

Like Mother, Like Daughter

2008 MMPA District 10 OYDC Abigail Nelkie



Abigail Nelkie says she's always been interested in cows, and has worked on her family's farm "ever since she was old enough to hold a pitchfork."

"She's always liked the farm," Abbie's mother Julie says. "She holds the same interest in animals and farming that I have."

Julie, a retired registered nurse, was raised at Lemajru Dairy Farm—her family's West Branch, Mich. farm that she and her husband, Charles, managed and eventually purchased from her parents. Julie's love of animals, medical background and attention to detail were all passed down to Abbie, who is now nutritionist of the farm's herd of 200 registered Holsteins.

The Nelkie's take dairy genetics seriously, having done the legwork and bearing the expense of ensuring their cattle are marketable on a national basis. The family's herd is tested yearly to ensure it is TB Free Accredited. The farm has also instituted Johne's Disease control measures, having achieved and maintained a Johne's Disease level four status since 2004.

"Our goal was to get an animal out of the state," says Abbie.

Through embryo transfers and sound AI mating choices by the mother-daughter team, the family was not only able to ship cattle with desirable genetics out of state, they're now able to boast having the first bull in their area —Lemajru-N O-Man Gopher ET—go to stud at ABS Global in DeForest, Wisc.

"We are very close in our thinking, we can go through a list of cattle and mate the animals—we can almost match cow for cow," Julie says. "When we look at a cow, we see very similar traits."

The Nelkies' attention to detail does not stop at genetics. The family pays close attention to cow health, placing emphasis on milk quality and udder health. The herd's average SCC has remained consistently beneath 100,000 for many years, currently ranging around 72,000. The farm's milk quality has earned Lemajru Dairy MMPA quality awards for nearly a decade, achieving gold award status the past four years in a row.

Abbie's experience working in a mastitis lab while attending her final year of college at North Carolina State University taught her how to identify most mastitis causing organisms. A microscope, incubator and lab supplies kept on the farm allows Abbie to sample, identify and resolve mastitis issues quickly.

"We don't treat every cow that has mastitis—if it's environmental mastitis, we'll just milk her into the quarter milker until the quarter either clears or it dries up," Abbie says.

The Nelkies also use probiotics to enable the cow to take care of herself, Abbie explains. Only cows with severe cases of treatable mastitis are given antibiotics along with the probiotic treatment.

What goes on in the parlor is key to keeping mastitis under control and milk quality high. Every employee that milks at Lemajru Dairy is responsible for following milking protocols the Nelkies have put in place. If an employee is unsure, the protocols are located in an easy to access notebook in the milkhous. When the farm gets quality premiums, the employees who follow the protocols get a percentage of the premiums based on how often they've worked. A member of the family milks at least once a day to ensure protocols are being met.

"Cows like consistency," Abbie says. "To achieve quality, you have to have a consistent routine. If you don't, the cows aren't going to respond favorably."

Even a well-run farm has challenges. In college, Abbie majored in animal science until herd nutrition problems on her family's farm (over 900 miles away at the time) caused her to add another major—dairy nutrition—to her already busy schedule. Fortunately, she needed an additional year of college to complete her eligibility as an NCAA cross country and track and field athlete, a skill that earned her a scholarship and one of the main reasons Abbie went so far away from home to attend college.

"While Abbie was in college, we had a bad experience with a nutritionist and the cows got sick," Julie says. "Three quarters of the herd had laminitis. Abbie's attention to the nutrition has really made a difference."

Lemajru Dairy Farm



Abigail Nelkie and her fiancé,
Michael O'Farrell

*One Thing that Makes a
Difference on Our Farm is...
Paying attention to details while
progressing toward the future.*

~ *MMPA Member of* ~
District 10
Sunrise local

~ *Herd size* ~
100 milking and dry

~ *Replacements* ~
100

~ *Acres Farmed* ~
500

~ *Milking Set-Up* ~
Double 4 herringbone

~ *Ag and Dairy Involvement* ~

Abigail serves on the Michigan Holstein Association District VII Board of Directors, is an AFACT member, is a 4-H dairy leader and is involved in an under 35 dairy farmer group.