

RMJ

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Taking the Helm:
How rural Minnesota's next
generation sees the future

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Reflections of a Young Farmer

Tracy Gaalswyk

You could say farming is in my blood. I grew up on a farm and knew this was the lifestyle I wanted. My father-in-law grew up on a farm in Europe that is still being run by family members. He emigrated from Europe in the early 1950s; four brothers rode on a boat for two weeks seeking a better life. By staying and working for a relative, they were given the resources to start farming.

My husband and I both grew up learning the business, knowing this is what we wanted to do, which makes us a great team. We believe in what we do and are there to give each other support when there is a breakdown or weather is bad. We pick each other up. I know everything that happens day to day. While I get out in a tractor once in a while, I am usually busy making meals and keeping up with bookwork.

This profession is so rewarding: all summer you can watch the corn grow — it's amazing how fast it happens — and harvest is such a wonderful time of year. You get to see all your hard work paying off. We're both fortunate to be doing what we love.

Technology

It is amazing how far technology has come in the last four decades. I remember the excitement of going from a party to a private phone line. I thought life couldn't get any better than this, talking to my friends without having the whole neighborhood knowing our business. Now the landline is almost extinct and the mobile phone is what the next generation has grown up with.

I am always excited when there are new improvements with technology. On our farm we are taking advantage of the new and improved technologies. Farming is not the same as it was 20 years ago: today, having computer knowledge is crucial. To be a farmer of today, you must keep accurate books and data so everything runs as efficiently and precisely as possible.

Since we started farming ourselves, we have made several changes using technology to make our farm more efficient. I work with our GPS programs and mapping, *plus* I do all of the accounting, which includes: payroll, tax planning, and invoicing on the computer.

Every year is different for planting conditions and proper germination. This year started out one of the wettest and coldest. With the rising cost of seed, crop protection products and fertilizer, an accurate GPS system is necessary to be efficient. On our farm we do prescription planting, which is prescribing what the soil needs. Like a doctor writing you a prescription, we incorporate our data system into our management to get the right combination to keep the soil healthy. To do this we use GPS maps from prior harvests, which tell us exactly what the soil is lacking and where we need to improve the land. We then select the variety and population of seed we will need for each soil type. Our planter has a device on each row to make sure each plant is spaced equally and the depth of the plant stays the same as the elevation of the field varies.

We're also adapting old technology by using new technology. To alleviate crop fertilizer costs, we have diversified by raising poultry. We are able to use the organic manure to nurture our crops. We use GPS here, too, to monitor the insertion of these nutrients, resulting in a variable rate application. By first doing soil and grid sampling, we are able to apply the right amount of nutrients needed per acre. Then we are not wasting any of these valuable nutrients, but instead are feeding the land what it needs.

We are fortunate to work with a neighboring dairy, so we can also apply dairy manure on our fields. The soil needs all types of nutrients to stay healthy, just as we humans need

many types of vitamins to stay healthy.

Crops also need proper protection. Crop protection products are needed to fight off disease and insects, just as we humans use sunscreen and mosquito spray to protect us from harmful UV rays and pesky mosquitoes. Here GPS is also used for proper application.

Food production and food misinformation

The benefits of modern agriculture are outstanding, and I look forward to seeing what the future holds. Some farmers and consumers, though, want to produce and consume food without these new technologies. We are all striving for the same goal, to feed the world by producing a safe, affordable, abundant product.

Consumers are very fortunate to have several types of food to choose from. It is estimated that farmers will have to produce more food in the next 40 years than all of the food produced in the last 10,000 years. We are already producing a tremendous amount of food on a lot less land. With crop technology we are able to grow crops that need less rain and are able to withstand hotter and colder temperatures. The hope is to have enough research on many of these products so we can teach people in Third World countries to grow their own commodities, helping them conquer the world hunger epidemic.

There is a lot of concern with air quality, but with the use of modern tillage tools we are able to take fewer passes on the field, the result of which is like taking 40,000 cars off the road. Then there are animal activist groups who are experts at persuading the urban consumer with misinformation. Our animals are well taken care of; they have a very nutritious diet, are protected from the heat, cold and predators. We give them the best life possible and make sure they are as comfortable as possible. Our livestock need to have boundaries, just as your kids do. It would be unheard of to leave a three-year-old outside alone all day. This is why it is best for our animals to be guided and protected as well. We monitor our livestock all day every day. We keep them in a controlled environment just as you protect your child from many things in your home that may harm them.

The fact is people are living a lot longer due to better nutrition and medical advances. Some people would like to blame obesity on today's food technology, but in fact our food portions have gotten out of control. Also, with modern electronics, we do not get the exercise we once did. Now almost everything is done with a click of a button. Growing up we had to get up and change the channels on the television, just as one example. Although I reap the benefits of these conveniences, I also believe it is very important to stay active. It's easy to spend endless hours playing games on the computer, so I think it's great that video games are now more centered on getting up and moving.

