



CENTER FOR
DairyEXCELLENCE

For Immediate Release

Media Contact: Emily Barge, 717-346-0849; ebarge@centerfordairyexcellence.org

February 22, 2022

PERRY COUNTY DAIRY FARMER DISCUSSES TRANSITIONING BETWEEN GENERATIONS IN PODCAST

Donny Bartch Was Interviewed in the New Episode of “Cow-Side Conversations”

Harrisburg, Pa. – In the Center for Dairy Excellence’s latest episode of the [“Cow-Side Conversations” podcast](#), Donny Bartch of Merrimart Farms in Perry County, Pennsylvania reflected on the complex transition process that comes along with a family business and multiple generations. He also shared their decision to invest in robotics and how this technology is helping to transform the future of their operation. Donny’s wife, Shari, is the fourth generation, and the Bartch family milks 265 cows and farms approximately 1,000 acres. They also feed 150 Holstein steers and do custom farm work for neighboring farms each year.

Donny opened the podcast by describing their management structure and philosophy. With three full-time employees and 10-part time employees who are all high school students, efficiency is one of the core goals at Merrimart Farms.

“Our philosophy is efficiency: just keeping everything running smoothly and keeping everyone busy. We don’t wait around for the next job or the next problem to solve,” Donny said in the podcast. “I just want to make the best use of the time I have with the employees here each day, and even my own time.”

Before becoming a partner on the family dairy farm, Donny reflected on his previous career working in an office in Harrisburg. He shared the moment he and his wife made the decision to join her family’s partnership.

“I remember distinctly sitting there in my cubicle, looking out the window, and saying ‘What am I doing inside here?’ It was an eye-opener that it wasn’t what I wanted to do for the rest of my career, just sitting inside and pushing a pencil,” Donny explained. “It made the decision very easy when I had the opportunity and knew what kind of work I was getting into. Shari and I also realized what kind of opportunity it was to be able to raise our family here on the farm.”

Building the partnership and transitioning the dairy farm between family members was a bit more complicated. During the podcast, Donny shared how the transition process took a total of seven years to complete. He explained how a third-party moderator helped each generation communicate with one another and ask tough questions.

“As we started the transition process, none of us knew what we wanted, how it was going to happen, or how to move all these assets from one generation to the next,” he explained. “Having a third-party moderator involved – someone who was unbiased and impartial to the situation – really helped us ask those important questions. It got people to think and answer the tough questions on what they wanted to see out of this transition.”

Through a Transition Team Grant they received from the Center for Dairy Excellence, the family members were able to pay the consultant to help initiate difficult conversations about the transition process. The consultant worked to moderate the conversations, encourage each person to speak honestly and openly, and help the group listen with intentionality.

“The third party can take away some of the tension that some dairy farm families might have. You’re not sitting across from each other bickering. You have someone actually controlling the conversation and moving the conversation in a direction,” Donny said. “It may not be the direction that one side wants, but it’s still a direction. I think it keeps family members from blaming each other back and forth.”

With 10 part-time employees, open communication has not only benefited Donny’s family members but his younger generation staff as well. Donny described how his team motivates the high school employees with regular reminders about the operation’s goals.

“When working with high schoolers and college students, we try to create a team feeling so they know they’re part of something bigger than just milking cows. We’re working towards a goal here,” Donny explained. “I always like sharing numbers with the milkers to show them how they’re doing, whether it’s somatic cell count, milk production, or clinical mastitis cases.”

As Donny and his wife considered the future of their dairy operation and the best ways to manage and empower their younger employees, they kept returning to the idea of robotic technology. After building a new calf facility and integrating a robotic calf feeder, they noticed a difference in the number of employees needed to get the job done.

“The robotics didn’t save us a whole lot of time in actual employee labor, but it did eliminate an extra person who needed to be there at times. Now one person could spend that same 45 minutes each feeding doing those tasks instead of having two people go out to the barn. The robotics have helped us incorporate fewer people and get the same amount of work done,” Donny shared.

With a Transformation Team Grant from the Center for Dairy Excellence, Donny worked with outside consultants to perform a feasibility study and determine if robotic milking technology was plausible from a financial standpoint. After crunching the numbers, they expect to break ground this spring on a robotic milking barn, with the goal of it becoming a high-production, early lactation facility. Donny hopes this type of technology will also offer new opportunities to the next generation.

“Technology seems to be part of young people’s lives 100 percent of the time. [Robotics] are a good fit and gives my kids and these high schoolers an opportunity to grab ahold of something that they’re comfortable with and recognize,” Donny explained in the podcast. “It also gives us a new spark. If the next generation wants to milk cows, I hope it gives them something to make their own.”

Throughout the podcast, Donny shared additional strategies he uses to communicate with multiple generations, manage a family business, and motivate a younger workforce.

- **Be patient.** “As the younger generation, you sometimes have to be prepared to take it slow or figure out different ways to introduce your ideas to the older generation. It probably won’t happen overnight with the first conversation. My in-laws were also very patient with us. They wanted to see this transition happen. It goes back to the moderators we had – they encouraged

us to ask the right questions and answer honestly with each other.”

- **Be open.** “You never know where this next generation is coming from. Don’t think it has to be just your kids. It may be a son-in-law or daughter-in-law. It may be an employee who comes on who has a passion for it. Be open to that, especially if you want your dairy operation to continue for another generation.”
- **Be honest with yourself.** “Know what you want, but know how to communicate that. I heard a quote the other day, ‘I may be right but the way I said it made me wrong.’ It hit home with the way you can react in a tense situation that has a lot of emotions attached to it. Take a step back, think about what you’re trying to say, and be prepared to have your toes stepped on a little bit.”
- **Reflect on your strengths.** “One thing I learned very quickly when I went from being an employee to the one making decisions was that I can’t do everything and I don’t know how to do everything. I needed to find other people who knew a lot more than myself to do certain jobs. It was a learning curve trying to figure out my strengths and what I really enjoyed doing.”
- **Remember your purpose.** “It’s not so much about ownership. It’s about continuing the legacy that the past generations have started and the amount of work you know they put in. It’s about how you are benefiting from that and what you can do to make it benefit the next generation. Both generations should remember, at the end of the day, you have to step back and think about what this is all for.”

To listen to the full podcast interview, visit www.centerfordairyexcellence.org/podcast. The podcast is also available on [Spotify](#), [Apple Podcasts](#), and [Amazon Music](#). With a new episode released each month, Donny’s interview is the fourth episode in the second season. The podcast was designed to share real-time farmer insight, tricks of the trade, and inspiring stories from dairies across Pennsylvania.

###

The Center for Dairy Excellence is a non-profit organization initiated by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture in 2004. Bringing together people from more than 40 different dairy organizations in Pennsylvania, the Center’s mission is to enhance the profitability of the dairy industry by empowering people, creating partnerships, and increasing the availability and use of resources. Learn more at centerfordairyexcellence.org.

Center for Dairy Excellence ▼ 2301 North Cameron St., Harrisburg, PA 17110 ▼ 717-346-0849 ▼

www.centerfordairyexcellence.org