

Onion Peak Dairy: A steep learning curve

By GAIL OBERST
For the Capital Press

NEHALEM, Ore. — Those quick to criticize millennials haven't met Laura Grauwen, 33, and Blake Panos, 31.

The parents of a new baby boy, George, took over operations at Onion Peak Dairy, after her father, Mike Grauwen, suffered a traumatic brain aneurism in 2019.

Although both were raised in this small farming community along the Nehalem River, they'd each chosen other careers — Laura was a bartender and Blake was in construction.

When disaster struck, their relationship was so new, Blake said he first met Laura's family when they visited Mike in the hospital's Intensive Care Unit.

Their romance quickly turned serious. Laura left her job to help on the dairy, and Blake followed. Laura had been raised on the farm with her brother and sisters.

"It would have been really sad to not have this land be the epicenter of our family anymore," Laura said. In hopes of maintaining the dairy, she offered to manage it with Blake's help.

Initially, her father was reluctant to turn over operations to his eager proteges. Mike wanted out. To that end, he sold all but 50 of his 200-plus milking herd.

In the meantime, Blake and Laura set out to prove themselves as farmers, purchasing beef cattle and working with the cows left from the herd.



Blake Panos, holding baby George, and Laura Grauwen of Onion Peak Dairy in Oregon's Nehalem Valley.

Gail Oberst/For the Capital Press

Within a year, they sold the beef cattle and focused on expanding the milking herd and "proving up" their agreement with the Organic Valley cooperative.

Today, they milk more than 100 cows on 200 acres leased from Mike, aiming to one day own it themselves.

There have been more than a few bumps in the road. A few months after Blake moved to the farm to help Laura, she fell off a horse and injured her leg. Within a year, she was pregnant, although Blake brags that she was milking the cows into her ninth month.

The pandemic has delayed their wedding until this year.

But unexpectedly, COVID has

helped, rather than hindered, the couple's success. As their former employers closed shop, they focused their efforts on the dairy, Blake said. "It (COVID) pushed me. You don't have a choice."

With little dairy experience, Blake quit his construction job and worked full-time with Laura. He said he had to go "from zero to 100, real fast."

The couple has had plenty of help from friends, neighboring dairies and family. Blake's parents live in Nehalem. His grandfather, who retired as a millwright at the Tillamook cheese factory, is the couple's go-to welder and fix-it man.

The couple said they had a head

start, taking over a modern milking parlor and a previously successful dairy operation.

"It was a steep learning curve," said Blake. "But we're getting it figured out."

Little "Georgie," born in January, is the namesake of Laura's dad, Mike George Grauwen, who was so named for his father, George Grauwen.

He in turn was one of a long line of Georges in the family beginning with Laura's great-great grandpa, George Schuppen, who hand-milked the family's first 50 cows on a dairy in Colorado.

The first George's grandson, also named George, established a dairy in Eatonville, Wash. His son,

Mike, grew up on the dairy, and as soon as he was old enough, took a dairy job in Tillamook.

"One day, he drove by this farm and thought it was a dream," Laura said. Eventually, Mike rented the farm, and then bought it. Laura was 6 when she and her three siblings moved to Onion Peak with the rest of the family.

"Coach Mike" has now recovered but remains retired. Long before his aneurism, Mike and Melinda, Laura's mother, were part of Organic Valley.

The Grauwen dairy imitates — as do many Oregon organic dairies — New Zealand strip-grazing practices and genetics. The herd is a "melting pot" of New Zealand Jerseys, Friesian Holsteins and others. The cows are grass-fed in 18 rotating pastures carefully managed with fertilizer produced by the cows, scraped from the barns, processed in tanks and returned to the soil.

The herd is milked every 16 hours, twice one day, and at noon the next.

The pastures are irrigated from a slough during the summer. Quoting Mike, Blake said: "We're really just grass farmers."

Despite the hard work, the young couple have plans to remain. They hope to move into the farmhouse as soon as Laura's parents build their own place.

Cuddling Georgie, Laura reflected on his future.

"I loved my childhood and I wanted to give him the same," she said.

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