



## **FCC Knowledge Podcast**

### **Season 4 – Episode 6**

#### **From the ashes of grief: Cultivating hope for mental health**

##### **PODCAST TRANSCRIPT**

Interviewer: Aimée Stang (AS)

Interviewee: Diane Bergsma (DB)

**00:00:00**

**AS:** From AgExpert, it's the FCC Knowledge Podcast, a show that features real Canadians in agriculture, real stories and real good conversations about the business of farming. I'm your host Aimée Stang.

**DB:** We all depend on our farmers for our food, and we all depend on our first responders to keep our communities safe. So in a way, rallying around them as a community and creating a network of support for them should be important to everyone.

**00:00:37**

**AS:** Dalles Bergsma devoted his life to serving others, both as a farmer and as a firefighter in his community of Shetland, Ontario. But as the stress of managing and expanding a farm grew compounded by the trauma Dalles witnessed as a first responder, Dalles' family didn't fully know the mental weight he was carrying or the right questions to ask to get him the help he needed. When Dalles died by suicide, his mother Diane and her family knew something had to come from the ashes of tragedy, especially now that they had firsthand experience with the mental health crisis facing farmers across the country.

The Three Oaks Respite Cabin is the Bergsmas' way of honoring Dalles' legacy of hope and generosity while supporting farmers and first responders in their community. Their objective is to provide visitors with a place to rest and unburden themselves of the heavy mental loads their work throws their way. This is a story about suicide and grief, but above all else, this is a story of hope and perseverance. In this episode, we will be engaging in an open and candid discussion. So if you feel that the timing is not appropriate for you or your family to hear Diane's story, we recommend that you tune in when you are ready.

Please make sure that your well-being is a priority. Talk to someone if you or someone you know needs help, and if you feel like you or someone else are in an emergency situation, please call 911 immediately. Do not hesitate. Trained first responders are available to help. I can say without hesitation that all of us, including

your family and loved ones, would want you to make that call. With all that being said, let's get into my conversation with Diane Bergsma.

Hello, Diane.

**DB:** Hello Aimée.

**00:02:06**

**AS:** Thank you for joining us on our podcast today. How about we start from the beginning?

**DB:** My husband Alan and I both grew up on a family farm. His parents and my parents had their farm operations about two miles apart on the same road. We first did a stint in the Canadian Air Force. He did the Gulf War and served as a navigator on the C-130s. He had the opportunity to retire from there. Around the same time, a farm came up for sale right between both of our sets of parents. We felt it had our name written all over it, and certainly being so close proximity to our parents allowed us to have a good start with sharing machinery and all those costs that could be avoided.

**00:02:43**

**AS:** Thank you for your service and thank you for your husband's service. That's a big deal, I believe, personally, as a Canadian and the family behind the servicemen and women are just as important. To be close to your family must have been really comforting for you as you settled into this new role.

**DB:** That was the hardest part of being a military family is that you're often away from your siblings and your parents and extended family, and you learn to make the military family your own family for wherever you are and for the time that you're there.

**00:03:12**

**AS:** The operation has expanded since you started farming into hogs and crops?

**DB:** We now have 2400 head of pigs and about 750 acres that we operate. We were blessed with five boys and two girls, and they're all involved in agricultural fields in some way. We have three sons currently working towards taking over the farm operation.

**00:03:31**

**AS:** Can you tell me about your son Dalles? What kind of person was he?

**DB:** To sum Dalles up in one word would be generous. He had a very generous spirit all around. He shared his joy. He shared his humour. I think that was one of his telltale marks. He sprinkled joy by adding in humor in his conversations. He was deeply invested in his family, very devoted as a husband and he served as a volunteer firefighter as well. His great smile matched his character. And I think what you see on his smile, he was happy-go-lucky. He was everybody's go-to person. He was the

go-to brother if someone needs to chat something out or if they're concerned about something. He was just always so approachable.