Some groups are also blaming food technologies for early puberty in girls. The fact is that being overweight produces estrogen, which triggers early development, not hormones in dairy cows. In fact, kids these days are eating and drinking a lot less dairy products than the generation before.

Many today are scared of the word GMO (genetically modified organism) and do not know the truth about them. We, as producers, are eating the same food we produce, as well as feeding it to our families. While it seems everything else is taking strides forward such as medical, automobiles, computers, etc., agriculture is being asked to take ten steps back. Farmers should not have to defend themselves as much as they do. With fewer and fewer farmers, though, people are getting removed from the production side of the food chain. Many adults believe their food is grown in the grocery store. How does that affect how our youth think about food production? People think nothing of eating in a Third World country where you can't drink the water, but will not trust the USDA to bring them safe, nutritious food. As advances in medical technology save lives, advances in agricultural technology provide us with more safe, healthy, abundant foods. These advances in technology also increase the sustainability of our food production system and natural resources.

Passing on the legacy: The importance of starting young

Today, young farmers are in short supply. The average age of a farmer is 58, and more than a quarter of farmers are over 65. A mere 5.8% of farmers are now under the age of 35, compared to 16% in 1982. Farmers in America are getting to be rare, a scant 1% of the U.S. population, compared to 40% in 1900.

A lot of farms that were transferred in the last generation were also debt-free when they were transferred, but this is not the case for the next generation. Land is very expensive for the sibling who wants to carry on the family farm. A lot of times they can't afford to assume the farm expenses or don't want to get any further into debt, so the family farm goes to auction.

The main reason why young people are not taking the leap to keep their family legacy going is because the preceding generation did not have a proper succession plan in place. Unfortunately, there is a lot of risk and debt involved in taking over a farm, the worst of which can be the risk of splitting up a family. The siblings who are not involved with the day-to-day of farm life would a lot of times rather have their inheritance in the form of money and not land — not to have any risk — just the cash when the parents are deceased. When the farm falls to the children, some siblings may agree to rent land to the sibling that has been farming, while the other siblings would rather sell the property outright — thus causing dissent that can break a family apart. Many families will sell the family farm rather than risk that.

The parents usually have their whole life invested in the farm. They may try to “gift” some of it to their children while they are still living, but often the taxes are so much, it makes more sense to keep a claim and do some detailed estate planning to try to keep the family farm together.

Farm kids are getting to be very rare; 90% of them are not going to work on the farm after school and/or college. Instead, many of them will pursue a career in a field related to agriculture, such as agronomy, animal science, communications, and marketing computer programming. By early adolescence kids' feelings are formed about farming. Due to the large amount of capital needed (unless you inherit,

marry into it or win the lottery), it is extremely difficult to start farming. To get young people started in farming, parental help is a must. It helps if fathers are full-time farmers. It is easier for them to take the time to teach and groom their children, to encourage them to come back to farming. If the father has to juggle an off-farm job along with running the farm, it is far less likely this will occur. If one generation turns off the next generation, their family farm will not survive.

Everyone has a unique personality, formed not only by genetics, but also by life experiences. When I was growing up, I was involved with 4-H and FFA, and I was able to experience so many things in these groups. We had a great agriculture program for our high school that taught us leadership, booking skills, communication and more.

Now these classes are being cut from many school districts, and it just sickens me. I think that some of those classes should be required, as well as home economics classes. Fortunately, classes are being offered online, and students can join an FFA group in other districts. The lessons you learn from these classes will be useful throughout your life. You'll learn to dig in the dirt, plant seeds and watch your work grow, then harvest what you've grown and cook the end product. This kind of experience gives you a satisfaction and a new way of thinking about your surroundings. 4-H and the fair have changed in the last decade, but the organizations are still prospering. Now more urban children are getting involved, broadening their perspective as to where their food comes from.

My summers were always filled with preparing my projects to take to the county fair. Those memories and friendships have been forever cherished. Learning to communicate with your peers and superiors is another skill you can use for the rest of your life.

Be willing to fail if you want to succeed

The kids in today's generation are techno-geniuses. They will have no problem keeping up with new technologies in agriculture. I am very confident that the next generation will be great stewards of the land, while using more and more

improvements in agriculture every day. But there is much more to being successful in farming than keeping up on the latest new things.

To be successful, you have to be willing to take risks, make a decision, and be confident in what you do. You need to use your mistakes as stepping stones while surrounding yourself with positive people.

My husband and I did not start out with much, and it has taken a lot of hard work to get to where we have gotten so far. Without taking risks, we would not be where we are today. Not all of our decisions have worked the way we planned, but we kept moving forward. If you keep moving forward, you will grow and learn.

When you are doing something you love, you put your heart and soul into it. We live and breathe the land; we nurture it to the best of our ability. You know from the time you're little if you want to be a part of the family legacy — whether it's "in your blood." As the next generation of farmers, we face the task of preserving the honor of one of the oldest professions on earth. Being active in promoting agriculture is a necessity. Every day there are opportunities to make a difference. We just need to be willing to take advantage of them.