

## Coming Together by Shelli Manning

The wooden frame at the edge of Dave and Monica Roskopf's driveway hangs empty. For 11 years, a placard hung there, touting the couple's 200-cow dairy as a Grassland farm, but now only the frame remains.

The Dodge County, Wisconsin, farm has been in Dave's family since 1968. The youngest of four kids, Dave bought into the business right out of school, becoming the fourth generation of Roskopfs to farm. In 1997 he purchased the farm and is now raising his kids in the same home, and in the same manner, as he was raised. Monica grew up just down the road, one of nine children with an equally farm-focused life. Her grandparents settled in the Dodge County area when they emigrated from Germany and the whole family has remained a tight-knit unit, with the majority still calling Dodge County home. Monica was raised learning the 'old ways' from her German grandparents – farming, canning and cooking – methods all but lost on many today.



Married in 1999, Dave and Monica have raised two boys together. Trevor, who's 15, and Brendan, 12, have been given the work ethic which comes only from farming. The boys have had opportunities to earn money through milking, mowing lawns and growing crops. In addition to the corn they grow and 'sell back' to the farm, they're proud entrepreneurs of a pumpkin stand each fall. They don't grumble about helping with chores, even when it means getting up to do them before school so they can attend wrestling practice after. Though

the dairy is the family's main focus, with 900 acres of land where they grow corn, hay and soybeans – there's never a shortage of work to be done.

For the Roskopfs, like many Wisconsin families, farming is woven into the very fabric of their lives. On April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, the Roskopfs gained another commonality with 74 other Wisconsin farm families: a letter in their mailbox, sent by Grassland Dairy, their milk processor. It was an unsigned letter informing them they had 30 days to find a new home for their milk.

Dave and Monica were just returning from a well-deserved vacation and found the notice waiting at home. They were shocked, there'd been no warning, no indication this might

happen. The date of the letter wasn't lost on them, for a moment, they thought it was an April Fool's joke.

On paper, complicated and politically wrought regulations governing both dairy and trade in Canada were blamed. Unfortunately, that was of little to no comfort for the families affected – who included far many more than the 75 families released by Grassland. People who those 75 farms did business with would likely suffer as well.

The couple's milk hauler, Randy Hupf, received the same letter, with an additional note telling him of his 50 customers, 45 were Grassland farms. Randy was the reason Dave and Monica were with Grassland, and they'd been doing business with him and his drivers every day for 11 years.



As the news spread, first throughout the farming community, and then the media – the couple received many phone calls from fellow business owners. The farm's veterinarian, feed supplier and nutritionist were just a few who called, wondering if they'd be affected. Farms also received calls from reporters looking for statements as the story garnered more and more news coverage.

Grassland took some heat on social media. While it was a difficult situation for everyone, there were many who thought Grassland had an opportunity to handle it with more compassion. The way they chose to (not) communicate with farms left many frustrated. While official statements had them doing all they could for farms affected, many producers never heard from the company again. Dave and Monica thought at the very least, they could have been given more notice, 60 or even 90 days.

Unsurprisingly, where producers didn't find a lack of support was from each other. Farm families organized meetings, in order to share information face to face and work together finding ways to save their businesses. There was also a swift reaction from state government. Governor Walker and Secretary Brancell were both involved early on. The cuts took national stage once President Trump declared his support for dairy farmers – through a visit to Wisconsin and some choice tweets aimed at Canada.

Meanwhile at home, Monica and Dave were calling processors, asking around, searching for someone to buy their milk. Two weeks after the letter went out, the furthest they'd gotten was having their farm put on a couple waiting lists. While they were hopeful because some farms were starting to get picked up, they grew more nervous at the same time, as the end of April approached and their milk still had no home.

Monica kept friends and family updated via Facebook. On April 24<sup>th</sup> – with just six days to spare – she posted they'd found a home at Grande Cheese; albeit a temporary one. The company offered them a five-month contract. They, like so many processors, are full but they found a way to offer at least a temporary reprieve. The farm will earn less for its milk, and only have a home until September, but Dave and Monica are so grateful nonetheless.

Monica also shared many messages of support for the dairy industry and what their family was experiencing. She posted a photo of a milk tanker with a 'Hupf Trucking' emblem, and

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a caption marking it as the last time it would be hauling away their milk, the last day seeing a driver who'd long since come to be considered a friend.

Among so many industry partners who came together, eight processors took on new farms. In the end, all 75 affected by Grassland's cuts found homes, with the exception of a few small farms who took it as time to retire.

Producers are thankful for everyone who stepped in to help. From organizing meetings to passing along leads, people like hauler, Randy Hupf, were instrumental in the farms finding new homes. Randy hopes to help farms find permanent arrangements and rebuild his own business in the process.

In the end, it was the collective ag family who came together – the farmers and the haulers and the feed guys and gals, and all the rest. They found ways to avoid the crisis and won't stop working on this until all those empty frames have new signs hanging in them. They'll keep at it until the job is done.

Because that's farming.

*"The team at ANIMART was able to assist our producers affected by guiding them on working with DATCP and suggesting milk plants potentially accepting more farms. Our hope was that by sharing contacts, we could help provide our producers with answers and tools to line up a source for their milk. We are elated our clients were able to find a home for their quality milk and proud to be a part of an industry so willing to come together."*

Tom Klas, ANIMART Senior Sales Manager

***About the Author:***

ANIMART's staff writer, Shelli Manning, works to share the human interest side of individuals in production agriculture and communicate their passions which contribute to our unique American Story. She is the published author of *Little Fish*, as well as a motivational speaker on women's issues and an advocate for the reduction of domestic violence.