

JUDI SCHARNS

RETIRED, SUSTAINABLE TOURISM COUNCIL
& FOUNDER OF MOUNTAIN KEEPERS



A BRWIA Profile Written by Tathel Miller

As one of the founding mothers of Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture, Judi Scharns was very influential in the beginning of the organization. Judi and her husband were establishing their organic farm, Dragonfly Farm at the time, but it was on a road trip to present a grant request to Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation on behalf of Mountain Keepers that she and Watauga County Extension Agent Sue Counts shared with each other their thoughts on the need for an organization in the High Country for women farmers.

In 1999, Judi and Sue served together on the Sustainable Tourism Council, a council that Sue developed. While working on the council together Judi had the unique opportunity to join in with other Cooperative Extension workers on a camping trip to the New England states and learn from their experiences while there.

I think I was the only one that wasn't employed by the Cooperative Extension on the trip," Judi says with a laugh. "When we came back from this trip, we decided the Sustainable Tourism Counsel was just too narrowly focused. We then created the Mountain Keepers. Sue and I had applied to Z. Smith Reynolds for a grant, and we were driving down to Winston Salem to pitch and defend our grant application.

"And on the way down we said, wouldn't it be nice to do something for women in agriculture and show more women how it doesn't take acres and acres to farm and that they can really do this if they're specialize and focus on a small plot of land, even just a quarter of an acre.

"So, we go into the meeting to promote the Mountain Keepers grant and then began talking about this "women in ag" thing. The executive director at the time was so intrigued because one of their missions was to support women and agriculture. He said, go back, get your organization together and bring me a proposal. We were so excited, and we got the grant for the Mountain Keepers too."



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Ruthie Blakely’s Master Thesis, *Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture: Resistance and Persistence of the Small Farmer in Northwestern North Carolina* included an interview (2003) with Judi and in the interview, Judi was quoted as saying this, “They’ve (women in agriculture) been unrecognized in agriculture. They’ve been there. They’ve been doing the work. They’ve been the backbone, but like the backbone, you don’t see it. But that’s what gives everything shape and form.”

The beginning of Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture didn’t come without obstacles and hurdles, but the persistence of those who chose to work together and overcome the barriers is evident in the strength of the organization today. And Judi is thankful to have had the opportunity to work with Sue, a woman who also refused to see the barriers as a reason to quit.

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Judi recently moved back to Boone, a place she has always called home and is busy with her rental property and her photography.

“I still like gardening and photography is my passion, but mostly since moving back to Boone, I’ve been spending my time reconnecting with people,” Judi says. “I have lived in Boone, Oregon, Colorado, Alaska, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, and was born and raised in Southern Florida. Now I’m back home. This (Boone) is home. This is where my heart has been for years. I’m very happy to be back here and there’s so many more happy people here.”

