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A sister completes her brother's dream



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Mary Ellen Miller signs the deed documents donating 40 acres of Wayne County land to Sustainable Iowa Land Trust Thursday afternoon in the Centerville office of Orsborn, Milani, Mitchell & Goedken, LLP. Looking on is Ed Cox, Mary Ellen Miller's attorney and SILT president Suzan Erem.

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Sustainable Iowa Land Trust Thursday afternoon in Centerville at the office Orsborn, Milani, Mitchell & Goedken, LLP realized its second land donation since forming in January of 2015.

The first land donation to SILT was 53 acres in Pottawattamie County in western Iowa outside of the Omaha, Council Bluffs area. Thursday's donation was 40 acres west of Corydon in Wayne County.

Donating the 40 acres to SILT was Mary Ellen Miller, who inherited the land from her older brother who passed away shortly after buying the land.

Miller was living in Mason City at the time. Prior to her brother's passing, he asked her to come to Wayne County to help take care of him with the expectation his land would be sold.

Miller at first questioned what she would do in Wayne County. But she did come to take care of his affairs and with the urging of a good friend, who said she appeared very calm while at her brother's place, she decided to stay.

"I just can't tell you how blessed I feel," Miller said. "This was not a part of my life plan, but what I will tell you is that for 25 years my mission has been to find some way to do what Suzan Erem has finally managed to do."

Miller said her brother's dream, what he wanted to do with his property, was to put it into some kind of sustainable agriculture. Miller completed her brother's dream and at one point she called it "monumental."

Miller said her favorite description of Iowa is "We're nothing but a big small town between two rivers. We all know each other."

Members of the Wayne County Conservation Foundation, Centerville and Moravia mayors and others witnessed the deed signing Thursday.

WCCF does have an interest in the land donation. If for some reason SILT folds, WCCF is the backup to take over SILT's perpetual obligations and original intent.

"So if SILT folds for some reason you have to have a backup plan," Erem said. "And Mary Ellen wanted the Wayne County Conservation Foundation."

Erem said 27 other states have farmland preservation groups. SILT launched in January of 2015.

Erem said Miller has a "reserve life estate" which allows her to stay on the land and use it until she's done with it. "They will only own the house, the barn and the business on top of the land. They'll lease the land for as long as they choose. And they can even pass that lease on to their kids. She can rent it out. She can receive the rent," Erem said. "She'll pay the taxes. She'll maintain the house. It's as if she still owns the land except we have the deed."

Erem said when SILT owns land it goes off the market. When Miller is done with the land the next farmer who farms the ground will not own the land.

Erem said Miller's donation comes with several benefits, including tax benefits, peace of mind knowing her land will be taken care of and it simplifies things after she is gone.

The fourth benefit for Miller is that SILT becomes her partner who will work with her to find a new tenant, perhaps a next generation farmer who will farm the land more responsibly.

Erem said the process to find a new farmer is expected to start very soon. Right now Miller has a tenant on the land raising cattle, "but she's not very happy with that," Erem said.

SILT was launched in January after two years of research by Erem, her husband and others. Its mission is to protect the Iowa land and grow healthy food sustainably, she said.

"Because we were all identifying the same problem," Erem said. "There was nobody protecting farmland in Iowa to be farmland to stay as farmland."

"So as long as there is food being produced there and it is in a sustainable way, she's free to pretty much do whatever she pleases," Erem said.

Erem said the land may be used to grow vegetables, raise smaller livestock, grow nut trees and utilize rotational grazing.