On the fire department as well, he was the connecting link, the one that you could always count on to go the extra mile. I remember a story that the fire chief told me shortly after Dalles passed away, and the fire chief himself had lost his wife three months prior, and he was working in the backfield. He says, "I was just trying to collect my thoughts and get my bearings around my new situation in life, and I was enjoying the peace and quiet," he says. "And I saw this black truck in a cloud of dust coming down the gravel road." And he says, "I knew it was Dalles because of the big cloud of dust." And he said, "If tires could squeal on gravel roads, they probably would have, but he came to a screeching halt," and Dalles could run like the wind. He skittered across the field and jumped up on the tractor, didn't say a word, just gave the giant of a man, the chief, a bear hug and gave him a tap on the shoulder and a squeeze, and off he went. And the fire chief says, "It just changed my day, and he didn't even say a word." He just had that ability to infuse positive energy or hope and encouragement into other people. That was Dalles, just a very genuine, generous, dependable young man.

**00:05:18**

**AS:** That must have been a really comforting story for you to hear, too.

**DB:** Absolutely. And there was many stories like that, of him in high school being the kid in Grade 12 who was not too cool to take a Grade Niner under his wing because he felt this young man in Grade Nine was not doing so well socially. He just had that ability to connect with people.

**00:05:37**

**AS:** What a beautiful legacy. Tell me about the idea of the Three Oaks Respite Cabin and how it came about.

**DB:** From 2017 to 2020 we really worked hard on expanding our farm for Dalles and Michelle to take over the operation. And during that time, there was a heavy workload, and also Dalles had built a new hog facility, so there was also the stress of building a new barn and incurring the cost of it, penciling out all the numbers. There was a lot of stress and a lot of unknowns. And at the time, we wrote everything off to, "It's just for now. The stress he's facing as a young farmer is equal for all farmers," in some sense. Young farmers, especially, they take on heavy debt load, and they have the unknowns of farming. And we could see that he was stressed, but we did not have the tools to recognize what that mountain looked like for him. And because we didn't know, we also didn't ask the right questions. And on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020 our son Dalles died by suicide. And that was such a heavy blow, because our whole family was crushed. He was one of our children, one of our sons. He was our business partner. He was a much loved brother. He was a respected brother on the fire department. So there was this tremendous loss in so many ways.

But we also learned in the wake of his loss of the very discouraging statistics around mental wellness for farmers and first responders. They are generally the type of people who are in those vocations because they want to help people. And when we

learned of the statistics that the farmers and first responders are both dealing with, with high levels of mental fatigue and also completed suicides, we felt we had to do something. We couldn't know those statistics and sit idly by. This idea of building a place where they could come and take a break before it became [a] crisis situation was something that really appealed to us in our healing journey. Sometime before that, I had spoken with a counselor, and we were talking about places where people could go and rest, and if they had things to sort out, that they had this quiet space, that they might use that for getting their bearings and reorienting. And that counselor said to me, "I don't know of such a place, but if you ever find that, please let me know, because myself and every other counselor in Ontario would love to have a place like that to recommend."

And that conversation came back to me not long after Dalles passed away, and I thought, "You know, we know these statistics. We know there's a dire need for the people that grow our food and the people that keep our communities safe, and that if we were to provide a space like that, it would honour Dalles' life while lived, and it would also honour and respect and show gratitude for the investment that farmers and first responders make into our communities." So that's where the idea came from.

**00:08:27**

**AS:** So you built this cabin on your farm property.

**DB:** We built it in our 50-acre woodlot right on our home farm. It's a three-bedroom log home. Individuals or families or colleagues can come and just take a break, and while they're at the cabin, they have opportunity to take part in self-directed programming that is provided by our partners at National Farmers Mental Health Alliance. We feel very grateful and confident in their partnership, as they're all registered therapists who deal primarily with farmers and first responders as their clientele, so they are very well equipped and have a good understanding of the pitfalls and the triumphs, the stressors that face both those communities. When guests return home, they also get a phone call from a therapist connected with National Farmers Mental Health Alliance to check in and see how they're doing. If they have got their feet back under them, if they feel like they're in a good position to take up their life and their responsibilities, they have the opportunity to continue with therapy through them as well.

