I got all the other grains from the other women. And I said, you know what? I think I can make a cereal. And they said, OK, Noreen. And we had a 7-grain cereal that's the number one seller at some of the area restaurants. And it was a mistake because I just like kept combining them. And now they have market share. So sometimes you just have to-- you have to pivot, and quickly.

NINA MOINI: Noreen, thank you so much for coming by and telling us about all of your work. I love your message about just getting in touch with the ground and the land around you, and paying more attention to what just shows up on our plate and where it comes from. Thank you so much.

NOREEN Thank you.

THOMAS:

[APPLAUSE]