

By Alex Schnabelrauch

Walking the Line

2013 OYDC Mike and Jordan Noll

Multi-generational dairy farming can be a tightrope walk. Sports practices, 4-H, clubs, meetings and sleepovers make it far from easy to balance the hard work, time and sweat needed to maintain a family farm. Add in the mentality of today's Generation Z, and things get downright hairy.

But, 2013 OYDCs Mike and Jordan Noll are trying, like many other young cooperators, to have the best of both worlds.

"It's a fine line, showing kids the need and importance of investing time on the farm and balancing life beyond our dirt road," Mike explains. "We do our best to be involved off the farm with our kids while still running an effective, efficient business. It's a balancing act."

Living by an End-of-the-Day Checklist

Instead of dwelling on a never-ending farm "to do" list, the Nolls gauge success much differently. "When you own your own business, you can work every hour of every day and still never catch up. So instead of dwelling on what we could be doing, we stay focused on a daily checklist," Mike softly smiles.

Farming with Mike's parents, Mike and Lynne, and brother and sister-in-law, Mark and Brandy, the Nolls' priorities revolve around three questions: Did we get what needed to be done, done? Did we spend some time with our family? Did we keep the extended family content?

"If we can say yes to all three when the sun goes down, it was a good

day," Jordan grins. Grounded with this firm handle on the family's priorities, Mike and Jordan don't often stray from their easy-going, grounded, positive demeanors.

Coping with Urban Sprawl

But, after a phone call just halfway through our visit, it was evident there was one issue sure to impassion every member of the Noll family: neighbor relations.

Driving through the small, rural town of Roseburg before turning down the Nolls' dirt road, it seems as if this part of Michigan couldn't get more rural. Yet, Port Huron is just 20 miles away.

In search of their own "little piece of the country," many urban residents, unaccustomed to typical on-farm practices, purchase homes around Nolls Dairy Farm Inc. Mike and Jordan can speak about the large disconnect between farmers and consumers from experience, being accused of everything from spreading "black tar" on fields (and working it in with a big green tractor) to kicking up too much dust with their tractors.

Using farm equipment to plow surrounding residential driveways and



Above: Mike and Jordan Noll of Croswell were named 2013 MMPA OYDC following the annual OYDC Conference in August.

hosting over 200 neighbors to an annual hog roast, the Nolls are doing their part to educate and be good neighbors. But with approximately 75 percent of the surrounding population unfamiliar with dairy or agriculture in general, it's an uphill battle.

"We've hosted farm tours and, when funds were too low to fund transportation, took our farm to



Above: The Nolls do their best to balance farm work with community involvement as they try to keep the next generation – Jake, Rece, Joey and Riley (left to right) – interested in the family business.

the school," Jordan says. "Our relationship started with a farm tour, and we do our best to continue educating the community on our way of life. It's not easy, but it's our job to tell our story so the next generation will still have the opportunity to farm if they choose."

And the Rest is History

Outsiders would never guess Jordan is comparatively "new" to the farm scene. It all started in 1999 when she brought her class of third graders to the farm for a field trip; 13 years later, she's still there.

"Another teacher gave Mike my number. He called and asked me to go to Big Boy for coffee. Dating happened riding in tractors. And the next year we were married," Jordan laughs. A crash course in dairy farming and four kids later, Mike and Jordan have watched the dairy herd quadruple and acreage double. Now, Jordan stays at home with the kids while Mike and his brother, Mark, operate the farm. The fourth generation, Mike and Mark have diversified the operation, feeding between 150-200 beef cattle and cash cropping additional acreage. The farm has grown. The number of families it supports has expanded.

But the same commitment to producing quality products while focusing on family remains. "We do our best to do things right while being involved in our community and making memories as a family. At the end of the day, it's all about walking that fine line and balancing business and family," Mike concludes.



Mike and Jordan Noll District 8 OYDC Mid-Sanilac Local

Children: Jake (11), Joey (10), Rece (6) and Riley (4)

Herd Size: 260 milking, 50 dry

Replacements: 300

Acres Farmed: 2,000

Crops Grown: corn, soybeans, alfalfa, wheat, sugar beets and dry beans

Milking Regiment: two-a-day milking in a double-5 herringbone parlor

Sustainable Practices: reclaimed plate cooler water, variable rate fertilizer application, TMR tracker

Breeding Program: AI with a cleanup bull

Education: Mike received a two-year agribusiness degree from Michigan State University in 1998 and Jordan graduated from Calvin College with a bachelor's degree in elementary education, also in 1998.

Certifications/Training: FARM certified, MAEAP verified in cropping systems

Ag, Dairy and Community Involvement: Mike and Jordan both serve as 4-H club leaders. Mike has served as an MMPA delegate. He's on the Fremont Township Parks and Recreation Committee and is an alternate on the Zoning Board of Appeals, vice president of the Sanilac County Farm Bureau, finalist for the Michigan Farm Bureau achievement award and a youth basketball coach. Jordan plans kindergarten farm tours and conducts various dairy promotion events at local schools. She's the local little league secretary and has served on the Sanilac County Dairy Banquet Planning Committee and county Breakfast on the Farm Planning Committee and volunteers for Project RED.



Above: Since Mike began working full-time on his parents' farm, the Nolls' dairy herd has quadrupled and acreage has doubled.