



CLASS 7: AG LEADERSHIP'S FIRST WOMEN PAVED THE WAY

In 1970, Ag Leadership's first class of 30 farmers and allied industry representatives were inaugurated into what would become the most respected and longest-running leadership development program of its kind. It would be six years before women were allowed into the program. In 1976, Ag Leadership's first women—Judy Camarillo, Lyra Halprin and Jean Rotta—were inaugurated alongside their 27 male classmates to form Class 7.

As pioneers in Ag Leadership, Camarillo, Halprin and Rotta say they were proud to have earned their spot in the elite program. Although they came from diverse backgrounds and had different experiences, all three agree that the program was an impactful and life-changing opportunity.

Judy Camarillo



Q: How did it feel to be in the first class that accepted women?

It was a tremendous privilege. It took a lot of guts for all the interviewers to pick three women who would be part of the class. When I read all of the stuff that the female alumni have done, I feel very strongly that the women have proved themselves to be a vital part of the Ag Leadership Program.

We blazed a trail. From a personal and professional standpoint, the California Ag Leadership Program has been unbelievably valuable to me and it has given me a perspective to raise my three daughters and given me a perspective in management. I've spent 40-50 years in personnel management and everyday I use something that I learned in Ag Leadership.

We came out of it with so much of a world view. When I look at what's on the news and what's happening, I understand it so much better because of the time I spent in Washington, D.C. and on our international seminar.

Q: What kind of obstacles did you encounter during your time in the program?

We were under a microscope. I'm sure that the powers that be were really worried about what women would do to the program. Would we step up to the plate? Everyone was watching, holding their breath. It was a risky feeling for them—the board, the interviewers. Maybe after a few classes they didn't notice the women as much, but they darn sure noticed in Class 7.

In the 1960s I had done a lot of things where I was the first woman, so I knew that I would face a lot of the old time thinking. I was the first female ag appraiser for Bank of America and I was the first woman in the Mackay School of Mines. I was the only woman at the school and mining was very masculine. I had a professor tell me, "You got two choices lady, you can either drop this class, or you can get an automatic F." A lot of the hard knocks I had were before Ag Leadership—so every time someone said something that was uncomplimentary, I took it with a grain of salt.

Q: What leadership lessons did you take away from the experience?

Number one was that there are no personnel problems, only management problems. Either you have picked the wrong person, you are not giving them enough incentive or you're not giving them enough authority.

Q: Did the program impact your professional life?

Completely. Everything I do from a professional standpoint in management can go right back to what we learned in the programs that the individual universities put on. Those were absolutely incredible. It helped me take a look and realize what my failings were. There isn't a day that I don't use something I learned in Ag Leadership.

Q: How did the program impact your personal life?

That was a little tougher. When I would come back, I was exhausted and had learned so much. Your partner wants to know what you learned. Up until I was in Ag Leadership, I was always the one that everyone depended on at home to make decisions, the pressure was always on me to make everything happen.

It was a whole different world then when a woman stepped out of a family and came back changed. I don't want to make that sound harsh, but it just changes a relationship. My then husband was used to having me there with him and all of a sudden I wasn't there—it was tough. I won't sugar coat it. That did cause me significant amounts of grief.

I think the women who come into the program now have it differently because it was a whole different world back then. Women have been through everything. Both the men and the women expect something different than we did then—it's different expectations because of the fact that we were raised differently. It's eye opening to see how in later generations, men are willing to take on a broader role at home.

Q: What is your advice to someone who is considering applying to the program?

I think whether they are female or male, prepare to go in with an open mind. If you're at the top of the local food chain, this program will make you realize you are a small cog in a big wheel. I don't care if you are a woman or man. Open your eyes, open your mind and let yourself learn.

Keep in mind that not all class members learn or grow at the same rate. The thing that impressed me was that I knew some people who had preconceived notions that were unbelievable. Regardless of how stubborn some people were, they did learn and they did grow. One of the things that Ag Leadership does—and it happened in my class—was that some people needed to have their eyes opened and I believe that when they went back to their communities they did not see it the same as they did before the program.

Q: What was the single most impactful part of the program for you?

The trip to the Soviet Union. We got there at the end of the Cold War and we took our preconceived notions over there. We started looking at things and learned and listened to the people. Things were very different. Your whole world view is different. What you learn and see is incredible.

**Jean Rotta****Q: How did it feel to be in the first class that accepted women?**

Ag Leadership was a very good experience for me.

However, that wasn't the only thing that I was the first woman in. When Cal Poly San Luis Obispo went coed, I was the first there too.

Q: What kind of obstacles did you encounter during your time in the program?

It seems to me that my time in the program went all rather smoothly. I can't think that there were any problems with my classmates or anybody that I was interacting with.

Q: What leadership lessons did you take away from the experience?

We learned how to work along with other people in and out of our industry and come up with ideas. It also helped me learn to speak forward about certain issues that might have been problems at the time. Ag Leadership helped me deal with problems with my own operation and problems that were affecting other people at the time. It gave me some background and maybe helped me learn to stand up and deal with and be proactive about important issues.

Q: Did the program impact your professional life?

Yes, I would say it did. It certainly helped me be a better spokesperson, whether it be with my CattleWomen's association, or here in my immediate valley. It helped me help a lot of people with important projects and issues in our area.

