

You're listening to the My Simplified Life podcast and this is episode number 196.

00:09 Welcome to the My Simplified Life podcast, a place where you will learn that your past and even your present don't define your future. Regardless of what stage of life you're in, I want you to feel inspired and encouraged to pursue your dreams, simplify your life, and start taking action today. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac, and I'm excited to share my stories and life lessons with you while taking you on my own journey.

00:37 This is my simplified life. Hey friends, welcome back to another episode. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac. My guest today is a woman who was a change maker well before her time. Sarah Vogel is an attorney, an advocate, an author, and she fought for family farmers before this was even a thing. And yet.

01:03 Prior to the class action lawsuit that she brought in North Dakota in the 1980s, she was fighting for the equal rights for credit when it came to women and minorities in the 70s. She fought companies such as Montgomery Ward's, if you're old enough to remember that department store, on how they would take your zip code and if you belonged in a certain zip code, you were automatically denied credit.

01:32 simply based on where you lived, not who you are, not the type of person you are, not the credit you even had, but simply your zip code. She was obviously a born fighter. She came from a family of fighters who were politicians and lawyers themselves, and she fell in love with family farmers and the fight that they needed to go through. Her book, *The Farmer's Lawyer*,

01:59 has been out since 2021, but today it is out in paperback. It is the most incredible read that I think should be required for every law student, but also every American. You are going to get a history lesson like none other when you read *The Farmer's Lawyer*. And I was just completely blown away. I am so honored and privileged to have gotten to interview Sarah after reading her incredible story.

02:27 and I can't wait for you to listen straight from her, but please go out and pick up a copy of *The Farmer's Lawyer* because it is something that everyone in America should be reading. Hi, Sarah. Hey, Michelle. Oh, I've told you already, I'm fangirling. I am so excited to talk to you. *The Farmer's Lawyer*, can you introduce yourself to everyone for a moment, please? Sure. I'm the author of...

02:57 *The Farmers' Lawyer*, *The North Dakota Nine*, and *The Fight to Save the Family Farm*. It's a book about the 1980s farm depression and how I and the North Dakota Nine brought a lawsuit that ended up stopping foreclosures on thousands of farmers. And it's a true-life legal drama.

03:19 It is absolutely a drama. It was a page-turner. It's like 400 pages and I could not put it down. I didn't want to put it down. It was on the soccer field last night with me. I told one mom, I'm like, yeah, I got to finish this one. And then I had to tell her what it was about. But I'm like,

can you not talk to me, please? I really wanted people, I wanted to write an interesting book, not just a dry legal history about a lawsuit, because I wanted to tell the

03:50 I wrote the book because I fear that there will be another farm crisis. They'll manifest in a different way. But I was fortunate because I grew up in a political family affiliated with a nonpartisan league that in the 1930s had a lot to do with stopping foreclosures on farmers in the 30s. So I grew up hearing these hero stories.

04:19 about how important it was to stop farm foreclosures. And so in the 1980s, when another farm crisis came along, I thought, this is what I have to do. I have to do it. And so it ended up becoming this great big lawsuit. It didn't start as a big lawsuit, it just started as me working with individual farmers.

04:47 and isolated communities in North Dakota, but it ended up as a national class action. I really felt throughout the book from the beginning, you are a woman who was ahead of her time. Because you didn't just fight for farmers. Prior to that, your career was fighting for women and minorities, for credit. You've done a lot for the American people. You truly have. And I don't feel like you just saying that you...

05:16 worked for the farmers gives you enough credit for what you have done. And this is my fan girl admiration coming out because I read what you were doing in the seventies of, you know, it wasn't fair that women was, it was you that got the credit card. You applied for a credit card. Yeah. You were approved for the credit card and then it came in your husband's name. Exactly. And, and I was who had no credit. Yeah. I was part of a, of a, of a law school class.

05:46 at New York University. I went from North Dakota to New York University, which was quite the shock. But we had, at that point, very few women were in law school. But we had about, I think it was 30 women in a class of about 300. And they were powerful.

06:13 powerful women. Many had been in the civil rights movement down south and they'd come back and gone to law school. So we were, we were, I was surrounded by these really admirable women who were law students and, and so it, it sort of got to be a, um, law was a, a means of making social change for us. And, um, so when, you know, my, my first jobs were,

06:43 in consumer protection. And the consumer protection field, I think, hadn't been applied very much to farmers. But I used to say that if you just add three zeros onto the end of a dispute, that's how farmers were. I mean, farmers were having credit problems, just like people in the slums of New York City that were being redlined.

