

The changing faces of the dairy industry

By Christy Couch Lee

A pair of store-bought jeans – that was his dream.

As child in an impoverished family of nine children in Jalisco, Mexico, Uriel Ramirez wanted more for his life.

“With a family of nine children, we didn’t have the money to buy our jeans – my mom made all of our clothes,” Uriel recalls. “I didn’t like that. I said, ‘I want to do better. I want to have something.’ I wanted money to buy a pair of jeans. The hunger I had to do more for my life led me to want to join my older brother, who was working in the United States.”

At the young age of 13, Uriel did just that – leaving behind his parents and siblings and the only life he had known, and began his new life in America’s dairy industry.

As the dairy industry has evolved through the years, so has the need for additional labor. The immigrant worker has been a critical piece to this ever-changing industry.

According to a study conducted by the National Milk Producers Federation, AgriLife Research and the Center for North American Studies in 2008, American dairy farms employed an estimated 138,000 full-time workers. Of those, 47 percent – or 57,000 – were estimated to be of foreign origin, primarily from Mexico.

Many of these immigrant workers are needed for the jobs of pushing and milking cows, feeding and breeding, on thousands of operations across the country.

It isn’t an easy journey. But with hard work and the drive to succeed, Uriel has risen through the ranks, to now serve as the manager of two dairy farms in Texas, overseeing nearly 10,000 head of cattle and nearly 150 employees.

For Uriel, it all started with work and a desire for more in his life.

ROOTS IN MEXICO.

Uriel grew up in a farming home, where he helped his father milk cows before school, and then helped his mother sell the cheese she made when he returned home each day.

“When I was 8 or 9 years old – in second or third grade – I didn’t feel like I was learning much in school,” Uriel says. “My dad said if I wasn’t learning, I needed to go back to work. So I quit school and started working full time, milking cows and selling cheese.”

Uriel knew there was more to life. And with his oldest brother working in California, he knew the opportunities that existed in America.

In 1986, at only 13, Uriel ventured through Tijuana and into Los Angeles, where his brother helped him establish his new life in California.

For a couple of hundred dollars a week, Uriel began pushing and milking cows for dairies in the Manteca and Tracy areas. Eventually, Uriel was promoted to feeding cows and calves, then to milking.

“I knew if I learned these things, I could do better,” Uriel recalls. “I was always hungry to do something in my life. I wanted to do better. I wanted to go for it.”

In 1990, Uriel began his climb through the ranks in the dairy industry, when he began working for Neil Visser of Bakersfield, Calif.

“My boss could see I was always doing my best,” Uriel says. “He would ask me questions about how the cows were doing, and then taught me how to breed cows.”

However, his English was poor. And communication was the largest barrier to continued success.

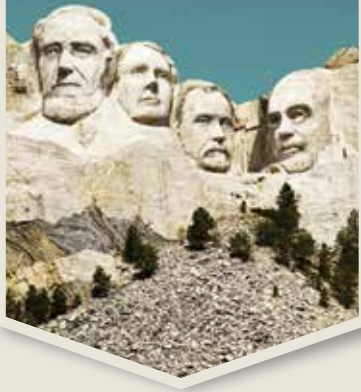
While he was attending church in Bakersfield, he met the woman – only a high-school student at the time – who would help him on his journey to success: the woman who would become his wife, Griecelda.

They began dating and married in 1992.

“Uriel would come home at night and say, ‘Neil said something that sounded like this. What does that mean?’ I would help him each



With only an elementary school education, calculating feed rations was difficult when Uriel began feeding cattle on a dairy in California. His wife, Griecelda, created a spreadsheet to help him fill the feed wagons correctly. They’ve worked as a team throughout their entire marriage, as she helped him learn English, and together they obtained U.S. citizenship.



REAL FACES OF DAIRY

The Faces of Dairy campaign is a year-long project designed to honor and celebrate the past, present and future people—well known and lesser known—shaping the American dairy industry through their personal stories. It provides a forum to highlight the many advancements creating an exciting and vibrant industry serving a global market.

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-Uriel Ramirez

night,” Griecelda says. “He started reading anything he could, and then asked me to talk to him only in English so that he could start learning, too.”

Eventually, Uriel registered for an English class to understand the basics of the language.

“I started speaking English all the time, and I started to really ‘get it,’” he says.

With time and continued learning working for Visser, Uriel was promoted to manager. And five years later, he was asked to move the family, now including four children, to Texas.

Neil Visser was in the process of building White River Ranch near Hart, Texas, and he was exploring the idea of moving all of his cows from his two Roswell, N.M., dairies to White River and a second location.

