



Brett Tallman/For the Capital Press

Ryan, left, and Kevin Pierson in the pasture with a herd of Holsteins and Jerseys.

## Three generations work together

By **BRETT TALLMAN**  
For the Capital Press

ST. PAUL, Ore. — On any given day, three generations of one dairying family can be found at Sar-Ben Farms.

This afternoon, Steve and Susan Pierson are in the shop. Their son, Kevin, 29, is feeding cows before milking. Their other son, Ryan, 25, is in the heifer barn feeding calves.

Susan's father, Marlin Rasmussen, though retired, acts as a sounding board for ideas. Only their daughter, Sara, 21, is away, finishing her junior year at Oregon State University.

"Our kids grew up on this farm, went to college and did well," Steve said. "They could have done anything, but they chose to come back. We're very proud of that."

Kevin graduated from Oregon State in 2010 with a degree in agricultural science.

"Even back in high school I knew I'd want to come back," he said. "Part of it was, I like the work. But the other part of it was the hard work put in by my great-grandfather, my grandfather and my mother and father. I wanted to

continue that."

Ryan also went to school in Corvallis, graduating in 2014 with an animal science degree.

"By the time I graduated from high school, I wanted to do anything but work at a dairy," Ryan said. "I tried out a couple things, but after awhile I missed dairying."

Sara was Oregon's dairy princess ambassador in 2016. She's in her third year at Oregon State, working on a degree agricultural business.

"Sara always said she wanted to work in the dairy industry, but that she didn't want to be a farmer," Susan said. "A few weeks ago, she told us she'd changed her mind. It looks like she'll be back, too."

"It makes you kind of proud to see your grandkids coming back to the farm," Marlin said. "I guess as a family and as a farm we've done some things right."

Marlin's father, John Rasmussen, came to Oregon from Nebraska in 1959. With his inheritance and the profit from a proven breeding bull, he bought 180 acres south of the Willamette River. Marlin worked 45 years at Sar-Ben

Farms before leaving the day-to-day decisions to Susan and Steve in 2004.

"I think of succession as a 30-foot rope," he said. "You give 'em five feet and, if they don't hang themselves, you give 'em a couple more. The older generation has a hard time letting go, but if you don't give up any control until you die your kids are going to get all 30 feet at once."

When Sar-Ben Farms started grazing their cows in 1997, Marlin, Steve and Susan had all talked to advisers, pushed pencils and deliberated. They made the leap together.

A few years later, Susan and Steve approached Marlin about going organic.

"I told them it takes three years to transition the land," Marlin said, "and I'm retiring in two. You guys figure it out."

Steve has a similar plan for handing Sar-Ben Farms off to his own children, though he uses his own analogy.

"Kevin, Ryan and Sara have always had skin in the game," he said. "They need to know how fragile this can be — because pretty soon it'll be up to them to make it work."



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