

# Women in Dairy

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"I couldn't have picked a better person to do this dairy life with. She's my other 3/4. The fact that we enjoy spending so much time together is amazing. Everything just clicks."

- Husband Richard

"Mom puts her all into every animal on our farm to ensure they are healthy and comfortable. She farms every day and still sneaks in to make us a delicious dinner. So thankful for her."

- Daughter Chloe



Ashley enjoys her coloured cows very much, including Lulu 2364 – their very first EX Jersey three years ago!

### Tars Cheema

When your father is a dairy farmer and your mother is an RCMP officer, it's hard to predict where you might end up. But the influence of being in the barn with the cows from a young age was undeniable for Ashley Munro. Following her dad around the barn became normal, since accompanying her mom in the squad car would probably have been a non-starter. The presence of a few Brown Swiss cows in the herd would also imprint on Ashley as she admits to appreciating things that are 'different.'

The 60-cow Chilliwack herd moved from Prest Road to Jespersen in 1996, when Ashley was active in the Chilliwack 4-H Holstein club as a teen. But the charm of Brown Swiss eyes took her to the Agassiz

# Appreciating the Different

"Mom is our Wonder Woman!"  
- Daughter Alyssa

family while actively running their farms. "I milked the night before Alyssa was born and I was home 24 hours later. I was having contractions with Chloe while running the loader picking up round bales...she was a quick birth!" shares Ashley, like it was no big deal.

By 2005 they knew it was time to make the move to their own farm – which took them all the way to Saskatchewan in 2006 – **different**.

### Saskatchewan and the Cows of Many Colours

"We could afford it better," Ashley explains simply when asked, 'Why Saskatchewan?'

"Our Chilliwack house helped us buy the Saskatchewan operation – it was 100% on us. We are very much a first-generation farm," she makes clear. Just 10 minutes north of Saskatoon, they found 150 cows on a section of land in Warman – on a paved road! They knew it had been a blessed choice, when just two years later, a Tim Hortons was opened just two minutes away.

"Alyssa was three and Chloe was eight

cow for us. She started the 'E' family that we still have." Seventeen more Jerseys were added from Vern Toop in 2009.

"In May 2007, Dad was selling-out his mixed herd of about 50 cows. We had been doing some cross-breeding. We took a liner-load to Saskatchewan – there were Monties, Brown Swiss, Reds, some Holsteins and Jersey crosses," Ashley explained their introduction to the world of multi-coloured cows. Even though they continued to have some good success with crossing cows in Warman, the puzzle always closed in and it became hard to sustain gains in crossing.

### Back to BC

After 8 1/2 years in Warman, they made the difficult choice to pack up and move back west, despite the financial consequence. "Mom was in poor health," Ashley explains their reason. Gene Sache had been a good friend back in Chilliwack and told them that John Hylkema's farm was for sale. Dykman Cattle moved two liners of heifers in mid-August and two more liners brought 80 cows out in time to start milking on September 1, 2014! "We brought all our Jerseys, Swiss and the best Holsteins. They all moved really well except one." Nine years later, they are still milking two cows that were just calves when they arrived in BC!

Both Richard and Ashley are happy to be farming near the Saches who they can share cropping work with. "Doing custom work for so long makes me not the best customer," Richard admits with a smile. At one time in the distant past, the Vanderkoois had 365 customers – grass, planting, plowing, corn and more. Richard spent long hours in tractors, which he doesn't mind to this day. His time as a highway trucker served him well also, as he crops land in Rock Creek and brings it home through the year. Farming the land at a significant distance is only possible because Ashley **is the farmer** in Chilliwack. She runs the farm at home, including milking, feeding, breeding and calf raising, all the herdsman and administrative duties we can think of.

"Ashley has taken on so many things outside of her comfort zone – like operating equipment. She operates most everything... silage wagons, feed wagons, power harrows, silage trucks, and she's way better at it than she thinks! I'm really proud of her!" Richard tells me.

### Industry Involvement

Ashley has been the Secretary of the Upper Fraser Valley Holstein Club since 2015, though she admits that it hasn't been too active a role. More active is being a Director for the South Fraser DHI committee since 2019 and currently the only female. "I'm also BC National Director for the Canadian Brown Swiss – Braunvieh Association, since 2022. We hold meetings on Zoom, and I find our meetings interesting. When we were in Saskatchewan, I was asked to be on the Holstein Branch board, but it just wasn't possible at that time!"

Ashley has also been an active 4-H mom, supporting Chloe and Alyssa first in Saskatchewan, then in the Agassiz club



Back in 2020, this family showed their Canadian dairy colours at a fun photo-shoot with WCDN's Kevin Plastow.

Rainbow 4-H club so she could show Swiss calves in her final 4-H years. Unfussed, Ashley says, "I was always at the back of the pack with my Swiss calves, but I did get Reserve Grand Champion at Abbotsford once in the coloured breeds."

### Groundhog Day

"I liked the cows, I had that in common with Dad. I observed and learned a lot from him, including milking the cows." She was just 13 when she could milk the herd in the double-4 herringbone parlour on her own! She began dating Richard Vanderkooi in grade 10, the brother of her friend Brenda. His family milked about 350 cows and did a lot of custom work. They married on Groundhog Day in 2002, making their anniversary easy to remember. "I like things to be different, that's how I ended up with Richard," she quips. They bought their house in 2003 while each continued working at their home farms, except for one year when Richard went trucking. A common challenge for farming women is managing the needs of

months when we landed here. So the girls had to go everywhere with us!" Just as Ashley 'grew up in the barn,' so did their girls. "We had a playpen and toys in the dairy to keep the girls busy while I milked," Ashley remembers.

