Colleen’s story began on a purebred Hampshire hog, Angus cattle and grain farm near Milford, Illinois. As the newspaper headline read, “9-year-old- Wins Swine Award on First Try”. Colleen was that 9-year old and the youngest exhibitor of a Grand Champion at the International Live Stock Exhibition in Chicago. It was just the beginning of many firsts to come.

But being a member of the Future Farmers of America (FFA) was not one of them! Despite her agricultural background and experiences, Colleen was not granted FFA membership. Women weren’t permitted to join FFA until the month after Colleen graduated from high school.

But another first almost coincided when, during her first semester at the University of Illinois, Colleen earned membership on the State 4-H Livestock Judging Team, becoming the first female to ever make the team.

Colleen pioneered her way to broadcasting as the first woman Agribusiness Director for WMBD Radio and Television in Peoria, Illinois, a position she held for 30 years. She continued to break barriers serving as the first female president of the National Association of Farm Broadcasting and was the first women inducted into their Hall of Fame. Shortly after starting her own communications firm, Colleen was invited by Secretary of Agriculture Anne Veneman to accompany her to the war zone in Afghanistan and Iraq. Colleen’s commitment to public service inspired her run for United States Congress in 2008. Colleen describes the experience as “Not Winning Doesn’t Mean Losing!”

Public service became a reality, though, when Colleen accepted a Presidential appointment to become the State Director of USDA Rural Development in Illinois. During her tenure, Colleen oversaw a 20% reduction in staffing while still being able to generate a $1 billion increase in the Illinois loan portfolio.  “By focusing on staff development, creating work teams, and developing a curriculum for communications training, Colleen brought back happiness to the workplace.”
The positive impact was so well noticed that Colleen was asked to replicate the training in other Rural Development state offices and ultimately in Washington, D.C. Now, Colleen looks forward to continuing to do what she does best…communicating. And she’s doing that through her new business, Colleen Callahan Consultancy.