

# A Different Perspective

2009 MMPA District 1 OYDC Duane and Malissa Guenther

About the same time MMPA's other 2009 District OYDCs were attending MMPA's OYDC Conference, Duane and Malissa Guenther were trying to decide if they were even going to continue dairy farming. Low milk prices and start up expenses had hit the generally upbeat couple hard and they were seriously considering giving up Duane's dreams of dairy farming.

During that time, both Duane and Malissa had off-farm jobs just to make ends meet. Malissa was able to find a temporary job

that allowed her to work between milkings. Duane drove truck for a friend, hauling grain.

"About mid-summer, we thought we were ready to quit milking cows," Malissa says. "Between working these other jobs and the milking, we were each working at least 18 hours a day. But then we realized it was bad all over. So we decided to keep milking."

By then, milk prices had started to recover and the Guenthers had realized making ends meet in Michigan is difficult no matter what profession they chose.

"It was still always my dream to milk, and I'm glad we stuck it out, because things have gotten a lot better," Duane says.

Duane had farmed with his father and uncle since he was a kid. After his uncle had a farm accident, the elder Guenthers decided they wanted to get out of dairy farming, but Duane wanted to keep dairying. Duane and Malissa own and reside on 30 acres adjacent to Duane's

family's farm in Saline. Their property does not contain cow facilities.

"In 2007, we split off from my dad and uncle," Duane says. "We looked for a farm to buy but couldn't find one affordable in this area because land and taxes have gotten so outrageous in the Saline-Ann Arbor area, that people can't afford to buy a farm here."

Duane recalls one day where he was so frustrated with finding a place to milk his cows that he just decided to take a drive. While out, he noticed an old dairy facility owned by former MMPA producer Neil Weidmayer, whom Duane did not know at the time. Neil was sitting on the porch and Duane walked up and asked if he was interested in renting the dairy portion of the facility. Neil agreed, and the pair shook hands. Soon after, Duane and Malissa began the cleanup and maintenance of the facility located in Manchester, nine miles away from their home.

"We cleaned up the barn and parlor and got it ready for the cows to come there," Duane says. "Neil's been very good to us."

The cows moved to the refurbished facility in November 2007. The rented facility gave the cows a more comfortable environment than they had at the old facility.

"There is greater air flow and the cows are more comfortable at the rented facility," Duane says.



Top: The Guenthers: Malissa, Duane and Codie, 11.

Bottom: Cows on the Guenther Dairy Farm.



“They have done so much better than they did at the old facility. We did really well the first year.”

Coming into the dairy business just prior to one of the largest price drops in dairying has been difficult for the Guenthers, but through careful planning and the help of family, they have been able to make it work.

“Fortunately we were able to make cutbacks,” Duane says. “Our feed costs were huge, so we were able to cut back on vitamins and minerals, but didn’t cut back on any forages.”

A portion of the farm’s forages were purchased from a family member who allowed the Guenthers to pay for them when they were able.

“Family support helped keep us going,” Duane says.

The couple says having the gift of laughter helps them make it through the tough days.

“We’ve learned to laugh about finances,” Malissa says. “It might not have been as bad if it wasn’t our second

year in the business when the milk price dropped. Trying to pay for everything and make a go of it then was tough.”

Duane and Malissa are the sole proprietors and the sole employees on their farm. That can make living nine miles away from the farm difficult, say the couple, particularly since their son, Codie, 11, goes to school in a different school district than where the farm is situated. Either Malissa or Duane make sure they are home in time to greet Codie as he gets off the bus.

“We milk twice a day,” Duane says. “Codie gets off the bus just before we do evening milking so he is able to help feed the calves.”

Cow monitoring can also be challenging, particularly at night.

“With both of us working at the farm, there’s been a lot of challenges that we’ve dealt with,” Malissa says. “We’d really like to find a place to live where our cows are.”

The Guenthers are currently trying to sell their present homestead and are looking for dairy farms throughout the state where they and their cows could live in close proximity.

“Duane’s always dreamed of having his own dairy farm,” Malissa says. “If it wasn’t for friends and family, we couldn’t have made it. So many people have helped us make it work.”



## Guenther Dairy Farm Facts:

- MMPA Members of:  
District 1 and the Saline-Ann Arbor Local
- Herd size: 90 milking and dry, 90 replacements
- Acres farmed: 140
- Milking set-up: Double 10 parallel parlor

“One thing that makes a difference on our farm is... We do all the work ourselves.”