

Women in Dairy

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“Joanne is a remarkable person. She is resilient and a calculated, accomplished breeder and farmer. We don’t always agree – in fact, we’ve gone toe to toe on issues over the years, but in the end, she always has your back. She is one of the most loyal friends I have in my life. When the chips are down, I want Jo in my corner.”

David Morey,
Unique Stock Farm



True Grit – Joanne Edwards

The Edwards family received their 'Century Farm' award in 2004, pictured with three of four generations. (L-R): Marjorie, Albert, Joanne, Jim and Fran.

Amanda Poelman

When I think of Joanne Edwards, someone I've known for more than 20 years, the term 'true grit' comes to mind. "The intersection of passion, perseverance, and unshakeable determination - pushing through adversity to achieve long-term goals," is one very apt definition of true grit. Anyone who knows Joanne would agree true grit is in her genes. She's drawn on these characteristics through all of life's hurdles, from loss and injury to raising the next generation.

Born to Farm

Joanne is the fourth generation of the Edwards family to farm in Nokomis, SK, located just under two hours southeast of Saskatoon. "The land was homesteaded in 1904 by my great-grandfather," Joanne says proudly of the farm that was recognized by the provincial government as a 'Century Farm' in 2004. What began as a grain and hog operation has diversified through the years to include chickens, sheep and cows. While Joanne doesn't remember the pigs, she says, "My mom is responsible for the cows."

Fran got her first cow in 1970 - a Jersey. In 1976, she became a member of Jersey Canada and the BRAMVILLE prefix was born. Interestingly, the name originates with the Edwards' ancestors in England. "The original farm was in Branville," says Joanne, "But I guess they couldn't read the writing, so that's how Bramville came about. We never changed it." A couple years later, Joanne made a swift entry into the world...literally. She arrived 30 minutes after her mom made it to the Nokomis Hospital, not long after she'd finished her evening chores in the barn.

After the farm got into the chicken business in the early 1980s, Joanne recalls, "As kids, my siblings and I had to walk around town selling chicken and eggs." The chickens were fed skim milk from Fran's growing herd; they made butter and were regular cream shippers. Regulations in Saskatchewan at the time prohibited the shipping of milk if you were more than 15 miles away from another producer, so Fran delivered 30 cans of cream to town until 1989, when cream shippers were phased out.

Despite her steadfast love of the Jersey cow, Fran had some Ayrshires in the early years. "My mom started showing Ayrshires," Joanne says, "but my dad hated them! So, when the kids left the farm, so did the Ayrshires!" The initial barn was quite labour-intensive, cleaned out by hand until a barn cleaner was installed in 1989. Joanne, her sister and two brothers, had their respective farm chores to attend to, with Joanne taking care of the calves. "We fought over who had to do the chicken chores," laughs Joanne, "All of us hated the chickens."

In 1997, a year after her high school graduation, Joanne headed for New Zealand through the World Jersey Youth Exchange. The 9-month trip quickly turned into a year away, as Joanne worked on over 45 different farms during that time. "That was my university experience," she says, "I learned a lot!" After returning home, Joanne worked as a bar waitress and a grocery store clerk, in addition to her chores at Bramville.

Joanne's current herd favourite, BRAMVILLE LEMONHEAD CRICKET EX-94 3E, was Reserve Grand Champion in Saskatoon and later nominated All-Canadian Lifetime Component Cow last year.



Not long after, she hit the road again, this time working at Clanman Jerseys in Manitoba for a year, followed by four years at Robella Holsteins in Saskatchewan. She didn't know it at the time, but all of those jobs, where she gained expertise in all areas of farming from cows to field work, played an important role in preparing her for what came next.

Home for Good

During the summer of 2003, Joanne moved back to Bramville. "I asked my dad if I could come home to the farm full-time," says Joanne, who noted that her parents never expected any of the kids to come back! Her sister had moved on, working in the hog industry initially and then at the credit union. Her brothers were bull riders and pursued careers in horse training. But her parents knew that if anyone were to return to the farm, it would be Joanne, who had continuously developed her love of cows.

