

A Saskatchewan Example: Lessons from Farm in the Dell

Farm in the Dell is a nonprofit charitable organization near Aberdeen, Saskatchewan, that provides residential and vocational opportunities for adults experiencing disability in a rural farm-like setting.

Krista and Lynette, the founders of Farm in the Dell, worked together for many years at a school where they supported students with disabilities, as well as providing respite and working in group homes. Over time, they observed a need for more residential and vocational services in Saskatchewan.

Lynette and Krista met the founder of Farm in the Dell International based out of Helena, Montana in the United States, who encouraged them to consider starting their own farm. In 2007, they toured some of the homes and programs run by Farm in the Dell in Helena, gathered resources, and researched what would be needed to create a similar service in Saskatchewan. What started as an idea to open a group home, grew into a dream to build a farm, where people who experience disability could work, live, and experience farm life every day.

Next, they hosted a community presentation and gathered everyone they could find that might be interested in their idea – teachers, educational assistants, families, and community members. The positive response they received gave them the encouragement they needed to move forward, and they set to work building their team. When talking about the importance of building your team, Lynette shared:

“You need to have Board members who know what they are doing. This means including business members, an accountant, a lawyer, someone who is great at fundraising.”

Although they are not officially a member of Farm in the Dell International, Krista and Lynette sought permission to use the name Farm in the Dell for their project, and in 2008 Farm in the Dell became an incorporated nonprofit charitable organization in Saskatchewan. They continue to connect regularly with the international organization.

Once incorporated, they presented their idea to the Government of Saskatchewan - Ministry of Social Services, and in 2009 they received a government contract to begin building the farm. Krista and Lynette were officially hired to get the business side of the organization moving – developing policies and procedures, human resources systems, planning, and much more over the next several months.

Things moved quickly as they worked to find suitable land and get approval from the rural municipality. With this approval, they completed the purchase of the land. Next came quotes from several builders, and with the expertise and support of knowledgeable Board members, a builder was selected and construction began.

As their first house neared completion, hiring for support staff began in summer 2010. Krista, Lynette, and the other staff then spent a month doing training and preparing the house for the first clients to move in. Farm in the Dell officially opened its doors in September 2010.

Reflecting on the experience, Lynette shared some lessons and advice for people who are thinking about starting an organization in the Disability Service sector. This advice includes:

- It's a huge job to get started, and at first you have to volunteer your time and energy. Both Lynette and Krista continued to work full time elsewhere while spending their free time on the project until they had a contract and could become paid employees. Lynette said, *"For a while, it will take over your life. It's exhausting and it takes a ton of work, but it is also so rewarding!"*
- If possible, they encourage people to go to an already established organization with their idea and discuss opportunities for partnership.
- When you find great staff, train them well and promote from within.
- Networking and getting to know people who can help you achieve your goals is a key part of getting started – this includes community members and neighbours, businesses, and government officials.

Farm in the Dell has continued to grow, with the addition of a second home and supported independent living suite. They are pleased to provide services for people who want to live in a rural setting, and take pride in being part of the farm community.