In 2006, after much discussion, Uriel and Griecelda decided the move was best for their family. They relocated to Spring Lake, Texas, where Jess Visser built VB Ranch Dairy. Uriel worked as herdsman for both operations, while managing VB Ranch.

Eventually, he was promoted to manager at both operations, while two employees under his supervision were promoted to herdsman.

Today, Uriel manages 5,500 milking cows and 7,000 heifers at White River Ranch, and 3,500 cows and 4,700 heifers at VB Ranch. Between the two operations, Uriel also oversees between 130-140 employees, many of whom are of Hispanic descent.

A BETTER LIFE.

Working on a U.S. dairy farm provides a life not possible in Mexico, Griecelda says.

“In Mexico, you get paid \$10-\$15 a day,” she says. “How can you live from that, when prices are the same for items here and in Mexico? When you have to buy \$40 shoes? It’s impossible.”

Uriel says a better life is possible for immigrants who are willing to work.

“If you want to get better in your life, you can,” he says. What it takes to get there is work. If you work and do your best, you can get there.”

However, language barriers and red tape can often provide the greatest obstacles in that pursuit, Griecelda says.

“If you don’t speak the language, you don’t know where to start or where to go,” she says. “And if you come with no documents, you can’t be hired. You will get deported and sent back to Mexico. But getting the proper documentation is not easy. We have siblings who have been waiting in Mexico for more than 10 years to receive the proper documentation to come to the U.S. to work.”



SHARE YOUR STORY

Throughout 2016, the Real Faces of Dairy project encourages everyone to share their dairy story and upload pictures of what dairy means to them. The dedicated website will feature interactive activities, including photo and essay contests. Visit www.realfacesofdairy.com.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christy Couch Lee combines a background and passion for agriculture, and has owned Cee Lee Communications, Hoopston, Ill., for six years, specializing in freelance writing and photography in the agricultural industry. You can read more about Christy at www.realfacesofdairy.com.

The proper documentation has always been a priority for the Ramirez family.

Uriel came to the U.S. on a green card. However, the experience of witnessing Griecelda's sister achieve citizenship sparked the desire for him to do the same. Together, Uriel and Griecelda studied and completed the required tests. And nearly 15 years ago, their dreams of U.S. citizenship were realized.

Griecelda says this accomplishment is just one example of Uriel's drive and ambition.

"Uriel sets a goal and goes for it," she says. "He looks ahead and wants to get better, and he wants to better himself. In his family, he is the only U.S. citizen."

THE IMPORTANCE OF A TEAM.

Uriel credits Griecelda for his ability to achieve the goals he sets for himself and his family.

When he was beginning to feed cattle, the math of changing rations for the number of head of cattle was a challenge, as he has only an elementary school formal education. Griecelda developed a table to help.

"He told me he was having issues with making sure the rations were correct, so I created a spreadsheet each week, as the rations changed, for him to attach to his front windshield and refer to as he watched the scale," she says. "The ingredients were listed in the order they were added. And it told him that when the scale read a certain number, it was time to add another ingredient. He didn't have to do the math – he just had to watch the scale."

And her contributions to his success – as well as the management of their household and four children: Stephanie, 20, Charlie, 16, Celeste, 12, and Eddie, 10 – do not go unnoticed.

"She's my No. 1, and she's everything to me," Uriel says. "Without her, I wouldn't be here."

In addition to managing the two dairy farms, the Ramirez family also owns and manages a few rental homes in town, as well as operating a dairy supply store – both of which Griecelda takes primary responsibility.

"I also work in the dairy office with Uriel," Griecelda says. "He works so much, I just want to help him with whatever he needs."

Together, Uriel and Griecelda have built the life of their dreams for their family.

"The dairy industry is everything to me," he says. "It has provided so many opportunities for my family. The dairy industry is my life."

Griecelda agrees.

"Stephanie is the first generation of our family to attend college – she is attending Texas Tech University," she says. "Being able to provide the opportunity for all of our children to receive this education is so nice."

The face of the U.S. dairy industry definitely shifted with the introduction of immigrant workers like Uriel. And their contributions will likely continue for years to come.

"Don't give up – focus on whatever it is worth to you, and just keep going," Uriel says. "Follow the right steps, and come over the right way. Work hard, and do the best you can. If you do that, in anything you do, you'll be successful."



Uriel and Griecelda Ramirez (center) are proud of the life they've built for their children -- Celeste (left), Eddie (second from right), Charlie (right), and Stephanie (not pictured) -- in the U.S. dairy industry.

NEXT MONTH: *The faces of a changing cow. In our May issue, we'll look at how the cow has evolved to become more efficient and productive.*