The way we have it set up is that when people book the cabin, and it's booked right on our website like an Airbnb, but they also sign off on receiving the phone call from a therapist upon their return home, and that part has been working very well. People don't have to make that difficult phone call to a therapist, which is still difficult for a lot of people, you know, and then they're struggling, that they don't have to pick up the phone and say, "I'm so and so, and I'm stuck. I need help." This way, the conversation is already started when they book the cabin. They know it's coming, and they can look forward to the conversation, they can prepare for that conversation, and then while they participate in the self-directed programming as a guest at the cabin, it also sets the stage for some reflection and being prepared for that therapy session.

**00:10:09**

**AS:** The follow up is so important.

**DB:** It is. And the trails in the woodlot are finished now, so there's about five kilometers worth of trails that takes them through the woodlot, and over time, we hope to make it more interactive. But we do have a wind phone situated on the trail already, and it's a form of Japanese therapy that allows people to have a phone that is not connected to anything out in nature, where they can pick it up and maybe finish a conversation that they would have loved to finish, and didn't have an opportunity to, or vent some things that are difficult in their life and that they speak it out loud, but it won't go any farther. The trees will keep their secret.

**00:10:47**

**AS:** If a tree falls in the forest, right?

**DB:** Yes, yes. Or if a tree hears something ...

**00:10:54**

**AS:** Yes.

**DB:** That isn't supposed to be passed on, right?

**00:10:56**

**AS:** That is such an interesting concept and such a cool idea. And have you had feedback about this wind phone?

**DB:** There have been two guests that specifically mentioned the wind phone, and they thought it was very helpful and therapeutic to say the words out loud.

**00:11:09**

**AS:** I've heard, listening to different psychology podcasts, people talking about how sometimes it's important to have those conversations, even if the person that we want to have the conversation with is not there. You just need to have some of that release.

**DB:** Yeah. It would be similar to journaling, writing it down and expressing your thoughts and feelings that way. This way, saying them out loud is also a form of letting that out.

**00:11:30**

**AS:** How did you bring this cabin to reality?

**DB:** Initially, our family put aside the funds to complete the cabin, and we thought that would be the end of our project, that we will build a place and welcome people to come and take a rest. But then as the communities became aware of our project, there was such an outpouring of support in the building of it that we were able to have enough funds left over to add a mental wellness program in addition to offering a place to stay. And that's where the partnership with the National Farmers Mental Health Alliance came from. The generosity of the public and businesses and

individuals has just been astounding. It's been part of our healing as well, that people are behind it and support it. That part has been beautiful.

We've met so many generous people along the way, and now we have a program that will carry people further in their healing journey. We believe very strongly in the partnership with the National Farmers Mental Health Alliance and the follow-up calls. And the booklet that they work through with their self-directed programming is something they take home and can reflect on – simple exercises that may or may not be new to them, but in any case, it's a good refresher if they've already had some of the mental wellness exercises. The idea that now it's more of a community project and a community initiative is something that we hope and we believe will carry it forward, so that it's a lasting thing, and not just an offering or a resource for a decade. But that it has many decades to offer to our farmers and first responders.

**00:12:57**

**AS:** I see it, similarly to everyone's mental health journey, is that it's going to continue to evolve, and you're going to need the support of the community and the people who are bringing this to life.

**DB:** Certainly, everybody is affected in some way, because we all depend on our farmers for our food, and we all depend on our first responders to keep our communities safe. Rallying around them as a community and creating a network of support for them should be important to everyone.

**00:13:25**

**AS:** There was some concern about the conservation of the woodlands.

**DB:** Initially, there was some concern from the Conservation Authority with protection of the woodlot and species in the woodlot, but we did a complete environmental impact study, then we were able to work with the Conservation Authority through the impact study and make sure that we mitigated any damage to wildlife or to species and trees that were growing there or living there. It took a long time, and it was an arduous project; I will not deny that. But we're very grateful that two years in, we got our building permit. From there on it took us a year or so to build it, and we've been operating now since May of this year.

