

Maria Van Bommel

By Carol Stewart-Kirkby

Maria Van Bommel — farmer, wife, mother, agricultural advocate and activist — says she has come home.

After farming with her husband, Rene, in the Belmont area (just south of London), Maria and her family are now settled in Parkhill, also in Middlesex, where she was born and raised.

"It's nice coming back to a place you know well. Some of the children are older now, but I still know who belongs to who," Maria explained.

Maria and Rene faced financial difficulties on their farm to finish operation in Belmont. Now they are rebuilding. Maria expects to be farming full time this spring while Rene operates his sub-contracting business in London.

"We are being much more cautious this time around, especially when it comes to debt. We don't want to carry a lot of debt. We have been making repairs to the barns in preparation for the spring, but we've been paying for those repairs as we go," Maria said.

Maria is not afraid to speak out about the loss of the Belmont farm, in fact she says, she has a tendency to speak out on lots of issues which she finds important. It was her desire to learn more about agricultural issues, and have her say, which led her into an involvement with farming organizations which continues today.

"I stayed home and farmed full time after my first child was born. I went to commodity meetings and federation meetings but noticed women didn't attend — they only came to the banquets," Maria explained. When she asked why this was, she discovered many women were unsure of the issues and unwilling to ask questions which may embarrass themselves and their spouse. In other words, she realized there was a need to educate women on agricultural issues.

After attending a couple of conferences and meeting up with other women in the Middlesex area who



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had similar observations and concerns, Maria became involved in organizing what is now Women for the Support of Agriculture (WSA).

Since then, Maria has participated in many other agricultural organizations. She was on the steering committee for the Turning Point Conference. Maria was Ontario Coordinator for the second and third National Farm Women's Conference as well as Ontario's representative to the National Farm Women's Network. She is a member of the Liaison Committee of Ontario Farm Organizations and is currently on the executive of the Middlesex Federation of Agriculture. And, Maria is still a member of the WSA.

At the moment, however, Maria is "taking a year off". She wants to take

a break from her hectic list of commitments to agricultural organizations and get re-energized.

"The last year has been very busy. I was beginning to feel burned out," Maria admits.

At the third National Farm Women's Conference in November, Rennie Feddema was named Ontario's Coordinator. Maria is spending some time with Rennie to make the transition.

As someone very involved in the national farm women's scene, Maria says she has seen some development over the last few years, but the November conference seemed to present some contradictions.

"The idea of a network at the national level for farm women was presented to allow existing organizations

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