



# Bruce & Jennifer Lewis

The Lewis family, from left: Adam, Brittany, Bruce, Conner and Jennifer.

A positive outlook, coupled with a desire to continue the family's heritage of dairy farming are qualities that help Bruce and Jennifer Lewis run a successful dairy operation.

"How you face your challenges – that's what makes you the person you are," Bruce says. "We always try to keep a positive attitude."

Bruce and Jennifer are this year's MMPA Outstanding Young Dairy Cooperators. They are the sole proprietors of Pleasant View Dairy, in Jonesville, Mich. that was started in 1941 by Bruce's grandparents, Wayne and Vivian Lewis with 12 cows. Bruce's parents, Roger and Norma Lewis added buildings and grew the herd to 300 milk cows. The farm now houses 400 milk cows and a variety of 4-H project animals.

Five years ago, the Lewises were farming in a 50/50 partnership. When the farm partner decided to quit dairy farming, Bruce and Jennifer were faced with some big decisions. Could they afford to buy the other half of the herd or should they scale back?

"One of the earliest things we had to do is establish what kind of operation we wanted to have on the other side," Bruce says.

Making the choice to continue farming with the same number of cows that were owned under the partnership meant the Lewises had to restructure debt and reevaluate long-term goals.

"Our long-term goals have changed," Bruce says. "What our goals were for age 50 have really changed."

Instead of waiting and worrying about how they could continue without a partner, Bruce took a proactive approach and went straight to the bank. He advises anyone facing this difficult challenge to do the same.

"If you are ever faced with the challenge of dissolving a partnership, get your banker involved right away so he knows what's happening," Bruce says. "We basically used a team approach and the banker was in on it."

The Lewises believe in taking a proactive approach to hurdles they face on the farm, particularly when dealing with Johne's dis-

ease. During a herd expansion in the early 90s, they purchased some heifers that turned out to have Johne's. They contacted the veterinarian as soon as they realized the problem.

"The vet came out and discussed the protocols we should take to avoid spreading Johne's to other cows," Bruce says. Johne's disease management practices have now been in place on the farm for more than 10 years.

With the ease and availability of Milk ELISA test, the Lewises are able to step up management of the disease. The farm began using the test in 2004.

"We've become more aggressive," Bruce says. "Now we are taking milk samples at dryoff. Testing is a lot better than what it was years ago."

The addition of a new dry cow barn means Johne's positive cows are calved in a different area away from healthy cows. Their calves are ear notched and treated as suspects until they are old enough to be tested.

"With all of the increased awareness, it made sense to be-

come more aggressive and become John's free," Bruce says. "We know it will take awhile."

To avoid bringing any other problems into the herd, the Lewises are internally expanding what Bruce refers to as their "strictly commercial grade" herd. All cows are A.I. bred and a bull is used for clean up only with the heifers. Cows are given Ovsynch to coordinate breeding and reduce the occurrence of summer heat.

The farm's size requires the Lewises to manage both people and cows, making employee retention a key to the farm's success. Bruce and Jennifer make it a point to treat employees with respect and give them the autonomy to make daily decisions themselves. They also ask for opinions when implementing changes on the farm.

"People are more accepting to change if they are involved in it," Bruce says. "If I want to make a change, I tell the employees what the ultimate plan is and let them give ideas and thoughts as to how we will get there."

Offering health insurance and being flexible with hours and vacation time also helps with labor retention. Employees pay a

portion of the health insurance.

"One thing that has helped in keeping labor is adding health insurance," Jennifer says. "It has been a key in keeping employees. We are not experiencing much turnover."

The decision a year ago to hire a Hispanic family to milk the cows has paid off for Bruce and Jennifer. They had previously employed a mix of single Hispanic workers and local part-time people and had experienced some issues with turnover and employee relationships.

"For many years we had a lot of people in and out," Bruce says. "Back then, we had more milkers on staff than we do now."

"The key is just to have a family," Jennifer says. "We learned that having family members work with each other is better. We used to get quality premiums, but now they are higher and more consistent since we hired the family."

In addition to the milkers, the Lewises employ a herdsman, assistant herdsman, calf care person and two mechanics. Bruce says having mechanics on staff helps keep costs down.

"We try to do as much maintenance on the farm as possible," Bruce says. "We have two individuals that are mechanically talented in different areas. That's important as shop rates become more expensive."

Properly maintained equipment ensures Bruce can harvest forages at their peak. Most of the corn and alfalfa grown on the farm is fed to the cows. Lactating cows are fed a TMR twice daily. Open and pregnant heifers are fed a TMR once a day and given access to pasture.

"Having the heifers on pasture is good for them and it looks good to those that drive by," Jennifer says.

Jennifer organized a meeting with Farm Bureau and Michigan State University Extension that addressed concerns of dealing with environmentalists for Farm Bureau members in Hillsdale and the surrounding counties.

"We discussed what the farming community can do to have better relationships with neighbors and environmentalists," Jennifer says.



Heifers at Pleasant View Dairy are given access to a large pasture.



*A roof over the calf hutches keeps calves cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter.*

The Lewises rent a portion of the over 2,000 acres they farm. To foster good relationships with the landowners, Bruce and Jennifer send a letter with their rent check saying they appreciate the opportunity to farm on the land.

"We tell them we take care of the land as we would our own," Jennifer says.

To demonstrate their commitment to the land they own and rent, the Lewises are working toward verification in the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP). They have already taken many steps to become environmentally compliant, such as addressing fuel and fertilizer containment and parlor water on the farm. A Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) is currently being developed; something Bruce feels will also help the farm economically.

"I look at it that with the price of commercial fertilizer you have to take advantage of as much manure as you can," Bruce says. "The CNMP will help provide closer tracking of nutrients and we will get more use of the manure."

By keeping the herd intact, upgrading buildings, fostering good relationships with neighbors and working toward environmental compliance, Bruce and Jennifer hope they will be able to provide a future for their children should they decide to join the farm. When they are not busy with sports, school, or 4-H, the couple's children, Adam, 16, Brittany, 14 and Conner, 12, help out on the farm.

Instilling a love for agriculture in young people is something that is important to the Lewises. Jennifer serves on the Michigan

Farm Bureau Promotion and Education Committee and heads up a Farm Safety Day for the youth in Hillsdale County.

About eight years ago, Jennifer organized a 4-H club for area youth that includes various animals and individual projects. The all in one 4-H club is popular. Jennifer initially thought she may have a dozen kids sign up, now the club has 60 members.

Bruce is president of MMPA's Hillsdale-Litchfield Local and also serves as a delegate. He is a past president and current board member of the Hillsdale County Farm Bureau. Bruce and Jennifer are both members of the Hillsdale County Dairy Promoters,

Bruce and Jennifer represented MMPA's District 1 and the Hillsdale-Litchfield Local at the 2005 OYDC Conference in August. As OYDC, the Lewises will represent MMPA at various events during the next year.



*Bruce and Jennifer spend a portion of their day working in the farm office. The couple turned the small house they first lived in to the farm's office.*