

In stark contrast to the rest of the empty building, Susan Sokol Blosser's office on the second floor of the old, Victorian house is tidy and cheerful. The room reflects her personality, with prayer flags and antique furniture that once belonged to her mother. Sun trickles in through the window, naturally lighting the small office.

Among the many things that she is passionate about, environmental issues are something that Susan has long felt strongly about. The Sokol Blosser Winery, which began as a vineyard in 1971 and is located near Dundee, Ore., is known for its sustainable business model and practices.

From the way they farm, to the way things are packaged, the kinds of cleaning materials that are being used, and what products are carried in the tasting room, Susan and her family strive to keep the winery sustainable in every way possible.

"Being environmentally friendly means that you have, first of all, respect for the Earth and for all living things. It means that we as humans are part of the food chain— we're not in control of it," Susan said.

There is a framework for looking at sustainability that Susan used as a model for her business. It's a system called the Natural Step, which came from Sweden.

"[Natural Step] probably sounds better in Swedish. In English, it sounds like an orthopedic shoe," Susan said, laughing.

The philosophy says: Don't take things out of the Earth that aren't renewable, such as oil. Don't make things out of things that you take out of the Earth that do not biodegrade, like plastics. Don't put so much stress on the environment that nature can't respond.

"In other words, don't degrade wetlands, don't overfish the oceans, and don't kill the coral reefs— all the kinds of things that humans have done in trying to dominate nature," she explained. Nobody can accomplish all of these things, but if a business can strive toward all those things, it would be environmentally friendly.

Susan first learned about this system at a convention that was taught by a Swedish oncologist. He concluded that most cancers and diseases were all environmentally caused. We should be treating the cause of these diseases, instead of treating the symptoms and trying to find a cure, she said.

This convention was Susan's "a-ha" moment. She realized how unsustainable her lifestyle and business were. It inspired her to use the Natural Step as a lens for how she looked at the world and her winery.

"I decided that my new goal was to be sustainable across the operation, and that took a number of years," Susan said.

The Sokol Blosser Winery was the first in the world to have a LEED-certified building, which stands for Leadership in Engineering and Environmental Design. The people at the winery decided to make an environmental statement with their new barrel cellar in 2002, and they went after the certification. They got it.

"You have to look at the whole. It's not just about how you eat, how you farm, or if you have solar panels. It's everything. Learn the Natural Step and look at the world through that lens," Susan said.

Many people define sustainability in small areas. If they farm organically, then they think they must be sustainable. However, if you then use harsh chemicals or unsustainable packaging materials, you've gone against that model.

Susan has always had drive, passion and an appetite for life. Growing up in Milwaukee, Wisc., Susan had an early curiosity about the world and a desire to travel. She satisfied that thirst with a trip to Japan when she was a teenager. At the time, traveling overseas, for a girl or anyone in the Midwest, was a big deal. It expanded her worldview and taught her valuable lessons.

"I had to look up where Japan was on the map. I was totally oriented to Europe. Going to Japan was a fabulous experience. Everything Japanese was wonderful," she said.

Susan attended Stanford University, where she studied American history with a focus on the American South. Susan felt born to go to college, and the experience opened her mind in more ways than she thought possible.

At that time, she said, educated women had about three choices. They could be a social worker, a nurse or a teacher. So after Stanford, newlyweds Susan and Bill moved to Oregon, and Susan went to Reed College to receive her teaching credentials. She was soon hired to

teach by a principal who wanted her to use her natural innovation in the classroom. A new principal came along shortly after that and didn't find her quite as appealing.

"That principal was much more conservative, and when I did those more innovative things, he wanted to get rid of me," Susan said. "One of my favorite quotes he said about me is, 'When I think of Susan Blosser, my ulcer acts up.'"

Susan's husband's education took them back to North Carolina, where Susan got a job in a library where private manuscripts were kept. There were letters that people had written during the Civil War, journal entries and diaries from colonial days.

"My specialty was history of the South, so I was in heaven processing all of these manuscripts. I'd still be there because I thought that was so interesting."

Her husband then had the idea to start a winery, and back to Oregon they went, in their Volkswagen camper bus. Susan was pregnant at the time, and their first son was born the same week the two bought their first piece of vineyard property.

"The old saying, 'It takes 20 years to be an overnight success,' is really true, except in our case it took 30. People ask me, 'When did you know that you were going to be successful?' And I say, 'Last year,'" Susan joked.

The wine business was a new thing and people weren't aware of the fact that there was wine in Oregon. When Susan and her husband traveled out of Oregon, they would take a map so they could show anyone who asked where Oregon was.

Susan decided to run for state representative of Oregon in 2010. She thought that her experience in agriculture, as a teacher and as a small business owner would be useful in bringing new perspectives to decision making.

"I thought our community, our state, the nation, the world is in a time of crisis. We know that we can't continue doing things the way we have been. It's also a time of tremendous opportunity. We need to reinvent our economy and I wanted to be part of that discussion," she said. She believed she had something to offer. So she decided to step up and offer it.

Although she didn't win the election, Susan remains active in the community. With the support and momentum from her campaign, she began a nonprofit organization called Yamhill

Profile Article
By Kelsey Sutton
October, 2012

Enrichment Society. She was able to get a board that is interested in issues like education in the arts, food, agriculture, history and community.

“This is really an entrepreneurial opportunity and organization,” she said. “The idea is that if one of us comes up with a project that we think would benefit the community and fits these parameters, and if we could convince the rest of the board that it’s a good idea, then we’ll make it happen.”

Among her accomplishments, Susan is currently working on a third book.

“The transition from president of Sokol Blosser, which I’d been for 17 years, to turning that over to two of my children was really hard. It was kind of like giving up my identity. What struck me was that all the buzz all your life is about accumulation,” Susan said. “You want to accumulate knowledge, you want to accumulate influence, you want to accumulate money and things and love and, you know, you just want to gather all of this to you. Nobody talks about letting it go. But it’s something that everyone faces in some way.”

Though the working title for her new book is “Letting Go,” Susan sees opportunity for growth in every day that passes, spreading her knowledge and watching over her beloved winery.