07:13 And, but yeah, consumer protection is definitely a theme of the kind of law I did. And farmers, farmers are also consumers. And then also race discrimination and sex discrimination. That's certainly another theme in my law practice over the years. I loved reading about the Native American Indians and

07:38 I really felt like I got a schooling and I said this to Lee Stein that I feel every American should read your book because they should know the history of farming and agriculture and

what all of these farmers not only have gone through but continue to go through. And then to also understand, you know, reading the statements that President Reagan had made and how we gave the Native Americans their land.

08:06 It was eye-opening to me and I was born in 81, so I wouldn't remember any of this. And to read it, I felt like every American should be reading this. A, every law student should read it. To see your journey and to see what you went through, the fact that you had never done a trial and then you just went in cold, I was beyond impressed because that would scare me. Yeah.

08:35 It was like I was on a freight train going like really, really, really fast and I couldn't get off. I mean, there was no way to jump off. I mean, once the lawsuit started, you know, it was a North Dakota class and then it was a then it had to be a national class. But it was yeah, I deliberately sought out a Native American client because the the the mistreatment.

09:05 of all farmers was horrific, but the mistreatment of Native Americans and we didn't have any black farmers in North Dakota, but like I knew that it was going on. Like one of the scenes in the book is when I got a call in the middle of the night from somebody who was from Mississippi and it was a phone call. That person could have been a black farmer, it could have been a white farmer, had a southern

09:36 And they called in the middle of the night and said, can you file a lawsuit that would protect us as well? Can you do for us in Mississippi what you've done for North Dakota farmers? And I said, it was the middle of the night. And I said, well, can you call me at the office tomorrow or Monday? And he said, I don't know if I can make it that long.

10:07 Well, done deal. I mean, I went to the office, you know, the next work day, and we started to build the National Class Action because what was going on with the farmers of North Dakota, the Native American and white farmers in North Dakota was also happening in the South and in the Southwest. And like, just lots and lots and lots of farmers. And it was like...

10:36 There's no reason for it other than super bad public policy caused by election and appointment of the wrong people and the wrong jobs. I felt Ronald Reagan was a villain, just a villain for farmers. And I think that's one of the things I tried to bring out in the book is public policy matters. Who you elect matters.

11:04 And it was amazing to read these farmers who, I mean, some committed suicide. They were in such turmoil to the point that they needed this help immediately. And it was just soul crushing to read, you know, that they were in such dire straits to read something like, oh, they weren't quote, husband-like. And then to find out what the definition of that meant of, you know, being a good husband to basically your farm and your land. Yeah.

11:33 And these men were, they were the epitome of a husband-like person. Right, right, they were. And it was, and the women too, they were farmers just as much as the men. And they were neglected. They were not, they were ignored. Except, except when it came time to foreclose, the husband and the wife were always named in the, in the summons and complaint for the foreclosure.

12:01 Until that point they were ignored but like convenience. Yeah, they would get the women's name on the deed and then they would ignore her and like Women farmers always said by the way, if if people who are listening to this podcast want to get a really beautiful Introduction to the themes and what the 1980s farm crisis was like the movie country by Jessica Lang and Sam Shepherd is

12:31 like a documentary. It was based on what was happening to real farmers who were really who were like in the case. They were based, the movie is based in Iowa, but it's a hundred percent accurate story. And it actually ends, the movie, the ending of the movie is the language of the final permanent injunction in the Coleman versus Black national class action case, which ended up protecting farmers.

13:00 all over the country. And anyway, the movie country is, I mean, I have to go watch it. At the end of the movie, you're like crying. I cried through the whole movie the first time I saw it. But it's a really good movie. Oh, I cried in your book, so. And the movie is very gripping, but it's a companion to the book, I think.

13:30 We were sending Jessica. I love that. We were sending Jessica Lang the pleadings while the case was going on. Oh, and because you were college roommates with her sister. I was. Jane. I read that. See, I read the whole, I've read cover to cover. And you read the acknowledgments even. You read. I did. I certainly did. Yeah, yeah. Well, I had a lot of support. A lot of important people helped. And.

