

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, OK 73105-4912
PRESS RELEASE: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 14, 2017

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Betty Thompson, 405-522-6105, betty.thompson@ag.ok.gov

Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Anita Van der Laan

Growing up in the Holland province Fryslan, Anita Van der Laan never imagined she would one day have an 8,000 head dairy in Oklahoma.

Van der Laan's love for dairy began at a very young age on her family's 90-head Holstein dairy back in Holland. She is a 5th generation dairy farmer, with farmers on both sides of her family.

A defining moment in Van der Laan's life occurred when she was graduating high school. Because she was a woman, the family dairy went to her brother, and her father told her it was time for her to find somewhere else to work.

"It really hurt," Van der Laan recalled. "It still hurts 30 years later. But it made me want to encourage other women to go into the dairy industry."

Van der Laan made the decision to move to the United States and start dairying here. Her life took another twist when she attended a Thanksgiving dinner in Texas with neighboring dairy farmers. A young man named Pieter Van der Laan had a birthday on Black Friday, so the friends decided to decorate his house for his birthday while he was out milking.

Little did Van der Laan know, Pieter grew up about 30 miles down the road from her in Holland, also on a dairy farm, though the two had never met before coming to Texas.

"I met him that day and the rest is history," said Van der Laan. "We've been married 27 years, 7 months and 8 weeks. I'm still counting the days because we are still in love. Can't help it."

After the two were married on January 26, 1990, they combined their small herds, got a loan from the bank and started their dairy with 40 cows. Both kept their other jobs to pay off the loans so they could buy more cows. Their herd slowly and steadily began to grow. Today, they have grown to 8,000 head of dairy cattle.

"We never imagined in our wildest dreams we would milk this many cows," laughs Van der Laan. "Our kids call us cow hoarders."

They have two dairies in Frederick, Okla., Van der Laan Dairy, milking 2,900 cows and Sunshine Dairy LLC, milking 1,500 cows. Van der Laan is proud to say they are 100 percent owned by her and Pieter. Sunshine Dairy LLC sells their milk to Lonestar Milk Producers, and Van der Laan Dairy sells their milk to Select, which sells milk to Hiland Dairy, a popular brand seen in grocery stores across Oklahoma and surrounding states.

But no success story is without its trials. Sometimes many.

One morning when Van der Laan was out feeding calves, one particular Brown Swiss calf named Gemma butted during feeding, causing the bottle to painfully bump Van der Laan in the chest.

A very tender lump appeared within days, and after several weeks of no improvement, she finally went to see a doctor. Her fears were confirmed when the doctor diagnosed her with breast cancer.

Van der Laan says if it had not been for Gemma, the cancer would not have been found.

“I had never even held a bottle that way,” Van der Laan said, “It was just meant to be.

“I really believe that God doesn’t send angels in the way that we think of them,” Van der Laan said, “He sends them in the way we need them. I really believe she was my angel.”

Though Gemma sadly passed away during Van der Laan’s chemotherapy treatments, Gemma’s bloodline lives on at the dairy. She has three siblings on the farm—Gloria, which means glory to God, Gertrud, which means glory to God in Dutch, and Grietje, which means pearl of God in Dutch.

“Her mama is still around too,” Said Van der Laan. “Every time I talk to her I tell her she’s the mama of an angel.”

Van der Laan will forever hold a special place for Gemma in her heart.

“She saved my life,” Van der Laan said. “In all the dairy farming, you would never imagine God would send you an angel like that—but He did.”

Difficult times did not stop with Van der Laan’s fight with Breast Cancer. 2011 proved to be a very challenging year, bringing severe weather such as extreme heat, drought, and tornadoes.

In June 2011, their dairy was hit by a small tornado. The contractor had just completed the remodeling and repair work in October when an EF-4 tornado devastated their dairy on November 7, 2011. They lost over half of their baby calves, 450, and many more cattle were injured.

“People we didn’t even know came to help,” Van der Laan recalled. “They took our injured calves that I couldn’t care for and took care of them, we got them all back in December.”

A farm they frequently did business with came with a large trailer and took the remaining healthy cattle back to their farm to allow the Van der Laans to rebuild and recover.

“We still to this day have cows that limp or have scars,” Van der Laan said. “They are our tornado victims, but they are still here.”

Van der Laan says despite the hard times, Oklahoma has been good to them, and she can’t imagine dairying anywhere else, especially because of the way their neighbors came to their aide in the time of need.

“Oklahoma is home to us now,” Van der Laan said.

Today dairies across the country are selling out and going out of business, so one can’t help but wonder what makes the Van der Laans continue to dairy. It is certainly not an easy life. Dairying is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year—it never stops. But Van der Laan simply laughs and says she understands it is not for everyone.

“I love the industry, I love the people, I love promoting our wonderful product,” she said.

“That’s just what I love to do. It doesn’t matter where you are—in the grocery store, talking to a stranger, we have to promote our product. When someone finds out I’m a dairy farmer and they tell me they drink the other types of milk, I love to tell them why they have to drink *the real McCoy*.”

The Van der Laans have three children, Eric, Wilma and Liza, who have all come back to work and help with the family dairy.

Most recently, Wilma and her new husband have joined the family’s operation. Wilma’s husband is an engineer and now heavily involved in their 6,000 acre crop farming, and Wilma continues to help out with the dairy.

“I wanted to raise my daughters to know there is no difference between them and brother—they can dairy too,” Van der Laan said, “Especially because of what happened to me. I’m so proud of her [Wilma] for saying she wanted to go back to the family farm and dairy.”

Van der Laan says working with their three children is very special, and describes it as a beautiful life.

“I don’t know what I would do without it,” she said. “I have 25 heifers in the back yard right now, just because I can. I have plenty on the dairy, but I love to bring some home. These are my pets.”

###

Editor’s note: This is part of a continuing series of stories on Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture. The project is a collaborative program between the Oklahoma Department of

Agriculture, Food & Forestry and Oklahoma State University to recognize and honor the impact of countless women across all 77 counties of the state, from all aspects and areas of the agricultural industry. The honorees were nominated by their peers and selected by a committee of 14 industry professionals. If you would like to make a nomination, visit <http://okwomeninagandsmallbusiness.com/>.

Photo Captions:



Grietje: Anita Van der Laan pictured with Grietje, a sibling to her beloved Gemma.

Anita and Pieter: Anita and Pieter Van der Laan, of Frederick, Okla., are the proud owners of Sunshine Dairy LLC and Van der Laan Dairy.

