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FEATURED

Montana Farmers Union holds Eastern Women's Conference

By Greg Hitchcock | The Sidney Herald
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Attendees of the Montana Farmers Union Women's Conference met this weekend in Sidney.

Greg Hitchcock



In a darkened room on a large screen, a furrowed, sunbaked aged woman peers directly at the audience of women gathered around a speaker to hear the woman's story.

The elderly woman stares over a distance of 100 years into the present; the woman could be anyone's great-grandmother, but it is Courtney Kibblewhite's, the keynote speaker of Friday's event held at the Elk's Lodge, 123 3rd St. SW in Sidney.



Keynote speaker Courtney Kittlewhite talks about the power of family stories on Friday.

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Attendees met over the weekend for the Montana Farmers Union Women's Conference for workshops, panel discussions, networking, and presentations.

Kibblewhite's great-grandmother was Nannie Alderson, a 19th-century pioneer wife and author who wrote about life and loneliness among the plains of Montana.

"We have grit in our blood," Kibblewhite said about Montanans.

"By framing family stories optimistically", Kibblewhite said, "our way of thinking about ourselves improves".

Kibblewhite, the Vice President of Northern Broadcasting System in Billings, said she had many opportunities to feel differently. She related when she was in a Phd program, she failed to pass her exams twice.

"I felt worthless. If we are not careful, our mental health can erode," she said.

By falling back on family stories and family values, Kittlewhite said this can bring people back to positive feelings.

Images of the Marlboro Man and Yellowstone were then displayed on screen.

“To romanticize the ‘tough’ cowboy is to mask the tenderness inside us,” she said. “Our values are taking care of the land, our neighbors, animals, the joy in simple things, our heritage and our legacy.”

Kittlewhite presented two concepts: a deficit-focused/opportunity-focused approach and the three Ps. The Deficit-focused approach is when people are focused on what they don't have. The opportunity-focused approach to what they do have.

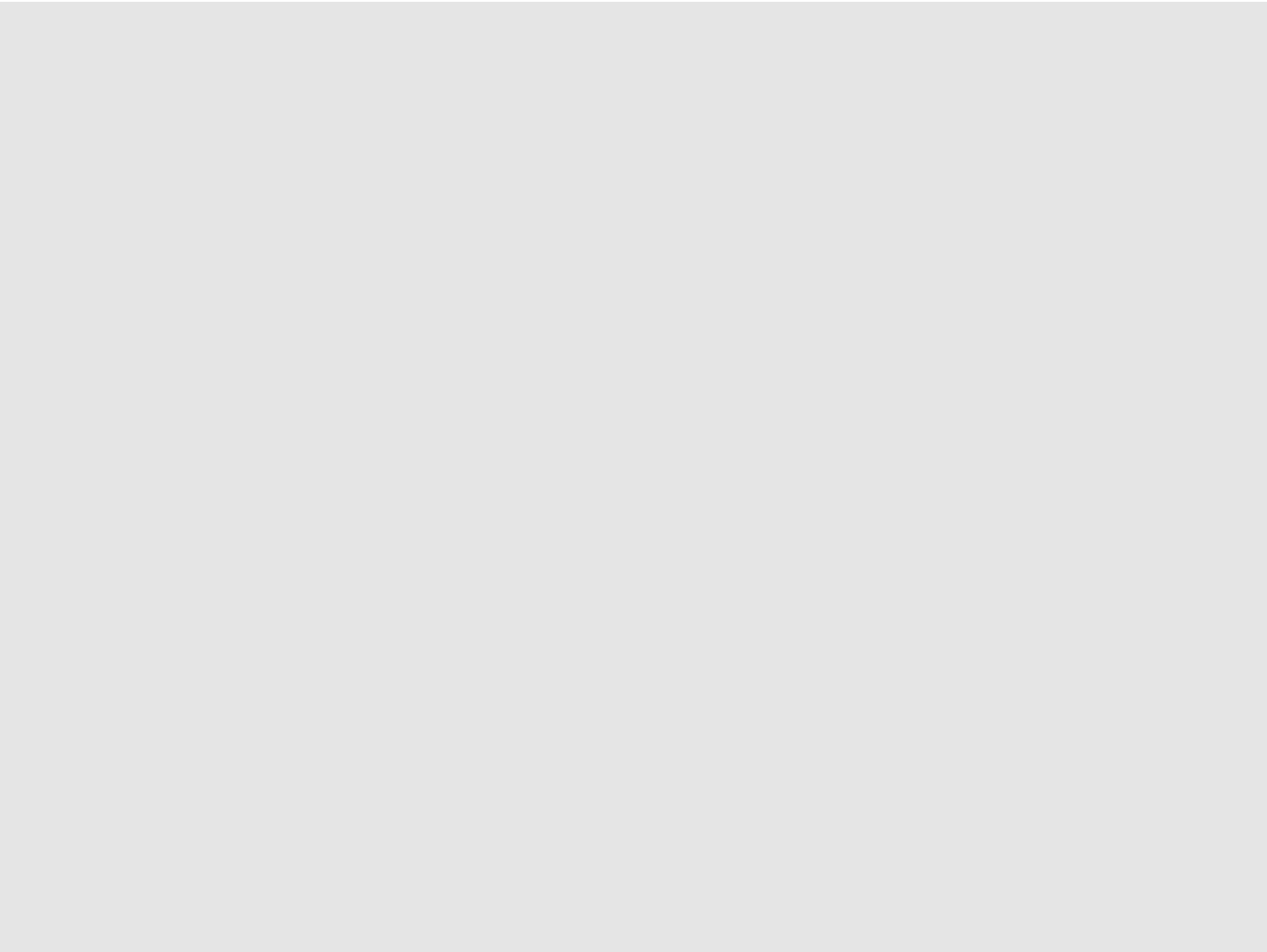
“We manage our own healthcare out in the plains. We have a lack of resources so we must be resourceful ourselves,” she said.