14:00 And certainly my clients, they were so brave. They stood up to the federal government that was trying to take away their land. And they knew it was unjust. They knew it was wrong. And like Russell Falmer, who passed away before the book was written.

14:29 when I called to say, would they be a lead plaintiff? Would they be the point of the spear in this big lawsuit against the federal government? And he said, he said he would, and he said that it might be too late for me, but if I can help other people from having this happen to them, I will do it.

14:55 And they did, they all stepped up. And after the book was written, I guess the draft of the book, maybe before it was published, I talked to the ones that were still alive and asked if they had any regrets. And like the McCabe said, not at all. It was the best thing we ever did. We're so proud of what we did.

15:24 I was kind of worried though because the retaliation from the federal government was unbelievable. The farmers were following the law and the federal government was not. The Department of Justice was not following the federal law. The USDA was not following federal law. It was pretty tough.

15:55 depressed or demoralized one of my clients, usually Dwight Coleman, would call and just cheer me up and I would remember why I was doing it. But yeah, the book Facing, I knew it was important and in, you know, like about a decade ago or so, I started to feel this is happening again, this could happen again, we could have another farm crisis.

16:24 And right now, farmers are very much, and their family farmers are very much threatened. And it's a different, in some ways, it's a different kind of threat than it was back then. But, you know, corporatization of agriculture is very much a threat. Purchase of land by corporations and multi-billionaires who are not invested in farming is very much the future of small towns.

16:53 is very much in threat. The future of democracy, I think, is very much threatened by the over-concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few as opposed to having, you know, like, a lot of family farmers are a protection for democracy. And you can read all of the founding farmers, most of whom were farmers. Yeah. I mean, they...

17:23 It's important. It's very important. So I tried to bring that out. Family farming is like kind of the virtues of family farming is kind of a religion in the family I grew up in. But it's closely connected to democracy. So I'm trying to get the word out that we need to protect family farmers and we need to support family farmers and right now it really is a very deep concern.

17:54 And public policy is important. Who you elect is important. What they do is important. And when we talk about family, we have to include your family, your father, who bless his heart, I loved the notes he would send you, the, you know, come work for me and you resisted it for so long, when in reality, what you did finally work for him, it really was that you got to do the same work that you wanted to do, except you got a paycheck in health insurance. It was amazing.

18:22 It was amazing, but yes, I thought that he would view what I was doing for these farmers as being, well, it was improvident. Let's call it that way. If your entire law practice is composed of people facing foreclosure whose bank accounts have been seized, who don't have a penny to their names, whose electricity is being disconnected.

18:53 And this is your sole client base. You're like in a world of financial hurt. That was what I would do. Which you were. Yeah, I was. And so, you know, the farmers were bringing me food. I mean, they would like canned vegetables or fish that they caught in the rivers and do carpentry work. I mean, they all tried to pay me as much as they could, but they didn't have.

19:22 any money. Money is what it takes to pay your phone bill and stuff like that. That was one of the most important things. When my phone was disconnected, then Richard and Marlene Delaire offered me a loan. I ended up saving their money.

19:50 Yeah, they built a handmade desk because I didn't have a desk. I just worked on a card table, but they built a desk. I still have that desk at home. I still use that desk. To me, it just goes to show how much they appreciated you and they believed in you and they needed you. When you read everything that they

20:15 the farmers were doing for you because they saw how hard you were working for them. It's amazing. It really gives you faith in humanity and all of that. To know how much you were going through and suffering. Your son, Andrew, is there saying, please don't leave again, mom, but you had to go fight this case and fight for the farmers. What does your son say now looking back at all of this, reading the book?

20:46 He's proud of me and he's trying to be like, I would say that he's like the best father, I know. I'll leave it at that because like he's not into, well, he's a great father. Perfect. I love that at the end you include where everybody is now.

21:14 Because I was so curious and the one that I was really curious was, what is his name? It shouldn't even be repeated because I was so mad at him the entire time. David Stockman? No, no, no. It was the one who was going to sell your condo and then ran off all around the country collecting other Chuck Perry. Ah, Chuck Perry, man. He he's he he passed away.

21:43 a while back. And before that, he wanted to like hiding from creditors, hiding from whatever, whatever. He should have been hiding from you. Well, in some ways, I owe a lot to him because he didn't have the same problems that the farmers had later, but I learned about the inner workings.