**00:14:03**

**AS:** How is your first summer welcoming guests?

**DB:** It's been a wonderful experience. We don't get to meet the guests unless they specifically ask to meet us, which has happened for a few guests, that they asked to have a coffee or something at the cabin. But generally speaking, we don't meet them. We would like people to just have that private space. They let themselves in and they let themselves out. They only have to bring their food. The rest is all available for them. It's been a busy summer, getting used to the cleaning schedule, and for now, we're doing all the cleaning and all the maintenance, everything ourselves to see where we are fiscally. Also towards our donors, I think it's a nice gesture that we keep our costs to a very minimum, and that any money that we do receive from donors is used directly in support of our guests.

The cabin is open year round, and certainly the winter time will also be a very beautiful time to be at the cabin and to use the trails. We've had a number of guests come back and say, "I noticed this is not at the cabin." Just this past weekend, we had someone stay at a cabin and said, "I noticed there was no hair dryers in the bathrooms," and that's something that we had missed. By the end of her stay, there were two hair dryers in the bathrooms. Those things are just very beautiful tokens of appreciation from our guests, and the guestbook is filled with positive feedback that it has been rejuvenating and relaxing for them. So we're grateful for that feedback.

**00:15:20**

**AS:** It's probably inspiring to the other guests too, to see the guestbook of the people who have come before them and are having these positive experiences.

**DB:** It also reinforces that we're not alone, if we feel burdened. It's human to have seasons that we find hard, and that we can reach out in community for that help.

**00:15:38**

**AS:** Why is this type of space important to you and your family and to the community?

**DB:** We all have burdens to carry. We live in a broken world. We have to remind each other that the burdens we carry have to be checked. We're not created to carry an ever-increasing load. The things that we carry because they're too heavy to deal with them today, or the things that we allow to drag along in there because they're too painful, or the memories that we allow to fester in there because it's easier than working through the emotions associated with them, those are not things that we're supposed to carry indefinitely.

And in support of all the farmers and first responders and frankly, all the people in our lives, including our own lives, I would love that today we can resolve to dump out all the baggage in our virtual backpack in a safe place, but very regularly. If there's a practical message from today, that we take note of the urgency and the necessity of emptying out the stuff that we tend to carry, and find ways to encourage our loved ones to do the same. Acknowledging our vulnerability and our need for community, we don't expose weakness. We strengthen our resilience and our bonds in those relationships. And within relationships and community, that's where we have the privilege of serving and helping one another.

**00:16:48**

**AS:** That's beautifully said, Diane. How often do you recommend people unpack their backpacks? Or if someone said, "Yeah, I should probably do this," what would you say?

**DB:** I am by certainly no means a therapist and so I hesitate to answer that question, but I think if we're honest with ourselves and we're authentic, we know ourselves well enough that it's time to unpack it when it feels heavy, or when it's affecting our relationships, or when it's affecting our sleep, when it's affecting our performance on the farm or on the job. I think the telltale signs are there for ourselves to recognize it in our own lives, if we're honest with ourselves. That's where it's often hard. We say, "I'll deal with it for another two weeks. It'll get better after harvest. It'll get better after this load of corn is out, or it'll be better when this bin is empty." We tend to expect

more than we should expect from ourselves, especially as farmers and first responders, because that's the type of people that are attracted to these beautiful professions. We have to be more aware of the signs of mental fatigue in each other, so that where we have opportunity that we lovingly and respectfully but intentionally step into the lives of those who are suffering.

**00:18:02**

**AS:** Yeah, and there's a lot of great resources available out there, including mental health first aid courses where people can become more aware of their telltale signs. Are you an advocate for those types of trainings?

**DB:** As long as they're from a registered therapist.

**00:18:15**

**AS:** Yes.

**DB:** And not fluff.

**00:18:18**

**AS:** It's important to have the real science backed information at your disposal.

**DB:** And culturally relatable, that the help you get comes from a person who understands where your stressors might be. The culture in Ag or the culture in a first responder world is not well known to everybody in the public or all the therapists. It's important to connect with a therapist or a person that you're leaning on for mental wellness, that they understand how a stressor might be a stressor for you.

