



P.O. Box 179  
Penn Yan, NY 14527  
[www.nyanimalag.org](http://www.nyanimalag.org)  
315-719-2795

**For More Information Contact:  
Ann Noble Shephard  
315-727-5449, [ann@ivypartners.com](mailto:ann@ivypartners.com)**

### **Celebrating Dairy in Extraordinary Times**

(June 15, 2020) Dairy farming is a very big deal in New York. It is king of the state's agricultural industry, valued at \$2.5 billion annually. To celebrate dairy's health benefits, June Dairy Month has long been commemorated with parades, giant ice cream sundaes and friendly bovines from Buffalo to the Hudson Valley since 1937. But in June 2020, the health of New York's nearly 4,000 dairy producers has stolen the spotlight. In good times and bad, what impacts local dairy farmers impacts a net of businesses and public services in rural communities. It is a classic example of the multiplier effect. Most likely you will not see a sign the likes of the McDonald's golden arches identifying dairy's presence in small towns and villages, but the financial well-being of these farms is critical in terms of jobs, property tax revenue, and more in these vulnerable areas.

#### **Dairy Economics 101**

Kirsty Northrop of Lawnel Farms is fourth generation on her family dairy located in Piffard, NY, 35-miles south of Rochester. Together with her husband Tim, brother, and parents, they manage 3,000 acres and 1,200 cows. "We don't have middle managers," said Kirsty. "We work side-by-side with our employees maintaining equipment, planting crops, and caring for our animals. It's important for us to talk with them about the economics of the business and involve them in decision-making to be successful. Given the environment we're living in now, our operation may not be profitable, but one of our top goals is to be sustainable. We're always mindful of the community where we live and work, and are actively involved in our school, local business, and community activities. It's a symbiotic relationship.

"Even though I was raised in this community, agriculture is a much bigger pie than I ever imagined," said Kirsty. "It's not just about cows and managing manure. It's mind blowing what it takes to successfully operate a dairy farm. Finances and community relations go hand-in-hand. We need to be proactive about decisions impacting both. It's not all about efficiency.

"Every year the farm hosts fifth grade students from York Central Schools to talk about economics," added Kirsty. "We discuss property taxes and how revenue generated from our acreage helps pay for schoolteacher salaries and other big budget items. Without well-established ag businesses in the area, which helped found our community historically, the school and the town couldn't be successful. Dairy farms, like ours, are also big employers. Someday these same kids will be looking for a job that will provide a good standard of living and housing. We want to be that option, so it's important that we show pride in what we do and support our school and other community events when we have an opportunity."

## **We're All Small Businesses**

According to Shelley Reynolds, her family's dairy farm, founded in 1956, is just another small business in Genesee County. They currently milk 1,300 cows and crop 2,500 acres. "We all share the same issues with the corner store, like hiring and retaining labor and trying to figure out how best to stay afloat," said Shelley.

She and her husband John have been fixtures in the Darien community for decades. In 2020 the couple are in partnership with their three adult children. "As family and a farm, we really believe in supporting the local community," continued Shelley. "If we call and ask for a donation for an event or activity, we're sure to reciprocate by doing business with that vendor. It starts in our little town and grows outward. On a monthly basis we probably work with 40 to 50 businesses. That includes the corner store where we might grab pizza for our work crew. We're also not going to drive to Syracuse to purchase and service what we need when we can do it locally. The pandemic has only heightened these close working relationships."

## **A Good Neighbor with a Message**

Valerie Blumer Patten of Alexander, NY operates a 450-cow dairy farm. After a barn fire in 1988 forced her family's dairy operation in Oswego County to shutter, she brought 100 cows to this hamlet and started out on her own. "I could buy land and buildings for less than it would take to rebuild my family's homestead," said Valerie. "I knew this was the place to milk cows because of the support of agri-business, the size of farm fields and the community's long-time connection to agriculture. It continues to be a very dairy friendly area."

According to Valerie, her neighbors knew her long before she knew many of them. "They were very welcoming," said Valerie, "and having kids helped further engrain my husband Dave and I into the community through school and sports. From the start, I was willing to be the student and learned so much from my veterinarian, equipment dealers, plumber, and other repair specialists. I've dealt with many area businesses over the years and have formed lasting relationships that are an integral part of Blumer Dairy today."

Since the main farm is on a busy road, the Pattens have had their fair share of interested travelers stopping in. "They will slow down and pull in the dooryard," explained Valerie. "You can tell they're enamored with what they see. Our goal is to be a good neighbor and to be as transparent as we can in our operation. We never pass up an opportunity for an impromptu tour. Beyond producing food, the average consumer doesn't consider the economics of farming and one-on-one discussions gives us a chance to answer their questions."

## **All Things Essential**

The Northrop's school-aged children hand painted a billboard-sized thank you to essential workers on their front lawn bordering Rt.36 in the Village of York. "As dairy farmers," said Kirsty Northrop, "we were obviously essential as defined by Governor Cuomo during the pandemic. But we're not here to say thank you to ourselves. As a community, we all work and function together. We wanted to spread a message that we understand and appreciate those working on our behalf and along-side of us during these difficult times."

"We feel personally fortunate to be in the ag industry and for our 17 employees to be considered essential during this pandemic," added Shelley Reynolds. "Like we do with so many unexpected

or unfortunate situations that happen on the farm, we look hard at what we can learn from any given situation. Preparation for the unexpected has been critical. What was so gratifying to see was how hard the groups of people that we rely on for the farm were working equally as hard as the Reyncrest team. I'm assuming that they're feeling a lot like us. What worked best, and what did we learn? This gives me confidence for the future."

*"This article was brought to you by the New York Animal Agriculture Coalition (NYAAC). NYAAC is a farmer founded and funded not-for-profit organization that strives to enhance the public's understanding of and appreciation for animal agriculture and modern farm practices. NYAAC is effective in doing so by engaging the public in conversations about animal agriculture and empowering farmers to tell their story firsthand."*

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