22:13 of, I already disliked USDA because they were, I mean, the farmers home administration, because they were, they were the most discriminatory lender I ever encountered when I ran the equal credit opportunity act enforcement program. And by the way, I'm now serving on the agriculture advisory committee to the USDA equity commission. So I'm still fighting that fight about like, let's stop discrimination against

22:43 against minorities and women and Hispanics and so on. And that isn't over. That's still going on. Congress mandated the USDA set up an equity commission to deal once and for all with these problems with USDA so people can look up equity commission who are listening and the fight goes on. That's incredible. After all of these years.

23:11 I'm working on another book now. This one will be about Native Americans and USDA. Oh, I love that. Let's talk about the Native Americans. Let's talk about the Crows Hearts. That's the proper name. That was their name, right? That family and what they went through reading how basically the government just flooded the town, flooded the farmland and pushed them all out.

23:41 It was mind-blowing. Yeah, yeah. That chapter, by the way, the chapter that particularly focuses on the Crows Hearts and Native Americans, took me so long to write because I had to condense this incredible history of dispossession and discrimination and cruelty and...

24:11 into like one chapter. It had to fit in. But yeah, the treatment of Native Americans, farmers and ranchers was the worst. And I saw this. You know, as many people have read this, you know, the mistreatment of white farmers and ranchers was absolutely appalling, unconstitutional and illegal.

24:41 but the treatment of Native Americans and probably Black. I didn't have any direct dealings back then with Black farmers, but they were treated worse.

24:54 And so it, yeah, it's not a good history. But one of the things that I would like people to remember as they read this book is that this agency was set up in the 1930s by FDR and it was

set up to help people who are struggling and dispossessed. And, you know, the book, Grapes of Wrath, when the Joad family...

25:25 had been traveling and suffering and unable to find even clean water or a place to, a safe place to put their tent, they found a USDA camp for migrant farmers, dispossessed migrant farmers, and that's where they went. Like the Joad family had already lost their farm when they went on the road.

25:51 So the Grapes of Wrath is about dispossessed farmers. We can't let that happen again. Interesting that you mentioned it not only now, but in the book that Grapes of Wrath was actually on over the weekend while I was reading the book. Oh my God. It hit home. I was like, oh my goodness, this is what I'm reading about. This is, it's all meant to be, you know? Yes. Because there's a character in the book, not a character, a person, of one of the farmers that you said sounds like

26:20 like Pa Joed or Uncle Joed, and here was the Joed family on the TV. And I went, oh my goodness. Now it's like it all connects the dots. Yeah. Yeah. I used to say that I was, even though I was suing USDA and I was suing the Farmers Home Administration, that I was the biggest fan of that government agency because I was trying to bring them back.

26:49 to why they were created. They were created to help people, to lift them up, to support them through hard times. And under the Reagan administration, that is not the way it ran. But right now, I think under Vilsack too, I call him, because he's in his second term as Secretary of Agriculture, he's made some brilliant appointments. One of them, the head of the Farmers Home Administration.

27:17 It's now called Farm Service Agency, is a guy by the name of Zach Duchenaux, and he's a Native American rancher, fifth generation Native American rancher from South Dakota. Wow. And his father was a tribal chair, and he helped so many farmers as a farm credit counselor in the 80s. And you know, so like, you can, you know, when you look at minority farmers, they are

27:47 They're like the canaries in a coal mine. You know, when they're having trouble, the trouble is moving on. So like, it's really important to come to the rescue of minority farmers and Native American farmers. And it's happening, you know, things like that are happening today. During the pandemic, very little money reached, you know, other than great big...

28:17 great big corporatized farmers. So it's something that all of citizens need to be aware of and not just believe. I mean, a lot of corporate farms, they smack the name farmer on it and they have like a cutout. And they're trying to get the goodwill that they don't deserve. But we really, all of us need to, my-

28:45 My favorite political saying right now is when a politician comes and asks you for their support you say, well, let me think about it, but in the meantime, tell me what you're doing for family farmers.

29:02 Make them think about it. Family farmers, not agriculture in general, not agribusiness, but what are they doing for family farmers, particularly young family farmers who tend to be the ones who care about the land because they want to pass it on to their children and their grandchildren. So they're not going to be dumping chemicals down the well.

