

NewsWatch

Hard work makes dream come true

By FRAN O'LEARY

WHEN Gerald and Andrea Dannenberg got married in 1973, Gerald was milking 80 cows with his dad on a rented farm near Newark, Ill., where he grew up. The 22-year-old loved farming and dreamed of owning a farm someday.

Humble beginnings

"My parents had always rented, and I didn't think there was any future in renting," Gerald explains. "Farms were too expensive to buy in north-eastern Illinois, so we came up here to look. In 1975, we found this rundown, 148-acre dairy farm near Mineral Point that had an FmHA [Farmers Home Administration] loan on it that we could assume, and we decided to buy it. It was such a mess. My dad said I'd never make it buying a farm."

But the young couple went to work and never looked back. In 1977, they built a 50-tiestall dairy barn. Over the years, they remodeled the modest farmhouse and added on to it, and slowly but surely fixed up the place. They raised three sons: Bruce, 30; Dan, 28; and Peter, 26. Andrea taught grade school in Darlington to help with family living expenses and assisted with chores after work and on weekends until the boys were old enough to go out to the barn. She still teaches fourth-graders at the same school.

Ten years ago when Dan was still in high school, Gerald helped his two oldest sons buy



BUILDING A LIFE: Andrea and Gerald Dannenberg of Mineral Point have watched their farm and family grow during 35 years of marriage. Together they've built a family and farm that are thriving.

Key Points

- The Dannenbergs are the first generation on their farm.
- They farm 1,000 acres and milk 320 cows.
- They also farm 6,000 acres in Ukraine.

a neighboring farm where they milked 100 cows of their own. They did field work together. Gerald continued to milk 50

cows on the home farm until 2002 when they decided to put the two herds together at Bruce and Dan's farm and form Triple D Farms LLC.

Expansion mode

"Milking 150 cows worked out for six years, but then the boys were getting married, the family was growing and everyone needed more income," he says. Gerald and Andrea's family was getting larger, as well. In 2000, the couple adopted a daughter, Anastasia, from Ukraine. Four years later, they returned to Ukraine to adopt a second daughter, Laurianna.

Last year, they decided to expand their dairy operation and build a freestall barn for 200 cows. They added on a new office, break room and bathroom for the milkhouse. They also built a post-fresh and pre-fresh building, and put up two more bunker silos and a commodity shed.

Today, they milk 320 Holstein cows with a 25,000-pound rolling herd average. Calves are raised at the home farm. They stay in hutches until they are weaned at 3 months old and are then grouped into pens of eight to 10 and are housed in the dairy barn that has been converted into a calf barn.

"When the calves are 8 months old, they go to a neighboring farm that we rent,"

Gerald says. "They come back here when they are breeding age and then go back to Dan's until three weeks before they calve." Then they are moved to the dairy facility, which is located on the farm where Bruce lives.

The Dannenbergs farm 1,000 acres — 300 owned and 700 rented. They raise all of their own feed.

Bruce and Dan also custom harvest 3,000 to 4,000 acres of hay and corn silage. "We do ours first, and then they go on the road," Gerald says.

They rely on several employees including herdsman David Bradley; full-time hired man Craig Hansen, who has worked with the Dannenbergs for five years; four part-time milkers; and part-time help to drive tractor or truck during harvest, Gerald says. In addition to their employees, they also work closely with their Vita Plus feed consultant John Urness and their veterinarian Matt Beyers with Dodgeville Vet Service.

Bruce and his wife, Sarah, recently built a new house on the farm where the cows are milked. Sarah works full time off the farm at Heartland Credit Union in Dodgeville and Platteville as an ag loan processor. They have an 18-month-old daughter, Isabella, and another baby due in the



A world away

IN 2002, after reading an article in the *Wisconsin Agriculturist* about a group of Midwest farmers who were farming in Ukraine, Gerald Dannenberg called one of them and formed a partnership with Joe Parker from Kentucky, John Shea from Platteville, Keith Eckstrom from Belmont and Sasha Gordinko from Ukraine. The men lease 6,000 acres in Ukraine, called New Hope Farm, and grow soybeans, wheat, canola and corn.

"We bought machinery here and shipped it by container to Ukraine, including two John Deere 9610 combines," Gerald explains.

"They're just starving for combines in Ukraine." They bought Belarus tractors in Ukraine because they can get parts and fix them there.

Last year, the soybeans yielded an average of 50 bushels per acre, and they were paid \$13 a bushel.

"We think we can do better [yield-wise] because we irrigate everything," Gerald says. "They only get 13 inches of rain a year where we're at. But the soil is so fertile. All you have to do is add water!" Gerald travels to Ukraine in June and October. He sometimes brings along Andrea and the girls.

They pay \$40-per-acre rent and are hoping to start buying some of the land. The partners involved in New Hope Farm are also looking at renting an 8,500-acre, 400-cow dairy farm in Ukraine. "We're also looking for additional investors," Gerald says.

fall. Dan and his wife, Elizabeth, recently built a new house. Elizabeth works full time off the farm managing two assisted-living facilities in Mineral Point and Dodgeville. They have an 18-month-old son, Tucker. Gerald and Andrea's youngest son, Peter, lives in Newark, Ill., works in excavating, and recently became engaged to Jeannie Keisler.

Gerald and Andrea know they have come a long way in the 35 years since they were married. "We started farming with almost nothing and a dream," Andrea says. "We've been fortunate and have realized our dream and are grateful to our family and friends who've helped us."

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GERALD DANNENBERG

Age: 57

Location: Lafayette County

Size of farm: 1,000 owned and rented acres; 6,000 rented acres in Ukraine

Number of cattle: 320 Holsteins, 270 young stock

Years farming: 39

Family: wife, Andrea; two daughters; three sons; two daughters-in-law; two grandchildren