Q: How did the program impact your personal life?

It helped me to intermingled with people that I might not have met before. When various projects came up that needed attention, it helped me to reach out about local and industry issues that were important.

Q: What is your advice to someone who is considering applying to the program?

I would certainly encourage them to apply because you get such a wide overview of state and national problems and issues and you can learn more about them and proceed in a way that may help make things better for lots of other people.

Q: What was the most impactful part of the program for you?

The program certainly helped me to be able to put my thinking cap on and come up with better questions for whatever the problem might be at the time. It also helped me to find better answers to the problems we were facing.

**Lyra Halprin****Q: How did it feel to be in the first class that accepted women?**

I was really proud. I was amazed that it took so long for women to be accepted, but that's not a surprise—women have been wondering about that for years. I was 25 years old and I was a reporter for the Daily

Democrat in Woodland, but I was also helping my sister and mother run our walnut ranch in Yuba City after the sudden death of my father. I applied to the program because I'd interviewed several local men who were in previous classes and they suggested that I apply.

Q: What kind of obstacles did you encounter during your time in the program?

It was like being dropped in the middle of a fraternity. People told me I'd taken the place of men who should've been in the program. To suddenly have women dropped into a group of all men—that was a huge thing. There were a lot of great guys in the program and I made a lot of friends, but it was rough.

I also think my experience was different because I came from a completely different background from most people in the program. Growing up I lived half the year in Southern California, where my musician mother worked, and then we all lived in Yuba City during the summers and other school breaks. I enjoyed Ag Leadership and particularly loved the travel. Because of my background and because I'd traveled before, I already had an international point of view. I was born six years after Auschwitz was liberated and had family members who died there, so I had such a different background. What I learned in Ag Leadership was more about farming, and what my classmates learned was more about the world.

Q: How did the obstacles impact your experience?

I was already progressive politically because of personal family experience. The program made me a stronger feminist. I wanted good job opportunities and when people told me I had taken a man's spot in the program, I was stunned by that attitude. I did understand more about running our farm by learning from these guys, but I don't think they saw me as a real farm partner, or maybe even Ag Leadership partner.

The two years in the program were an eye-opener for me and it was also a little discouraging. I was 25 and in a peak career-learning period. My interaction with the guys in Ag Leadership gave me a little preview about what I'd be facing down the road and gave me a lot to think about.

I also felt like a bridge between generations. I was in the second wave of feminists who wanted to work and shocked men by sharing power with them. We wanted a seat at the table and it was tricky at times everywhere for women, including in Ag Leadership.

Q: What leadership lessons did you take away from the experience?

I learned from exposure to people like the astronaut we met—Gerald Carr—who made me feel like I could do anything. I've never forgotten how I felt. He inspired me to be whatever I wanted. So exposure to people like that on a very personal level was fantastic. I've never forgotten that experience, which was a really significant thing for me.

On that same trip in the south, we went to Southern University near Baton Rouge, one of the historically black colleges and I was appalled to see how crummy the facilities were. Then we went to the big campus of Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge that was predominantly white and it was a very different experience because it was richly endowed.

It was fun to be around people who were not afraid. I have never had trouble speaking out. I write a lot of letters to the editor, I have been a strong leader for various groups throughout my life. I think I was probably going to do those things anyway.

Q: Did the program impact your professional life?

I think it helped me especially since I spent most of my career writing about agriculture. The program helped me understand some farmers and ag industry people more. Ag Leadership has changed a lot though. I think there's more for me to relate to now because it's a more diverse program. It's particularly inspiring for me to watch the women in the program now.

Q: How did the program impact your personal life?

Spending part of two years in a "fraternity" was an eye-opener. It challenged me on what I thought about being a woman and helped define me as a feminist. I understood more about what women all over the world face and helped make me more of an activist.

Q: What is your advice to someone who is considering applying to the program?

I think it's a good program and I'm really glad it has evolved. It's more of a reflection of California agriculture today, which is wonderful. Ag Leadership changed a lot in the 41 years since I participated. The program evolved and it's wonderful. It's more difficult when people refuse to change. But I don't think that's the case with Ag Leadership. We've evolved quite a bit and I'm proud of that. The program couldn't have lasted otherwise. I love looking at the pictures and seeing that evolution. If you want to make a difference in ag, you have to reflect all of it.

The program is probably more interesting now because there is more diversity in general, and more women in particular. That's a more realistic representation of our world. It was silly that there was ever a point when women weren't allowed in the program. I'm sure we—the women—are part of the reason the program is better now.

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-LYRA HALPRIN

THE PROGRAM CERTAINLY HELPED ME TO BE ABLE TO PUT MY THINKING CAP ON AND COME UP WITH BETTER QUESTIONS FOR WHATEVER THE PROBLEM MIGHT BE AT THE TIME.

-JEAN ROTTA

WHEN I READ ALL OF THE STUFF THAT THE FEMALE ALUMNI HAVE DONE, I FEEL VERY STRONGLY THAT THE WOMEN HAVE PROVED THEMSELVES TO BE A VITAL PART OF THE AG LEADERSHIP PROGRAM.

-JUDY CAMARILLO