



Leroy & Stephanie Schafer

The last time Leroy and Stephanie Schafer represented MMPA's District 6 in the Outstanding Young Dairy Cooperator program, the couple had made vast improvements to a dairy operation they had taken over only a few years before. That was in 2001. Since then, the Schafers have continued to improve their farming operations and have gotten more involved with MMPA and other farming organizations.

Leroy and Stephanie are this year's MMPA Outstanding Young Dairy Cooperator Runners-Up. They are the sole proprietors of Jem-Lot Dairy, a 115 cow dairy in Pewamo.

When they took over Jem-Lot from Leroy's family in 1997, the facilities were not in very good shape. The herd Somatic Cell Count (SCC) was pushing near legal limits, and the buildings and the milking parlor were in need of repair.

Fast-forward to today, and the farm and milk quality situations are a much different story. The facilities have been upgraded and are being utilized to their full potential. The farm received a Bronze

MMPA Milk Quality award for 2004 and is on track to receive at least a Bronze award for 2005.

"Our best month this year was 79,000 SCC," Stephanie says. "We usually average around 165,000 and are working toward 12 of 12 months quality in SCC, raw bacteria and pre-incubated bacteria."

Hard work, perseverance and knowing when to ask for help are the qualities that allowed Leroy and Stephanie to create a successful dairy operation.

MMPA Member Representative Steve Lehman helped the Schafers early on by performing a milking system check and coordinating other MMPA Representatives to help him do a whole herd test.

"They found we had environmental mastitis – Strep non-Ag," Leroy says. That discovery led the couple to begin dry treating the cows.

Steve also suggested changes to the milking system and provided resources that helped Leroy and Stephanie install a new vacuum pump.

"We used MMPA Member Merchandise for some of the

changes that needed to be made to our milking system," Leroy says. "If you need it, they've got it or can get it for you."

With mastitis under control through treatment, some culling and bedding with mattresses instead of cement, the herd's SCC began to drop. It reached a plateau between 180,000 and 200,000, something that pleased the Schafers for a while, until they began comparing their herds to others of the same size.

The whole herd has been tested through DHIA since the couple took over the farm in 1997. That information is kept on the computer, so the Schafers were able to easily see how their herd matched up to others of the same size through DHIA's Dairy Matrix program.

"We compared our herd to others that used sand bedding and we found that we were below where we thought we should be," Leroy says. "Between that and talking with other dairy farmers, we found sand was the way to go."

Since the decision to switch to sand, the Schafers have noticed the cows are more comfortable,

production has gone up and both SCC and cull rate have gone down.

"We went from cement to mattresses to sand bedding – what a difference," Stephanie says. "Cow comfort plays a big role in production. If they are comfortable, they don't hurt and they produce better."

While they were improving herd health, the Schafers also improved some buildings and added some amenities that benefit both cows and people. An old hog facility was renovated to house dry cows and the heifer barn was revamped to allow fenceline feeding. Headlocks added to the breeding pen make A.I. breeding easier for Leroy.

"We are working to better the genetics in our herd," Leroy says. "All cows are A.I. bred and we use GMS Mating System to mate all the cows for us."

The Schafers do not have a bull on the farm for two reasons: A.I. breeding using suggested sires from GMS will help improve herd genetics and keep their children, Allison, 8, Kyle, 6 and Keith, 5, safe.

"The kids are out with the cows so we do not have a bull for safety reasons," Stephanie says. "They even have their favorite cow, Colby, #449."

In order to keep their focus on the cows and spend more time with the kids, Leroy and Stephanie contract to have all forages custom planted and harvested. In the long run, the couple feels this decision has saved them both time and money because they do not have to worry about equipment upkeep. The Schafers also have one full-time and 2 part time employees that assist in milking the cows and general farm duties.

Leroy's family has milked cows for more than 150 years, a heritage the Schafers hope to pass down to their children and

another reason the couple strives to produce high quality milk and improve herd genetics.

"We want to create a position where the farm can be financially viable to allow our kids into the operation," Leroy says.

In addition to the lessons taught by growing up on a farm, the Schafers also teach their children the importance of getting involved in farming organizations and promoting milk.

Each summer the Schafer family, in cooperation with other dairy farmers in the area, pass out hundreds of milk chugs at three local parades. The farmers and their children create a parade float for each event, fill a water trough with ice and milk chugs and pass them out along the parade route. This year, they also handed out string cheese.

"We solicit funding from MMPA and other dairy farmers and business in the area," Stephanie says. "We also pass out coloring books and pencils from UDIM."

In 2003, Michigan Farm Bureau recognized Stephanie for her agricultural promotion and leadership qualities, naming her their 2003 Outstanding Young Ag Leader. In addition to dairy farming, Stephanie is a DHIA technician, a 4-H leader and formerly served as chairman of the Pewamo-Westphalia High School FFA Advisory Committee. She also substitute teaches at the same school.

Leroy is a delegate for the MMPA Mid-Michigan Local and serves on the MMPA District Nominating Committee. He is a delegate for the Clinton County Farm Bureau and is a member of the Indiana Dairy Association DHIA Planning Committee.

The Schafers represented MMPA District 6 and the Mid-Michigan Local at the 2005 Outstanding Young Dairy Cooperator Conference in August. The Schafers and all the 2005 District OYDCs will be recognized at the MMPA Annual Meeting in March.



The Schafer Family, from left: Leroy, Keith, Kyle, Stephanie and Allison.