

Life's Unexpected Gifts: From the Farm to the Classroom

One of life's more difficult lessons to learn is that the most valuable things in our lives cannot be bought in a store or aren't a click away on Amazon. The lack of tangibility is what makes these gifts so valuable and precious. It is safe to say that the dairy industry has not only shaped my way of life but it has unknowingly sculpted and molded who I am as a person. Growing up I was occupied with the next big birthday or holiday, convincing my parents to let my friends sleep over, or what current girl had broken my heart; completely unaware of the bigger picture unfolding. Farm life was silently instilling traits and characteristics I would need later in life in order to follow my dreams.

Growing up I didn't see living on a third generation, family-run dairy farm as an advantage. As a child, riding your bike with the neighbors was always more appealing than feeding the bottle calves. As a teenager, football and wrestling practice would have consumed the entirety of my schedule, but cows still needed milked and manure waited patiently to be shoveled. As an undergraduate student, studying consumed my free time but the large-framed Holsteins and the strong-willed Jerseys still managed to capture my weekends and holidays. Now as vet student, nine hours away from the familiar buzz of the milk house and the melodic rhythm of happy cows chewing their cud, I find myself counting down the days until I am back.

It wasn't until I began to chase my dream of being a large animal veterinarian that I realized the dairy industry had given me an edge or a leg up, and I don't mean in the obvious ways that one would think of. As if school wasn't challenging enough, I didn't get accepted into vet school with my first application. Rejection made it seem like my world was crashing down around me and I didn't feel worthy of chasing my dreams. Maybe it was the year the continuous rain ruined the majority of our crops, or one of the many times I watched my father dry his tears and lift up his chin after not being able to save a sick calf; somewhere deep inside of me these lessons learned on the farm were imprinted on who I was. I was able to pick myself up, work a little harder, and get accepted into Lincoln Memorial University – College

of Veterinary Medicine. I know this was only possible due to the many times I witnessed my parents exhibit the same exact fortitude.

Dairy farming taught me to have respect and compassion for other people and other living things. Most people don't realize how much a dairy farmer cares for his cows or the extent they go to make sure their cows are happy and comfortable. This familiar concept carries over into every aspect of a farm family's life. Yes, a farmer loses sleep because number 24 wasn't eating and the vet cant make it out until morning, or because number 72 "just wasn't acting right." He is not only concerned because these animals are his livelihood but because he spends every waking moment with them, he knows their quirks and each cows personality. Because of this I learned at a very young age that the cows eat before we eat, chores get done before you get to open any presents on Christmas morning, and cow comfort comes before our own comfort or convenience. This lesson is why I am so passionate about dairy production medicine.

I am the most thankful that the dairy industry taught me to value my family very early on in life. Running a dairy farm requires a family and a team. It requires early mornings and late nights spent with your family. It requires you to communicate with your family and develop a level of respect for your parents and your siblings. Dairy farming is one of the most rewarding lifestyles but the days filled with trouble and heartache seems to outnumber the easy worry free days. However the good times definitely outshine the difficult times and make it all worth it. Dairy farming forms a family bond unlike any other. People continuously ask how I am so close with my parents and my sisters and the simple answer is, "well we farm together." Whether it is the poor weather, low milk prices, or your favorite cow is down with milk fever, you learn to rely on your family to get through.

So to me the dairy industry is everything I hold close to my heart. Without the dairy industry I would not be where I am today. I would not have the grit to make it as a veterinarian, compassion to care for these animals that give us so much, or determination to continue pushing forward. Having the support system of a farming family makes all the difference. I am positive that the success I have seen in the classroom and in my career is a direct result of growing up on a dairy farm. For

David Alexander
Real Faces of Dairy Essay Contest

that I will never be able to repay the industry but I can assure you I will continue to try. The dairy industry is my childhood, my family, and hopefully my future.

