On a warm day in July Amanda Owens is at ease candling eggs in the cool confines of “the cave,” a small apartment room in a building at her family’s 480 acre, multi-enterprise farm outside of Estelline, SD. Farming has always played a role in Amanda’s life and after pursuing other interests for a few years the tug of farming pulled her back. “I came to a point where I knew I wanted to pursue farming but I didn’t know how to move forward. Should I go on my own and start or should I figure out my role in the family farm?” At the time Amanda was an active member of Dakota Rural Action and heard that DRA was hosting a course called Farm Beginnings, a farmer-led training program that gives participants the tools to launch their own farm business. Amanda signed up. “My goal in taking the class was to come out with a concrete business plan that laid out my next steps.”

Over the winter Amanda attended twice a month classes taught by local farmers and ag professionals on topics such as Whole Farm Planning, Business and Financial Planning, Marketing, and Connecting with Resources. “Being able to hear directly from successful farmers was a big plus. You can learn from their experiences and mistakes. It’s also nice to see no one is perfect,” says Amanda. “The class is very approachable. It’s not taught in a way that assumes you should know everything already.” Amanda also learned a more holistic approach for farm planning. “I learned that you don’t just budget for money, you also budget for time, people, and so on. Specifically, you need to plan for quality of life. Budgeting down time is important because with a farm it’s easy to get caught up before realizing you haven’t slept or seen your family in three days.”

The class also helped provide a platform to spur family conversation around the direction of the farm. “The course work gave my family an objective reason to talk about decisions,” says Amanda. “Tough conversations were brought up and no one felt picked on. We just looked at the homework and said ‘We need to talk about this because it’s on this piece of paper.’” She
says the class helped to put everyone on the same page, something she says can be difficult with the variety of enterprises on the farm as well as differing personalities.

Over the course of the class Amanda says it became apparent that the best course of action was to join in the family farm. “There were so many more resources available in joining the farm because everything was already set up.” Amanda was hired by her Dad and she moved home. Over the past several years she has been working with the family helping run their grain operation and herd of grass-fed Belted Galloway cattle. She has also manages her own operation called “Star Grazing in SD” which includes a small herd of Katahdin sheep she markets directly as grass-fed lamb, pastured eggs she calls “Henfruit” and handmade soap she sells under the label “Foam on the Range.”

Since taking the class the family has grown as Amanda married last year and her husband Dave joined the family farm operation as an employee as well. The farm family will grow again this fall as Amanda and Dave are expecting their first child together in September. “Dave is a welcome addition to the farm enterprise. He has a background as a mechanic which has allowed us to upgrade a lot of the equipment around here.” His addition also means having more people involved in the farm’s visioning process. “A big part of Farm Beginnings is working with the farm as a whole, which includes the land, people, and resources. So finding a balance with everyone’s goals and personalities is important. Even though I haven’t picked up my class binder much since finishing the class it has affected the family’s mentality about farming and molded us into who we are today.”

Amanda views Farm Beginnings as an excellent investment in her farming career. “Farm Beginnings was worth every penny,” Amanda says. “It gets you out of your farmer box and into your business person box. You can’t feed yourself on dreams alone and the class gives you a dose of reality. The tools offered in the class work for any farming enterprise or method and provide a path for turning those dreams into something real. You can have all the goals in the world but without tools you can’t turn them into reality.”