



MARL Success Stories: Whitney Place (Class VIII)

Whitney Place has built an impressive career in the agriculture industry. One of the important building blocks in her growth came during Place's involvement in the Minnesota Agriculture and Rural Leadership (MARL) program. A Class VIII graduate, Place views her MARL experience as a turning point in her career, where she jumped to the next level.

Agriculture Background

Raised in Okabena, Minnesota, Place spent much of her time on her grandparents' farms. In high school, with her dad as her ag teacher, she participated in FFA and discovered her love for plants.

"I ran our school greenhouse and participated in plant focused career development events," Place says.

After high school, Place attended the University of Minnesota to pursue a career in plant breeding. She realized it wasn't the career for her. Place instead shifted her focus to agricultural issues.

"I interned at the National Farmers Union in Washington, D.C., and fell in love with the work," she says, "so I decided to go to policy school."

Place spent nearly a decade with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, working on a range of agriculture issues, from water quality to rural mental health. In early 2022, President Biden appointed Place the executive director of the Minnesota Farm Service Agency (FSA). Her new duties include overseeing state and district staff, as well as all the county offices and farm programs that serve Minnesota farmers.

"(Whitney) has been a valuable member of our team and I look forward to continuing to work with her at the FSA on issues and policies affecting farmers in our state," MDA Commissioner Thom Petersen said.

The Decision

Early in her career, Place was encouraged by many to apply to MARL. Ultimately, she decided to apply because she was in the trade show circuit and the MARL booth was always there. Everyone got to know each other by the end of the season and the program remained in the back of her mind.

"I didn't think I would get in right away because I was younger and at the beginning of my career," Place says, "but it was great timing, and I was supported by many people in the ag sector throughout the interview process."

The Experience

Place names the international trip to Vietnam as a highlight of her time in the program. The trip, an immersive 2-week experience, allows participants to meet new people and experience ag issues in a new way.

Participants also walk away from the program with an extensive network of professionals in the industry. Furthermore, graduates develop lifelong friends.

“It’s rare that a day goes by that I’m not talking to someone who has gone through the program,” Place says. “We stay in touch and usually see each other at ag conferences.”

Professionally, MARL provides development through various activities that graduates can draw upon years down the road.

“Each session is held in a different part of the state, where we would learn about the local economy and its issues,” Place says. “There were professional development components, but then we would go tour a local lumber facility or go to a state park and learn about environmental problems.”

To Apply or Not to Apply?

As she takes the next step in her career, Place appreciated that MARL provided her the opportunity to improve herself, both in her professional and personal life.

“When you’re in your career, you get busy doing tasks and gathering knowledge in your field,” she says, “but MARL gave me the opportunity to reflect and develop myself into the leader I wanted to be.”

For those wondering whether the commitment the program requires is worth their investment, Place has a few wise words.

“My advice is to do it,” Place says. “If you are thinking about a leadership role, even if it’s your local county soybean board, your township board or your church board, there is a lot of value in this program.”

Applications for the next season of Minnesota Agriculture and Rural Leadership (2022-2024) are now accepted. Apply online by April 29, 2021: www.marlprogram.org/applications.