Only 23 years old when she landed in Warman, Ashley says it took a few years for them to become 'insiders' and really feel like one of the locals. On the other hand, they had wonderful experiences working together with several neighbours cropping together as necessary right from the beginning.

"When I was in BC, it wasn't a big deal to be a working female on the farm, but Saskatchewan was different – some of the farm suppliers didn't seem comfortable to deal with a woman running the cow side of the farm," she shares.

"We bought our first four Jerseys in January 2007 from Dave McMorrow. GREEN HECTARES CENTURION ERICA really developed well and became a foundation



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There's not been much travel opportunity in their schedules since their 2002 honeymoon holiday to New Zealand.



For cropping or Richard's away times, Ashley has had to become proficient operating most of the barn and field equipment.



Alyssa and Chloe seemed to adapt to the Saskatchewan winters with a good attitude!



Mom's coloured cow fascination has rubbed off on their girls. Alyssa with her Reserve Champion (Guernsey) heifer and Chloe with Champion (Brown Swiss) heifer at the 2023 Agassiz Fair Rainbow 4-H Club Achievement.



The couple were just 23 and 25 years old when they took on their own farm in Saskatchewan with their very little girls.

when they returned to Chilliwack. "When Chloe was in her first year, she was Reserve Champion Showman in Rosthern. She's always had that ability," mom shares with reserved pride. Like their mom, both girls enjoy the different colours in the barn. Alyssa showed two Jerseys, two Brown Swiss, five Holsteins and in her just-completed final year, she was thrilled to show a Guernsey heifer purchased from the Tamis Lindrian herd dispersal in late 2022. "Both girls chose their own heifers to show - they asked my opinion, but the decision was theirs."

Most recently, Chloe and Ashley participated with seven other producers on a Greenbelt Roundtable panel on Calf Management - sharing and learning among the best managers to stimulate even better results.

"I've always tried to participate in industry functions, but there just isn't enough time for everything - and there's definitely not much time for holidays!" Besides their honeymoon in New Zealand, Richard and Ashley took a three-day John Deere factory tour in 2009 and followed up with a five day cow-holiday to the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in 2022! "The trip to the Royal was special. The girls ran the farm on their own - they were really pleased with themselves and we couldn't be

Richard and Ashley take pride in and responsibility for being Proud Canadian Dairy Farmers.

prouder of them," Ashley beams with deep mom-pride.

### Experiences with the Coloured Cows

Currently, the herd consists of 285 cows total - 130 Holsteins, 85 Jerseys, 40 Brown Swiss, and a handful of Guernseys, which they hope to see increase in the coming years. "We tried Shorthorns in the past - they weren't my favourite. Montbelliards are solid cows; we still have one Holstein that has a white head from her Monte granddam - she's 88 points." Their experience with Flekvieh wasn't the greatest and Ashley says she appreciated the fat production of her Swedish Reds when crossed with Holstein and Brown Swiss, but it eventually became impossible to sustain the multi-crosses. She's happy with the current range of breeds and has concluded her cross-breeding phase. She admits to using beef on the lower end of the herd, especially the Jerseys to enhance the value of male calves.

### Challenges, Lessons, Opportunities

Ashley isn't a complainer...her method seems to be one of 'get on with it.' Her only significant negative experience was in 2010 when their robot installation did not pan out as hoped. "We had to buy two liners of cows to replace all the cows we lost in the mess. We recovered, but it took a long time," she admits stoically. On the other hand, Ashley loves the birth of every new live calf! "A healthy new calf represents hope and possibility - that's what I'd rather focus on." Speaking of calves, Ashley began using winter calf coats their second year in Warman. "We break out the coats when we get down to 5C and use them for 3-4

weeks age. Our calves are stronger when they don't have to fight the cold on their own." For the last five years, they have participated in Greenbelt's Calf Program which monitors serum total protein and ADG to deliver better calf results based on real data.

While the herd currently averages 1.6 kg daily fat, Ashley wants to see them reach 2 kg. The Holsteins and Jerseys already have comparable daily fat yield, while the Swiss cows lag behind just a little. They milk 220 cows today, with a goal to reach 300 perhaps in five years.

### Perspectives, Advice and Future

"My thing is **cows**," Ashley states firmly. "I want good balanced cows that are productive and classify well. I've done some genomic testing in the past and I think it could be a good tool. We milk test and

classify - they complement one another," she shares.

Currently, Alyssa works full time at home and occasionally as a brand inspector, while Chloe is also working at home, primarily looking after all the calves. "I would love to see the girls stay here and farm, but they have to want to - it's their decision."

What advice does Ashley offer to other women? "Don't be discouraged as a woman in dairy...physically it can be hard - but there are ways to do it. Just because you're a female doesn't mean you can't be as capable as any man. And it comes down to respect - everyone should realize that women can do everything on farm that men can do."



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**Lee Gogal, BBA**  
Director and Group Lead, BC Agriculture  
604.308.1657  
lee.gogal@scotiabank.com

**Olivia Smith**  
Client Relationship Manager  
604.768.5049  
olivia.smith@scotiabank.com

**Jason Warmerdam, BBA**  
Associate Director, Team Lead  
604.845.4760  
jason.warmerdam@scotiabank.com

**Michelle Forrest**  
Client Relationship Manager  
778.548.7844  
michelle.forrest@scotiabank.com

**Dariann Kloot, BBA**  
Senior Client Relationship Manager  
604.328.0494  
dariann.kloot@scotiabank.com

**Devin Rollinson**  
Associate Director, National Accounts  
604.855.2728  
devin.rollinson@scotiabank.com

**Amanda McCardell**  
Client Relationship Manager  
250.808.5647  
amanda.mccardell@scotiabank.com

**Nicole Webb**  
Director, National Accounts  
236.522.1343  
nicole.webb@scotiabank.com

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