**00:18:47**

**AS:** I've also heard that it's important and okay if they're not the right fit for you, that you should not hesitate to look for someone who is the right fit for you.

**DB:** I would wholeheartedly agree. It is a relationship. And just like any relationship, not all people click with everyone, and not all people touch your heart or initially have that feeling of trust. It is definitely finding that person that you really connect with on a deeper level.

**00:19:13**

**AS:** This seems like the right time to tell everyone about the National Farmer Crisis Line. This crisis line offers free, 24/7 confidential help for farmers, families and AG workers 365 days a year. Call 1-866-FARMS01, that's 1-866-327-6701, to access immediate crisis support from Ag-informed mental health professionals when you need it most. I'll repeat that number, so if you're able grab your phone and add this number to your contacts. Again, that number for the National Farmer Crisis Line is 1-866-327-6701. We'll also include a link in the show notes, so if you're driving or in the middle of something, you can find the number there as well.

What else is happening at the cabin since it opened?



**DB:** The community involvement has been inspiring, and it's ongoing. There have been many organizations now and businesses that have reached out to have us at events or to spread the word that this is available for them. We were very excited to do our two fundraisers this past summer. We have an annual run on the Saturday before Father's Day every year, and that's in Chatham-Kent. The past two years, we've also done a tractor parade, which was a beautiful way to honor our farmers, inviting the public to sit along the roadside and watch the parade go by. And it was a way of respecting them and thanking them for what they do. It was also a great community builder for the farmers that attended. We went to the community center and had a meal there together, and yeah, it was great time and opportunity for farmers to connect and to share and as a community, reflect on how we need each other for mental wellness support.

It's almost cliché now to say, "It's okay to not be okay," but that's a real thing. If you see your neighbour struggling or maybe not doing as well as he did last year, or his reaction was totally different to a conversation or, "That's not the answer I expected," that we check in with each other. What makes us human is that we all have this vulnerable and fragile side that we have to tend to very carefully and that we have to encourage in each other as well. That's what makes us human. We're not machines. We have a soul, and we have a fragile side that even though we're very resilient, we could never deny that part of us is easily broken and it's hard to restore. I just encourage everybody to take stock of the stuff you're carrying and watch out for your neighbours and your friends.

**00:21:36**

**AS:** Would you have something else to say to someone struggling with their own mental health challenges, or to a family that has been in a similar situation such as yours?

**DB:** Yeah, we talk to each other and we ask those meaningful questions about another person's well-being, and we very regularly remind ourselves and others too, that at times, the most courageous thing to do is to ask for help, and that profound connection of offering and asking and receiving support from each other is one of the most beautiful aspects of what makes us human. And the more we have mental wellness as a regular topic in our conversation, the more we normalize care for our mental wellness like we would care for our physical health. Nobody blinks an eye when you say, "I'm going to the doctor because my left leg is tingling for the last two weeks," right? That's an accepted thing, but somehow we still have work to do when we talk about mental wellness and that we care for it as we would for our physical health.

**00:22:29**

**AS:** You mentioned it's okay to not be okay and it's okay to ask for help. You hear that all the time, but it's actually very courageous to ask for help. And I think that's an important message too, is that it's a hard thing to do. It takes a lot of courage and bravery to take that step.

**DB:** For farmers and first responders, I think everyone would agree that they are in that profession for the investment in other people. If we can take a step back and say, "I need to take care of my own mental wellness for my own sake, but that's an order so I can serve well." Again, it's not selfish. It's not self-centered if you want to be

your best version of yourself in order to serve others. It's actually a funnel to community service.

**00:23:06**

**AS:** I've heard someone say, "The most important piece of equipment on your farm is yourself." If you're not operating at your full potential, the whole kit and caboodle is maybe not going to be operating at full potential.

**DB:** The most valuable asset on the farm is the farmer.

**00:23:20**

**AS:** Absolutely, and we tend to forget that sometimes, when things get rough and tough. And I suspect it's the same way too for first responders, and it's such a great tie in that you're doing this for both first responders and farmers, as Dalles was both. It's such a relatable aspect of rural living, is so many people are both. There's a lot of similarities, and there's a lot of challenges that both services experience.

