

Dairying with a Double “X”

2013 OYDC Runner-up Jeff and Chriss Carmichael

If the dairy industry is a man’s world, someone forgot to tell Chriss Carmichael.

The youngest of three daughters, the 33 year-old mom is the only successor interested in continuing the family farm currently owned by her parents, Jerry and Lynn Mitchell. Along with her husband, Jeff – who grew up on a dairy, but has worked off the farm for UPS for 15 years – Chriss aims to add to the Cedar Grove Dairy Farm legacy and prepare the business for many generations to come.

No More Boys Club

Whether surveying MMPA local meeting attendees or reading names of the co-op’s field staff in the back of this magazine, one thing is evident: the number of females working in dairy is rising. But for Chriss’s family, women aren’t a new fixture in the milkhouse, parlor and freestall barn.

“When my grandparents met up with other dairy farmer friends, my grandma didn’t have anything to talk to the women about. She could do everything my grandpa did on the farm and would have rather been talking ‘shop’ with the men than sharing recipes,” Chriss explains. “Today, dairy is no longer just a man’s world. I can do field work. I can unload hay. I can AI. I can milk cows. I was raised with no distinction between women’s and men’s work on the farm. And it seems like the industry is starting to reflect this reversal of dairy gender trends.”

Committed to continuing this trend, Chriss mentors other young girls and women interested in dairy and agriculture. As a 4-H club leader and agricultural issues discussion group leader, she hopes to encourage other women that there is a place in the industry for them.

Chriss acknowledges, though, she couldn’t be as active with off-farm organizations without the tireless support of her husband and parents.

But Jeff remarks, “I wouldn’t have it any other way! I’ve always loved farming ever since I was a kid. Even when I started working for UPS, I still spent weekends working with my dad on the family farm. Even though my dad sold our dairy, I still get to be a part of a family dairy farm and enjoy helping Chriss continue our families’ agricultural legacy.”

From Prayers to Parlors

One of Chriss’s biggest role models, her grandmother, Wilma, still remembers Chriss helping feed calves as a child and, in reference to a very sick calf, asking “Grandma, what can I do to help this calf get better?” Wilma replied, “Pray.” And Chriss did.

A few decades later, Chriss still has a passion for calves and occasionally calls on her grandmother to



Above: Chriss and Jeff Carmichael, pictured with their son, Emmett, were named 2013 MMPA OYDC Runner-up.

troubleshoot calf care issues. “That woman taught me everything I know! Now she’s helping pass on that knowledge to my son and, at 89, still shares her knowledge and experience to help improve the family farm,” Chriss smiles.

While calf care is still her favorite on-farm pastime, Chriss can and has done it all. From milking to doing crop work, keeping the books to treating cows, she lends a hand wherever she’s needed. “Originally, I wanted to be a vet and spent two summers interning at local vet clinic. But I realized I could do vet, lab



Above: From milking to breeding, Chriss is an active part of her parents’ operation.

and nutrition work back here on the family farm. Being a dairy farmer, I get to do a lot of single jobs in the course of one day," Chriss explains.

Spreading the Word

A natural teacher, Chriss never turns down a chance to advocate for agriculture and share her farm's story. So when local leaders were looking for centennial farms to help start the Osceola County Quilt Block Trail, Chriss and her family couldn't wait to submit their application.

Three years later, over 100 quilt blocks adorn Reed City High School, the post office, fire department and Cedar Grove Dairy Farm – each with its own story to tell.

Especially popular with tourists in the area for fall color tours, many vehicles slow down, stop and snap pictures in front of the Mitchells' and Carmichaels' 125-year-old hip roof barn. Some even venture onto the property for an impromptu farm tour. "They aren't supposed to, but we have had a handful of interested spectators ask for tours," Chriss adds.

She might not fit the typical male-centric farmer stereotype, but Chriss is a part of the changing face of the Michigan dairy and agriculture industry. Despite its challenges, this passionate teacher, enthusiastic dairywoman and fifth generation farmer is committed to adding her story to the family's 127-year farm history.

And with a supportive husband, beautiful son and family full of strong female dairywomen by her side, Chriss's story is sure to be a page turner.



The Carmichaels' 125-year-old hip roof barn is a point-of-interest for hundreds of tourists each year as a part of the Osceola County Quilt Block Trail.



Jeff and Chriss Carmichael District 5 OYDC Evart Local

Children: Emmett (1)

Herd Size: 170 milking, 20 dry

Replacements: 100

Acres Farmed: 1,200

Crops Grown: corn, alfalfa, wheat, oats and rye

Milking Regiment: two-a-Day milking in a double-6 herringbone parlor

Sustainable Practices: soil sampling, slow-release liquid nitrogen, zone tilling

Breeding Program: AI with a cleanup bull for heifers

Education: Jeff completed the MSU Dairy Management Program in 1995, Chriss graduated from MSU with a bachelor's degree in Animal Science in 2002.

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

Ag, Dairy and Community Involvement: Jeff and Chriss have co-led the Dairy Lads and Lassies 4-H group for seven years and the Osceola County Farm Bureau Chat and Chew discussion group for five years. Chriss served on the county's Breakfast on the Farm planning committee in 2012 and has been her church's financial secretary for 10 years.