Driven: Advancing Rural Development Through Research

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Recommended Citation
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Sarah Low was supposed to be training for the Washington D.C. Triathlon, not immobilized in a neck-to-hip brace.

Low (’02 public service and administration in agriculture) didn’t get to do the 2010 triathlon. The car-bike accident during her commute made sure of that. But she was able to celebrate several victories along her six-month journey to recovery.

One was continuing to work—from her bed—as an economist in the Farm and Rural Business Branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service. “I drew on my indomitable spirit, developed through TaeKwonDo, to continue working. An intern I supervised that summer said I was the most hard-working and demanding supervisor she’d had, despite the fact I was immobilized. I was tickled pink,” Low says.

Low conducts research on farm and rural business and rural economic development. The outreach and policy-relevance of her work drives her. She wants what she does to create economic opportunities for people in rural areas. “I am often asked to summarize the current state of research for members of Congress. I recently briefed the Deputy Secretary of Agriculture on my local food marketing research. I just love taking calls from graduate students or economic development practitioners who have questions about my research. These are the outlets in which I can make a difference,” she says.

She’s done work on rural entrepreneurship and innovation, rural broadband accessibility and she’ll be delving into rural manufacturing resilience next.

Low’s list of published research and presentations is lengthy, especially for a young professional, and continues to grow. She has a master’s in agricultural economics from Purdue and a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in agricultural and consumer economics.

As a student at Iowa State, Low participated in precursor courses that now are part of the college’s Agricultural Entrepreneurship Initiative. The native of Maysville, Iowa, also enjoyed getting her hands dirty.

“Working at the ISU dairy farm as part of the freshman honors program was a lot of fun. I’m so glad I got to experience that. I remember going directly to my first class of the day smelling like, well, a dairy farm,” Low says.

Low was known on campus for her involvement in the Government of the Student Body, which was very influential in shaping her career. She also fondly recalls the support of mentors like Liz Beck, then director of the campus honors program, and her academic adviser, Steve Padgitt, professor of sociology.

“I’ll never forget Dr. Padgitt giving me a copy of the Main Street Economist, a publication of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. I was enthralled. I did research on the author and decided that I wanted a job like hers when I grew up,” Low says. “Less than three years later, I was in the cubicle next to her, writing about rural economic development issues for the Main Street Economist.”

That same drive and focus allowed her to get back on her bike. Eighteen months after her accident, she finished a sprint triathlon. She still bikes to work on occasion and trains with the DC Triathlon Club.