**DB:** There's a lot of farmers that do serve the community on volunteer fire departments. When they serve in their own communities as a volunteer responder, when they go to calls, it quite often is being called to help someone that they know quite well, and that level of trauma doesn't necessarily get dealt with. They go back to their work on the farm, and it's another layer of trauma that they carry around if it doesn't get unpacked.

**00:24:06**

**AS:** There's not often a debriefing. I know in my community, they've started to do more debriefing for traumatic or especially difficult situations, but I don't know if that's the case across rural Canada.

**DB:** We can hope that that improves, and I suspect a lot of them have it available, but unless we change the atmosphere around mental wellness, there's not going to be a whole lot of members that would seek out the extra assistance or support after a traumatic call.

**00:24:31**

**AS:** The default behavior is to go back to your regular life and get back to your business and your work, and when you think about it, I know—my husband's a volunteer firefighter, and they go back to the fire hall, they debrief on the situation and what they could have done better. They clean the equipment. They wash things down. And so it should be the same with our own mental well-being, is that we take a little bit of a stock of the situation and do a little bit of an unpacking and clean up.

**DB:** I like how you said that. They take care of the equipment so that it will work well the next time it's needed. So if we could just apply that to our persons, that would be a great step in the right direction. Asking for help is a heroic sign of strength. It takes courage to reach out. And if there are people in our listening community who have dealt with the trauma of suicide or mental health struggles, know that you're not alone. Please reach out for support so that your grief journey still contains hope. I think if other people can be helped at Three Oaks in this way, then our ashes have

hope. There's hope for us in our grief journey, and we want to offer that hope to other people.

**00:25:33**

**AS:** Diane, what excites you about the future of agriculture?

**DB:** I think the fact that there are family farms still up and coming, that there's young families who embrace agriculture, that they understand the importance and the significance of what Canadian farmers bring to the world stage, that we put Canadian agricultural products on the world map, that excites me. But it trickles down to the men and women who get up early, who work until late at night, sometimes raising their young family members on the farm and teaching them good work ethics and all the beautiful blessings that come with farm life. And I hope that the next generation of farmers also builds in a slice of time for rest, and that we schedule rest in a very real way for our mental wellness as well. Our family farm throughout Canada is what excites me most about agriculture. We have so much to be proud of and thankful for.

**00:26:24**

**AS:** We sure do. Well thank you, Diane, so much, for taking the time to talk with me today. I really appreciated you sharing your story.

**DB:** Thank you, Aimée. And I just want to encourage any listeners who might benefit from a break to reach out and book some time at the cabin and reorient and rejuvenate so you can be the best version of the farmer that you want to be.

**00:26:45**

**AS:** What a beautiful and poignant way to honor Dalles' legacy of hope and connection, something that Diane continues to celebrate with her family and community in memory of her son. We hope Diane's story has inspired you to regularly invest a few moments to take stock of the state of your mental health and take the steps you need to get back toward a baseline when needed. This could be anything from taking some deep breaths in the moment to asking someone you trust for help. Remember that seeking help is not a sign of weakness, but one of tremendous strength. We know this is often easier said than done, and appreciate this can be difficult and daunting, but you are worthy of this time and care. Our baggage can weigh us down. Recognizing what we're carrying and intentionally making the time and space to unpack can be an important step in caring for ourselves.

It's also giving an example for others to do the same. Whether it's for you or for a member of your team or family, familiarize yourself with the signs of mental fatigue and be aware of the resources available that could help unburden that load. While Diane is excited for the future of Canadian agriculture, taking care of the people who look after us and our food is a crucial element in making our industry successful in the years to come. After all, the most important asset on the farm isn't the land or the machinery, but the farmers.

Check the show notes for further reading and resources relating to this episode, including links to the Three Oaks Respite Cabin, National Farmers Mental Health

Alliance and the National Farmer Crisis Line. Did you find this episode to be insightful or impactful? Be sure to share it with your family and friends.

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