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## The Reluctant Farmer

**Communication professor combines life on the farm and the classroom.**



Debbie Dougherty and her husband, Tom, own a sheep farm near Fulton, Mo., in Williamsburg, where they specialize in Dorpers.

*Story by Kelsey Allen*

*Photos courtesy of Debbie Dougherty*

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**W**hen Debbie Dougherty's husband, Tom, suggested they move from Columbia to Williamsburg, Mo., a tiny farming community in eastern Callaway County, she was hesitant. He was eager to start a sheep farm, but Dougherty, who grew up in California and went to graduate school in Nebraska, had dabbled in agriculture before.

"I didn't want a farm," Dougherty says. "I know enough to know how much work it is. It's a job."

She already had a full-time job at MU as an associate professor in the communication department and was busy rearing their children. But Tom was convincing, and they made the move in 2006.

Seven years later, Dougherty has made a career out of her double life.

"I had these two really challenging jobs — one is this body-work job at the farm, and one is this text-work job at MU — and I felt like I was being ineffective at both of them," Dougherty says. "It occurred to me that it was an opportunity to put together this growing interest in



At the Nov. 21–24 National Communication Association convention, communication Professor Debbie Dougherty will present a paper called "Social Class at the Intersection and the Erasure of the Black Farmer."

communication and social class with my experiences in these two different worlds.”

At a Nov. 21–24 National Communication Association convention in Washington, D.C., Dougherty is scheduled to present a paper called “Social Class at the Intersection and the Erasure of the Black Farmer.”

Until moving to the farm, Dougherty’s research focused on power, particularly as it pertains to gender. However, once out in Williamsburg, Dougherty noticed a melting pot of social classes operating more overtly than they did in Columbia.

“You can observe the processes [of social class] being communicated in and around the labor of farming,” Dougherty says.

She wrote *The Reluctant Farmer: Exploring Work, Social Class and the Production of Food* (Troubador Publishing Ltd, 2011) to document what she was witnessing. “The history of farming in Callaway County provides a microcosm of the history of farming in the United States,” she writes. Throughout *The Reluctant Farmer*, Dougherty tackles the intersections of social class, gender, race and food production.

Most fascinating to Dougherty was how — no matter the conditions — many people she encountered

identified themselves as middle class. For example, a woman who operates an organic farm and nets about \$5,000 a year considers herself middle class because she owns property. Another woman who runs a medium-size farm and has a master's degree says she's middle class because of her education. A wealthy man who owns a lot of acreage defines himself as middle class because in relation to nearby farms, his is small.

“We think of the middle class as ideal,” Dougherty says of why people self-identify as middle class. “We idealize it: ‘[The middle class] are hardworking people who are achieving the American Dream.’ ”

In Williamsburg, Dougherty also observed community members struggling with the stigmatization of unemployment and downward mobility, which, she says, there is limited discourse for in academia.

“I noticed in writing [*The Reluctant Farmer*] and interacting with people in my community that unemployment is so much more fundamental [to identity] than you think,” Debbie says. “I wanted to take that to the next step and see what is the experience of unemployment especially as viewed through the social class lens.”

She spent the past year on leave conducting research on unemployment, including asking unemployed

Missourians to take photographs of things that epitomized that experience for them. She received pictures of a rundown barn, an empty hallway and many empty refrigerators.

Her most recent paper, which she hopes to expand into a book, explores how people experience downward social mobility when they are unwillingly unemployed.

“I’d like to humanize [unemployment], not just so that people can understand what the experience is like but maybe to create more realistic social policies and social conversations about what it means to be an unemployed person in the U.S.”

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