

AGRICULTURE



Anne Waltner grew up the Freeman community and returned two years ago to become a full-time farmer — and eventually a mother. She and her husband, Rolf Olson, are the parents of triplets Lydia, Alice and Greta. SUBMITTED PHOTO

From music professor to farmer (and mother of triplets)

Anne Waltner returns to this agriculturally-rooted land for the love of community

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✍ FOR THE COURIER

After years of study, work and practice, Anne Waltner's career as a music professor was just taking off. She held the position of Assistant Professor of Music at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) in Harrisonburg, Va. She was an accomplished and sought-after piano performer and accompanist. While a position at EMU, a small Mennonite university, might not seem attractive to everyone, for someone like Waltner, who is committed to the institutions of her Mennonite heritage, it could be seen as the beginning of a long and distinguished career. She would have had peers in every generation who envied her success.

Then Waltner gave it all up to become a farmer in rural South Dakota. It began with several seasonal summer farming expeditions renting land on her parent's farm smack in

the middle between the towns of Freeman, Parker, and Hurley. Then, two years ago, she left her teaching position at EMU to come home for good. Her parents, Keith and Sharon Waltner, were glad to welcome her home and enter into partnership with her in farming as they near retirement age. Unlike some young people who want to enter farming, Waltner and her family had both the means and the inclination to make that possible for her, and Waltner realizes how fortunate she is in that.

But still! Imagine giving up the security and the dream of a career in teaching and music for life on the farm? It isn't that Waltner doesn't love music and teaching and performance anymore. These endeavors occupied her life as a student and young adult pursuing just that career since she graduated from Freeman Academy some twenty years ago. As the school year recently began a second time without her, Waltner misses the classroom, and particularly giving music lessons to well-motivated students. And as her participation

as orchestra conductor at this past spring's Schmeckfest confirms, she continues to enjoy music performance as well. So what in the world motivated Waltner to make this drastic career change as an older young adult?

Waltner remembers that every move she made as a student and in her music career took her further east away from this rural, agrarian landscape where she had grown up—first from Goshen (Ind.) College to a three-year stint teaching at Woodstock School in India. From there she completed a master's degree in Chicago, a doctorate and artist diploma in Cleveland, and assistant professorships in West Virginia and Virginia. The further away she moved, the more homesick she got for this land that had shaped her. But farming wasn't particularly a childhood dream for Waltner. She saw how hard her parents worked on the farm, the long hours they put in year after year. She knew the challenges and risks of making a living on the land, even with the advantages she might have to begin with.

Waltner experienced the richness and strength growing up in a rural community provided for her. She grew up in a church

and school and community environment that encouraged her to develop her gifts. The heritage of the community gave her the sense of identity and the confidence to do that. Her years at Freeman Academy in particular gave her the foundation for pursuing her dreams. The agrarian culture of the rural community provides a distinct alternative to the dominant urban culture of American society.

So in the end, Waltner says, she came back to repay or give back or contribute to this rural community. And what else could someone like her do here but farm? It was the community, in other words, and not farming per se, that drew Waltner back to the farm, though she is eagerly learning about agriculture as well.

Returning to the larger Freeman community held a number of surprising riches for Waltner. First she met and soon married Rolf Olson, himself a music educator in the larger area. And then, lo and behold, they were blessed with triplets, girls born to them in May — Lydia, Alice and Greta. All of this has both complicated and enriched Waltner's



CONTINUED ON PAGE 12A: RETURN