

# Careful Investment

2009 MMPA OYDC Runners-Up Tom and Heather Wing

The thought that farmers may be overinvesting in their farms may sound unconventional to modern-day agriculture practices, but that unconventional thought process has helped Tom and Heather Wing weather the current slump in the dairy industry.

“When I was a commissioner, I asked an economic development professional what the most significant thing facing the future of Agriculture was,” Tom explains. “His answer was ‘overinvestment.’ It was a very unconventional way to think about it, but it stuck with me.”

The Wings try to avoid overinvestment by fixing more equipment and getting by with what they have, which has been helpful given the economic downturn the dairy industry is currently facing. Both Tom and Heather farm full-time, deriving their entire family income from dairying.

“We have had to adjust our thoughts on how things get done,” Tom says. “This past year’s been tough but it would’ve been tougher had we not instituted those practices.”

“Everybody’s going through tough times and we’re grateful for where we’re at right now,” Tom says.

A close eye on spending allows the Wings’ to focus on keeping their farm efficient. Instead of building a new parlor, the couple upgraded their current milking system to include newer, rebuilt detachers, as well as a homemade crowd gate, both making milking time more efficient. The improvements not only get cows milked more quickly, but also reduced cleaning expenses and hot water use.

“We’re investing in the existing infrastructure of the farm, not putting up new barns and adding more cows, just

improving what we already have,” Heather says.

To learn how their farm can be even more efficient, the Wings have requested that MMPA conduct an Energy Audit for their farm. They hope to learn additional ways to conserve energy or make their energy usage more efficient. Once the audit is complete, the Wings say they will likely need to switch from an electric hot water heater to a propane one. Otherwise, they plan to keep all farm expenses in check. They have even been experimenting with just how far they can cut back on the mineral supplements for the cows without having a negative effect on production.

“We are still within the nutritional guidelines but pushing the envelope on the low side of the minerals,” Tom says. “I think that may be causing the cows’ immune systems to become more fragile. We had a couple of cows get sick and the only difference was the reduced amount of minerals in their diet.”

After receiving his bachelor’s degree in Animal Science at MSU, Tom returned to the family farm where he worked as an employee for a few years. Around 1991, Tom’s father, Paul, decided it was time to make Tom a partner at Wing Acres Dairy. The two remained in partnership until 2000, when Tom had enough equity in the farm to purchase the equipment, at which time he also began to buy the dairy herd portion of the operation.

“My grandfather made a similar arrangement with my dad,



Photos, clockwise, from left:  
Heather, Arinn, Tom and Olivia;  
Olivia and Arinn help feed calves.



so it wasn't something my dad hadn't ever dealt with or considered before." Tom remarks about the transition. "We have a centennial farm and he wanted to pass it along."

Passing along the farm meant Tom's parents would hand over the house his father had spent most of his life in to his son. At the time, Tom owned a home once belonging to his grandmother. Swapping homes with his parents was included in the transition agreement. "It just made sense for me to be here on the farm, and them not to be here," Tom explains. By then, Tom had taken over the main farm responsibilities, including the books, as part of the transition.

Tom and Heather married in 2005. Heather resigned from her off farm job in 2006 when their first daughter was born. Heather is the farm's administrator/farm manager, skills she acquired while earning her Master's degree at CMU.

The farm transition has gone well for the Wings, offering Tom and Heather the chance to own and operate the farm while still providing his parents with

opportunities to remain involved with the family business. The Wings credit the smooth transition to a cooperative effort by all parties and the assistance they received from MSU Extension Dairy Specialist Roger Betts, who worked with the family to set up the entire transition.

Part of the transfer of the business from Paul to Tom included putting everything on paper by starting with sound accounting and recordkeeping systems. "It may be a family business, but the transfer part of it has to be on paper," Tom stresses. "If everybody knows the numbers, it makes it easier to understand what you're getting when you transfer the business."

Along the same lines, Tom and Heather stress the importance of instituting good accounting practices for all of their farm and family

finances. "It makes it less stressful to know whom you owe what to," Tom says.

A good handle on their finances and resisting the urge to overspend on their day to day operations have helped the Wings through the worst of the latest economic cycle in the dairy industry. The couple is hopeful their conservative practices will help keep their farm in the family for another century, should their daughters, Olivia, 3 and Arinn, 2, decide to pursue a future in dairy farming.



## Wing Acres Dairy Facts:

**MMPA Members of:**  
District 4 and the Barry-Eaton Local

**Herd size:** 100 milking and dry; 100 replacements

**Acres farmed:** 630

**Milking set-up:** Double-6 herringbone parlor

**Ag and community involvement:** Tom has served as a delegate of the Barry-Eaton local. He is the past president of the Barry County Farm Bureau and has formerly served on the Barry County Board of Commissioners. Heather is an MMPA Dairy Communicator.

*"One thing that makes a difference on our farm is... having God at the center of all of our decision making."*