

Attitude is Everything

District 12 OYDC Matt & Ginger Sterly maintain a positive outlook when faced with numerous challenges

During the past two years, Matt and Ginger Sterly have faced some unbelievable challenges – ones that may have caused other new business owners to rethink their decision to take on that much risk in the first place. Through it all, the Sterlys have learned to face challenges in stride, smile, and keep a positive outlook when they talk about their dairy farm and the future.

The rough road began in early 2005 when Matt's mother, Barb, learned her liver was failing and would need a liver transplant. They learned that Matt was a match, so he gave her 70 percent of his liver in May 2005. That same month, Ginger gave birth to the couple's second child, Megan, who soon had to undergo surgery for a digestive problem.

At the time, Matt and Ginger owned the dairy portion of the Petokey area farm and Matt's parents, Jim and Barb Sterly, still owned the cropping portion of the 1,000 acre farm. With three of them unable to work, overall farm management fell on Jim's shoulders for a while and the Sterlys relied on their employees to take up some of the workload.

"Matt was down for a month," Ginger recalls. "After that, he started working back into the routine and was almost back to full swing within two months."

Things went well until that October, when Jim fell off the combine, landing on his head.

"He didn't have a very good prognosis at first," Matt says. "They



thought he wouldn't be able to lift again. Now, he is doing better and can lift up to 50 pounds."

Jim and Barb's health problems made keeping up with the crop work difficult, so Matt, Ginger and the employees pitched in to help. Matt and Ginger took over the cropping portion of the farm from his parents in January 2006.

"My parents would still be doing the crops but with all the medical problems last year, they just couldn't keep up with it," Matt says. "So now they are working for us instead of us working for them."

Just as things were starting to look up for the family and the farm, Barb was involved in an accident while driving a farm truck. It was then that the Sterlys realized downsizing the farm would alleviate a lot of stress and reduce equipment time spent on the road. Summertime urban sprawl and retirees moving to the area have made moving large farm equipment along the roads more difficult in recent years.

"It takes a lot of road time to get manure out to the fields and the feed back in," Matt explains. "Our fields are very spread out. It is very stressful on an owner to have trucks out on the road, especially in the summer. The tourists will pass you on the right, left, anywhere. We have to watch everything that we do and are careful not to lose feed or manure on the roadway." Ginger adds if a spill does take place, everyone on the farm is instructed to clean it up right away.

Downsizing of the cropland will take place over the next 3-5 years due to land contracts. They plan to give up most of the rented ground and continue farming on fields they own that are located closer to the farmstead. Matt says that it was only a matter of time before they were going to lose the rented land to vacation homes.

Currently, the Sterly's have about 225 cows in the herd. Their facilities were designed to fit about 180 cows comfortably, which is the Sterly's target herd size. That would allow them to get to 3 hours or less at milking time.

"We are working on downsizing the herd a bit through culling to get back to a little bit less labor and more family," Matt says. "Ginger and I are more about working than sitting behind a desk – and so are my mom and dad. We got up to 250 cows but it is too hard with employee turnover."

"We are at that stage where we are too big for just family but too small for a lot of employees," Ginger adds.

The plan to scale back the employee pool should not be too difficult, according to Matt and Ginger. Since many of their employees are young – either still

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A closer Look



Sterly Dairy Farm

Matt and Ginger Sterly with their children: Megan, 1; Robert, 2 and newborn (in September) Alicia Marie

Location: Petoskey, Michigan

MMPA Members of: MMPA District 12 and the Upstate Local

Herd Size: 190 milking and dry

Replacements: 350

Acreage Farmed: 1,000

Milking set-up: Double-10 Parlor

Agriculture and dairy involvement:

Matt serves on the MMPA Upstate local's Executive Committee and as a delegate. Matt is the current Emmet County Farm Bureau President and has served on the Michigan Farm Bureau Young Farmer and State Policy Development Committees. Ginger serves as the Promotion and Education Chair for the Emmet County Farm Bureau and is currently involved in the ProFILE program through Michigan Farm Bureau. For the community, the couple hosts farm tours for 300-500 school children and their parents each year.

The thing that makes a difference on our farm is: We try to treat everybody, including the employees, as family.

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in school or recent graduates – the couple plans to not fill those positions when the kids go to college or a get new job. They also feel that their Hispanic employees do not intend to stay for a long period of time, so they will not rehire for those positions, either. That leaves the family with just a couple of employees who wish to stay on after the downsizing.

Even though urban sprawl has reduced the number of farms in the area, the Sterlys hope they will be able to farm on their land, which has been in the family for the past three generations. As farms in the area have diminished, so too has the

infrastructure supporting agriculture.

“Now we have to travel 2-3 hours just to get parts,” Ginger says. “Any time we go to an MMPA, Farm Bureau or other function, we try to make our trips count by getting parts either on the way down or on the way back home.”

Ginger’s father, a beef and crop farmer from Mt. Pleasant, helps out by picking up the needed parts and supplies and meeting them half way between the two farms.

Through all of their recent challenges and the prospect of more urban sprawl on the horizon, the Sterlys continue to keep a posi-

tive outlook and are determined to continue farming so they can pass the farm on to their children. The couple enjoy raising their three children, Robert, 2; Megan, 1; and newborn (in September) Alicia Marie, on the farm. Robert and Megan already love to “work” on the farm with their parents and grandparents.

“It seems like within the last year, anything that could go wrong went wrong – if it weren’t for bad luck, we wouldn’t have any luck at all,” Matt says, still smiling. “We have a positive outlook on the future and we’d like to stay farming. If not here, then someplace where it is more agriculture friendly.”

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