



## **Over Three Years**

**By Theresia Gillie: Minnesota farmer, former president of the Minnesota Soybean Growers Association (MSGA), agriculture and mental health advocate, and widow of farmer Keith Gillie.**

It has been over three years since the day that Keith died by his own hand. The day he died by suicide. So many people want my farm to succeed even though Keith is gone; I have gotten and continue to feel love from near and far every day. I would like to share what it has been like for me these three years and how I am doing now.

I went to the emergency room twice. The first time was the morning after Keith died, and the second time was the day his death certificate showed up. I spent more than a year meeting with a counselor who helped me comprehend what happened and how to function. For a long time, I dreaded the nights. I don't know how many times I cried myself to sleep or how many nightmares woke me up. Those things still happen, just not as often as they used to. I still have anxiety attacks. I still feel guilty for what happened that day and wish I could go back and fix it. I wish I could go back and talk to Keith one more time. And, I also wish Keith had talked with someone. But, he didn't. He didn't talk to me either. Keith lost hope, and for a long time after he died by suicide, I lost hope, too.

I have had to search deep inside myself to find my resilience. As awful as I felt, my life had to go on...without Keith. I am fortunate to have a neighbor who comes and checks on me to make sure I am okay. It took me a while to accept the help I so badly needed, but now I accept it willingly. I also had to accept that what Keith did was by his own hand and to not blame myself. I had to start thinking of my life differently because the life I knew no longer existed. I began farming with my two neighbors and am still farming the land I own with them now. And, I still have a large ag real estate mortgage to pay.

During this time of COVID-19, all of our lives are different. Crop prices have dropped. Hogs are being euthanized. Milk is getting discarded. Processing plants are closing, and many are working at half capacity. This is a very stressful time for everyone in agriculture.

Now is a time to find your resilience! I truly believe that after this pandemic is over, things will be better for farmers. For the first time, consumers have not had all the choices they normally took for granted in the grocery store - or have been fearful of losing those choices. Shoppers have had to be more concerned about simply having food than the label on that food! And, they seem to be concerned about farmers and understand that we are growing and raising the food that is needed to fill everyone's table!

So, now is the time to think of your farm differently. Quit thinking of your farm as being family community property! The farm you farm is not grandpa's farm anymore. The equipment is different, the land is worked differently, the technology is more advanced. The seed genetics



are more advanced. Everything costs more money and is more complicated than before. Maybe you need to farm less land or have less livestock. Maybe you need to partner with your neighbors and share labor and equipment like I do. Maybe you need to quit and sell the farm. Stop worrying about the generations that farmed before you and start being more concerned about what is going to work for you and your family right now.

Farmers are talented, hard workers who don't understand working 9 to 5 and are more used to sunrise to sunset, so their stress builds fast during circumstances like C-19 that directly affect their livelihoods. If you are having trouble sleeping, get some help. Maybe your doctor can prescribe something to help you rest calmly at night. If you can't sleep, you can't reason to figure things out. Eat things that are healthy for you! Get some exercise, even if it is a walk with your spouse and kids. Hold hands! Get that fresh air! If you see a neighbor who is struggling, go help them! Maybe they can weld or are great with mechanics—have them help you! Farming is one of the few occupations that requires a large number of skills. You all have these marketable skills! You are so valuable and talented! Don't forget that.

I believe that there is a light at the end of this tunnel, and we are that light! We are the backbone of this economy, and the world needs us now more than ever! But mostly, WE NEED YOU! If you are having trouble and are overwhelmed, please call someone. Call a friend or a brother or pastor, or you can call counselor or help line! It is okay to ask for help! The soybean industry's #SoyHelp campaign is a click away online for farmers or anyone else - just search that hashtag and all sorts of resources near you related to ag or mental health in general are available, along with tips for families who may have someone like Keith who at this very moment needs help.

These past three years have been a hard journey for me, and a journey that was not of my choosing. I don't want anyone to have deal with what I have had to deal with these past three years. I am not sure the guilt I feel every day will ever go away. It may be something I am going to have to live with the rest of my life, but my journey does include trying to find happiness again.

If I asked you what the most important thing in your life is, I bet you would say your family! Please do this for me: Next time you see your spouse, give them a hug and kiss and tell them you love them! Hug your children. They are your most precious commodity. During this time of stress, take time to absorb the little things that make life special—the sunrises and sunsets, listening to the frogs, have a bonfire or a picnic with your loved ones. Please find your resilience and know that tomorrow is another new beginning!