

GABRIELA BRASHER

GABRIELA BRASHER, a 1985 Mississippi State soil science graduate and the proud co-owner of the kenaf-based business, Kengro, relocated more than 4,000 miles to follow her passion for agriculture.

Brasher grew up in Rümlang, Switzerland, next-door to a small dairy farm, where she got her first glimpse of farm life, and as she grew, so too did her desire to cultivate the land.

“Switzerland is very small, about a third of the area of Mississippi; there’s limited farmlands, so if you want to farm, you pretty much have to immigrate. My father and I both wanted to farm, so when he saw a newspaper advertisement for farmlands near Minter City, Mississippi, he came to visit. Within the year, my father owned the property,” Brasher said.

Though her father now owned the farm, it would be another two years before Brasher could finish high school and begin to forage her own path to Mississippi. In April of 1982, Brasher had the opportunity to spend the season with family friends in Bruce, who were also farmers, and by January of 1983, she was enrolled at Mississippi State to study soil science.

Brasher graduated in 1987 both with her master’s degree in composite agronomy

and a pioneer’s spirit, one that was met in stride by her husband, Brent, a fellow MSU alum who she met at a cotton short course.

“Farmers are entrepreneurs. Even before we met, Brent and I were both looking for alternative crops that could be used to better the environment and set us apart in the agricultural market. When we were introduced to kenaf, we were amazed,” Brasher said.

Kenaf is a tall-growing, value-added crop related to cotton and okra. Brasher shared that, with processing, the product is able to break down the hydrocarbons in oil spills and remain fully organic and compostable, making it a perfect choice for the environmentally-conscious.

Of course, the success they have with kenaf didn’t come without a great deal of trial and error.

“When we first started working with the crop, we partnered with MSU on research. The university did a lot of research on kenaf, but they were a great help to us with the agronomics research, specifically. They helped us figure out what to do to optimize the growth of the plants, how best to fertilize, how to control pests,” Brasher said.

Once they understood the intricacies of kenaf growing, the Brashers set

out to start their company, Kengro. They’ve since opened a two-location operation that includes their 450-acre farm in Tallahatchie County and a separation plant in Charleston, Mississippi, where they separate the core fiber from the bark. The core fiber is processed into oil absorption and bioremediation products, and the bark is made into mats that protect against soil erosion and can control

sediment. Brasher shared that, though the majority of their customers use the fiber product as an environmentally-friendly way to mitigate commercial oil spills it can also be used for oil cleanup in the garage. No matter the use, Kengro’s products are entirely organic.

“I think what sets us apart from other companies with similar products is the fact that kenaf is both environmentally neutralizing and is a renewable resource. Other businesses might sell products that have to be mined or products that aren’t biodegradable, but when we started Kengro, we were very conscientious about being as ecofriendly as possible,” Brasher said.

There are challenges, however, with being in the oil clean-up industry, even with an ecofriendly product produced by Kengro. With COVID driving the price of oil to record-lows, there is less business for Brasher and her family.

“We’re in a bit of a dilemma at the moment,” Brasher said. “We’ve got a lot of overstock because of the unpredictable market this season, and we’ve got all the kenaf we planted last year when the market was normal.”

Though the future is unpredictable for Brasher, she maintains the intrepid spirit that brought her across the ocean to live the American agriculturalist’s dream. Beyond maintaining that spirit herself, she has passed it onto her children as well.

“All three of our children have contributed their strengths to Kengro. Our oldest daughter helped with supply chain and operational management, our youngest daughter whipped our online representation and social media presence into shape, and our son is very much hands-on with the farming. He’s the only one I see continuing with the agricultural world, but our daughters are out striking their own paths in the business world,” Brasher said. “If either of them decides to come back to agriculture, there’s plenty of opportunities out there for determined women. It’s lonely sometimes, but I’ve always had all the help and support in Mississippi State that I needed to reach my goals.”



Mrs. Gabriela Brasher (photo submitted)