The three Ps are pervasiveness, permanence, and personal. Will this problem last forever and who is to blame for the problem?

Kittlewhite concluded her presentation with a video from beyondtheweather.com, a website meant to help Montana farmers and ranchers manage their mental health.

“We are resourceful and hardworking. I want to pass these values on to my children,” Kittlewhite said. “If we don't think deeply enough of our stories passed down to us, we get lost.”

“Stories do have the power to change our minds,” she said.



From left to right. Haylie Shipp, Communications & Outreach Lead, Ranchers Stewardship Alliance; Angel DeVries, Executive Director, Ranchers Stewardship Alliance; and Kelly Beevers, Winnett ACES member speak about succession planning.

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Saturday brought a full day of workshops, panel discussions and networking. A presentation on the Perennial Roots Program: Succession Planning was held by Haylie Shipp and Angel DeVries of the Ranchers Stewardship Alliance and Kelly Beevers of Winnett ACES.

Winnert ACES is a collaborative formed in 2016 by ranchers coming together to share costs, resources, community, and workshops.

Ranchers Stewardship Alliance, formed in 2003, likewise was formed by ranchers.

“How do we keep ranchers from selling their ranches and how do we better help landowners utilize their land?” DeVries said. “Education plays an important part.”

Perennial Roots is a joint program of the RSA and ACES that tackles these issues.

The program works with large conservation organizations like the World Wildlife Fund and The Nature Conservancy that align with ranchers goals of conserving land.

“If someone does not have a succession plan in place, how do we make the land sustainable?” Shipp said.

Perennial Roots has three working points: Succession planning is never done; there are never enough resources; and there are individual options suitable for individual cases. 16.5% of ranches survive to a 3rd generation of ownership. Inadequate succession planning is the biggest threat.

“The real problem is ranchers are not thinking down the road twenty to thirty years about planning for succession or what may happen. They are not thinking about when they are not on their ranches anymore,” Shipp said.

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