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Alumni Spotlight: Jane Johnson

Communications and Marketing

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(May 18, 2024) The University of Minnesota Morris and the North Central Soil Conservation Research Laboratory are woven into the career of Jane (Fischer) Johnson '83.

Growing up on a dairy farm near Holloway, Johnson occasionally visited UMN Morris in the 1960s while her older sister was a student here. But when it was her turn to head off to college, Jane thought bigger would be better and started her undergraduate career in St. Cloud. But she didn't quite fit there, so she transferred to UMN Morris to earn her bachelor's degree in biology with a chemistry minor.

"I appreciated the small class size and the approachability of the faculty."

As a student, Johnson worked as a laboratory assistant. One of the perks was occasionally joining the field trips to the University of Minnesota biological station at Itasca State Park.

"I learned something new each time, such as how unpredictable northern Minnesota weather can be over the Memorial Day weekend. Some students experienced first-hand that racoons can open even latched coolers and they will eat or at least sample every bit of food. And finally, there is no such thing as packing too many pairs of dry socks."

After graduation, Johnson got a limited appointment at the North Central Soil Conservation Research Laboratory, commonly known as the Soils Lab, in Morris. At the same time, professor Jim Olsen asked her to help teach analytical chemistry, and she was able to do both.

"The undergraduate experience at UMN Morris and the work experiences with Dr. Olsen prepared me for the next steps on my journey."

Johnson went on to get her master's degree in soil science and a PhD in plant biology from the University of Minnesota St. Paul. She accepted a tenure-track position at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. That job allowed her to "reflect on what I'd observed and learned as a Morris alumnae and bring it to my students."

On a whim, while home for the holidays in 1999, Johnson stopped to visit her former supervisor at the Soils Lab. As luck would have it, there was an open position for a research scientist, and Johnson has been a part of the scientific staff there ever since.

In 2019, Johnson was named research leader for the lab, the first woman to hold that title.

Johnson says she's always delighted to bring new UMN Morris students into the lab as interns, as well as summer and part-time help.

"I'm pleased to say some of those students have stayed and become part of the permanent staff. I wonder if perhaps one of these students will follow a similar path and eventually sit in what is currently my chair, overseeing a nationally recognized federal research facility, which quietly sits at the top of the hill gazing down at Morris."



Pictured (L-R): First Row: Prof. R.S. Abbott, Wayne Barstad, Kent Nelson, Arden Virnig, Jack Erickson, Mary Olson Holman, Todd Holman, Cindy Watson, Randy Grev, Victor Myers III, Nancy Delage, Dawn Carlson, John Wesp, Christine Reike, Jane Fischer, Steve Boese, Assoc. Prof. Tom Straw, Assoc. Prof. Ellen Ordway, Don Patterson, Monica O'Hara