

## 2023 HOPES Award

The HOPES Award is presented annually at the PSW Conference to an individual or organization who has demonstrated exceptional dedication to suicide prevention in Wisconsin. The HOPES Award is dedicated to Helping Others Prevent and Educate About Suicide, a group of suicide loss survivors who spearheaded Wisconsin's suicide prevention efforts for 19 years.

### Farmer Angel Network

The Farmer Angel Network started in 2018 when the Sauk County community pulled together after a farmer died by suicide. During this challenging time, community members reached out to the family to comfort, support, and listen as they worked through the emotions that followed. As some community members chatted about the extreme sadness and feeling of helplessness surrounding the family and community, a farmer shared they had also suffered from severe depression and battled many thoughts of suicide in the past.

At this point, they realized there was a need to support the community and families in similar situations. They created a safe space to come together and talk about farm stress and suicide over the lunch hour. They brought in speakers and resources to listen to and utilize during these difficult times. The farmer's family and other community members decided to share their stories to help others learn about farm stress and mental health concerns in rural communities, and Farmer Angel Network (FAN) formed.

FAN continues to build strong rural communities that support agriculture by providing education, resources, and fellowship with a focus on mental health. This group includes farmers, healthcare workers, veterinarians, Sauk County Health Department, Sauk County Land and Water Department, Extension Sauk County, Church members, HCE members, and many others from the Sauk County Community.

FAN efforts since 2018 are focused in three areas: Capacity building, building community and community outreach. These are further explained here.

**Capacity building** of skills/tools/resources for suicide prevention, farmer stress management and farmer health and wellness. FAN sponsored, organized and/or partnered with local organizations offering educational opportunities on:

- **Suicide prevention:**



*(Pictured are co-founders Dorothy Harms, Brenda Statz and Randy Roecker)*

- LivingWorks safeTALK – Many classes offered with well over 100 participants for local hospital staff, emergency response services, and community members in Sauk and Richland counties. Also supporting FAN board member in becoming a trainer in order to offer more sessions in Sauk county and surrounding counties.
- LivingWorks ASIST – Supported FAN board members in completing this 2-day training
- Mental Health First Aid – Many classes offered with close to 100 participants from local healthcare organizations, public health agencies, county agencies, agri-business and community members in Sauk and Columbia counties.
- QPR for Suicide Prevention – Offered several virtual sessions open to community. Participants from Sauk, Richland, and Dane counties.
- **Farm stress management** topics provided in person and virtual over the years have included topics such as I am the Farm, managing farm transitions, succession planning, financial planning, breaking the farm stress cycle, and shifting gears. In addition to the day of attendance, video recordings have been posted have many additional views.
- **Farmer health and wellness** topics have also been provided in person and virtual over the years and have included topics such as better sleep, We Cope skills, parenting skills, farm women wellness and more. Many of these recordings have been made available.

**Community building** has been done to offer farmers, farm workers and their families a place of fellowship. We have found that many ways farmers used to socialize are no longer available, so are creating spaces for the ag community to come together. These include lunches with table talk, ice cream socials (including drive thru options), walks, family movie nights, couples movie nights, barn bash/pizza nigh, and bike rides. FAN works with our partners to support, coordinate, and host the events including covering ticket costs for participants. Thousands have attended these events including large community events where FAN hosted a specific activity such as Sauk County fair, Juneau County fair, Beat the Blues Cruise Walk, Plain Strassenfest, etc.

**Community outreach** has had a vast reach with many social media, newspaper articles, radio spots, and television spots and documentaries. These explain the work of FAN, breaking the stigma of mental health and resources for farmers. Highlights are shown here but unable to include a full list:

- News articles: The Washington Post, The New York Times, USA Today, many other national media publications such as American Agriculturist, Rural Realities, Rural Route, Successful Farming, Dairy Star, Lutheran Living, state/local newspapers such as The Journal Sentinel, Wisconsin State Journal, Capital Times.
- Radio spots: National and local spots including Rural Realities podcast, Newsradio 1360 WTAQ, Dairy Radio Now
- Television: PBS Earth Focus: For the Love of the Land documentary, PBS short news spot, NBC Nightly News (national) and even an international news story out of London

- National Conferences: FAN co-founders have spoken at national conferences including Farm Journal's MILK Business Conference and American Farm Bureau Federations national conventions.
- Community events: FAN participates in many state and local community events in Sauk, Dane, Columbia, Richland, and Juneau counties with displays, activities, and resources where thousands of attendees interact with FAN board members. Events include Farm Aid, Fermentation Fest, Farm Art D'Tour, county fairs, dairy breakfasts, community days, etc.
- Email subscriptions, Facebook page, and Website – FAN manages a subscription email newsletter/announcements, Facebook page and website to share information, events and resources to help us achieve our mission. This includes approximately 100 subscribers, 700 Facebook followers, and in just 2 months since publishing the website over 350 unique visitors.

In addition, FAN works to share this model for other communities to development. Currently working with a group from Menomonie, WI to establish an eastern Wisconsin chapter for example. All of this work has been accomplished with a board of directors of fewer than ten active members. The founders of FAN include the widow of a farmer who died by suicide and a farmer who shares openly living with depression and prior suicidal ideations. They have rallied non-stop to avoid even one more suicide in our area. They have brought together a powerhouse of resources to the board to make an impact not only in Sauk County but across the state, nation and even internationally.

*Farmer Angel Network was nominated by Christy Wehler, CPHQ, Transformation Program Manager at Sauk Prairie Healthcare, volunteer on Farmer Angel Network Board Committees, and co-owner of a family farm.*