29:29 that their children drink from. You mentioned the USDA coming back to their mission and we have to mention Judge Van Sickle who bless him. I was like, the way he helped you in the courtroom and his clerks and I just want to hug them all. But the fact that at the end of his decision, he brought it all together to remind them this is what's on your building. Yeah. Yeah, that's right.

29:58 That is, you know, the husband men who laboreth should be first partaker of the fruits. And that's biblical. That's from the Bible. So yeah, Judge Van Sickle was amazing. He was incredibly ethical, and he would not ever have visited with me while the lawsuit was going on.

30:28 and I think I was probably an Ag Commissioner or something like that, we visited. He told me that he felt that that was one of the best things he ever did is that case. He did another case too that was even more important for disabled people, people who were committed.

30:58 or people with mental disabilities who are being locked up in sub-human conditions. He made the state of North Dakota change their ways. That was even much more important. He was a great man and a Republican. I mean, absolutely conservative Republican, but he had values.

31:27 He valued proper behavior and human kindness. And I think he was a very religious man. But yeah, my dad told me I needed to go to that judge to judge Ben Sickle. But yeah, he was great. He was absolutely great. And he knew farming because he'd grown up on a farm. And he, in the 30s. In the 30s.

31:57 I loved how he interjected with his questions too and helped you right along. Yeah, he did. He was an amazing judge. Yeah, he's a hero. He's a definite hero. You are as well, my friend. I truly believe that. You are a hero to many and I so greatly appreciate what you have done. I know that...

32:27 the entire state of North Dakota does. Every farmer has to, you're incredible. It's amazing what you've done. And I so greatly appreciate how you have spoken out and spoken up for people. Everyone needs to read your book. Oh, well, thank you. I hope people do read the book and I hope that they take as a mission, save the family farmer, pay attention to the family farmers. Where can they find you and find the book?

32:57 I have a website called [sarahmvoegel.com](http://sarahmvoegel.com). I've got a lot of essays and book reviews and stuff like that on that. It's in bookstores. It's called The Farmer's Lawyer, The North Dakota Nine, and The Fight to Save the Family Farm by Bloomsbury. The big news is that on September 19th, a paperback is coming out. The paperback has a foreword by none other than...



33:27 Willie Nelson, my hero. Yay. And this will air on that day. Yeah. Oh, wow. Wow. Yeah. And so the paperback, I hope, gets, it's going to be less expensive, of course, than the hardback. But I hope it's like, I hope it becomes a best seller, not to make money, but to get the message out. Well, we will do our part. Yeah. The Willie Nelson Forward is.

33:56 is all about that. I mean, he is, he's a hero. He's been doing the Farm Aid concerts since the mid-80s. And so the mission of Farm Aid and the mission of my book is to get the word out that family farmers are important and we need to save them. And so, yeah, I do hope people buy the paper back and read it and talk about it and then do what they can.

34:23 ask politicians what they're doing for family farmers. Okay. This has been so fun. Thank you so much, Sarah. Oh, it's been such a pleasure. I so appreciate you. Thank you for writing the book, for sharing your story, sharing the stories of all of the farmers. It's, it's needed. Well, thank you very, very much. It's been a treat talking to you. Okay. Friends, besides reading the farmer's lawyer, you also get the chance to read the forward by Willie Nelson.

34:53 I think that is one of the coolest things ever. I'm so grateful to Sarah, not only for spending time with me, but for writing this book and for fighting such a big fight. When you read her book and you hear that she was the quiet individual who had a soft voice, she'd never been in a trial, let alone here she was in a courtroom and she had to be in a trial right away and cross examine witnesses and bring witnesses.

35:22 And she wasn't as fully prepared. And yet when you read the details of how she prepared for her class action lawsuit, you were just blown away. She was like a detective who knew what was going to happen, could foresee what kind of questions were going to be asked, what kind of objections there were going to be, and she did it. She is such a hero. She calls Willie Nelson a hero, but ultimately she is a hero. I know that.

35:52 the family farmers she worked with feel the same exact way, and that they all came forward to fight not just for themselves, but for the future of others like them. It is just so incredibly powerful, and I'm so grateful to have gotten to read The Farmer's Lawyer, and to have gotten to meet The Farmer's Lawyer. Please go out and purchase a copy today of The Farmer's Lawyer, available in paperback as of today. Congratulations, Sarah. And remember,

36:22 that speaking up for others is a big deal and it can change the future and the world and we need to do more of it.