"My dad agreed, but said I couldn't come back as an employee, it was **all in or nothing**," she recalls, "so I signed my life away at 23!" Joanne became a full partner in the farm with her parents, which she believes gave her a lot of incentive to put in her best effort: "All the debt was sitting there staring me in the face!"

Joanne got right to work getting rid of a lot of old buildings that year and began construction on a new Cover-All pack barn, which was completed in 2004. Cow numbers had increased to 50 head by then, but milking still took place in the old tiestall facility, which meant milking 26 cows first, sending them outside and bringing in the rest. She and Fran also continued to develop the Bramville breeding program, earning their first homebred Grand Champion at Olds Fair in 2004 with BRAMVILLE D.D. JOY EX-91 3E 2*. Although she was 'Daddy's girl,' Joanne and Fran had a shared love of the cows and spent long days in the barn together. "My dad only milked cows when he had to; the sheep and the grain farming were his domain," says Joanne.

Unthinkable Loss

In the spring of 2007, Jim was diagnosed with stomach cancer. "Mom and I actually found out before he did when the doctor called the house," shares Joanne, "We milked that afternoon, wondering how we were going to tell him." Jim's cancer was

aggressive and the prognosis was grim, giving him only 3-6 months to live. Although Joanne recalls the following six months as "emotional wreckage," she says, "The bond that developed was extreme." Fran and Joanne made sure they had everything under control in the barn and outside of it, living by the motto "We've got this." Still, the emotional moments came, alone in the tractor, or when she drove her dad to naturopath appointments in Alberta. Jim passed away in October, nearly six months to the day from his diagnosis, and was thankfully able to stay at the farm almost to the end.

"My parents had a crazy amount of faith in me when we went into partnership in 2003. I took over the breeding, cropping and financials immediately," says Joanne. While this seemed like a big deal at the time, Joanne now sees it more as a blessing, "I didn't have to deal with grief AND the learning curve of taking over the farm. I already had the business in my lap."

Moving Forward

There was never any doubt that the farm would continue following Jim's passing, with highlights and big changes on the horizon. Acquired from the famed Coleman herd in Alberta, GREEN HECTARES EXTREME VALLIE SUP-EX 91 6E 3* became one of Joanne's all-time favourite cows. Vallie was named Grand Champion at the Western Canadian Livestock Expo in 2005, 2009 and 2010, and earned Bramville its first All-Canadian nomination. Vallie lived to almost 19 years old and her descendants continue to impact the current herd.

In 2008, Joanne's future spouse, Steven Dufault, arrived on the scene. "Steven was a townie, so it was a pretty steep learning curve for him, and Mom and I were pretty guarded about our space at that time, but he is proud to be called a farmer now!"



Bramville Jerseys, Nokomis, SK.



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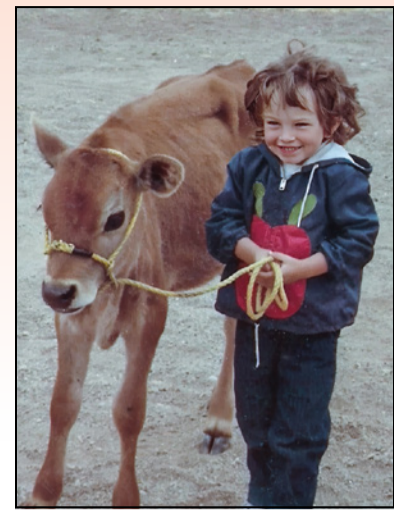
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Joanne, Steven and Maddie.



Joanne was horse crazy as a child, participating in barrel racing, team roping and gymkhana as a teen. Pictured with Jim in 1983.



Joanne caught the show bug early, showing Jerseys before it was 'cool' (1985).

Steven, who worked as a miner in the potash mine when he and Joanne met, became a heavy-duty mechanic and has taken over all equipment maintenance at the farm. Although he's employed full-time off the farm, Steven helps out when needed and was able to take nine months of paternity leave when he and Joanne welcomed their daughter Maddie in August of 2017.

In 2019, construction began on a new facility for the Bramville herd, which they moved into in December that year. The pack barn included a double-four step-up parlour, a setup Joanne saw at Pleasant Nook Jerseys in Ontario. "I really liked the step-up parlour; it makes it so much easier to milk on your own."



Maddie with her cow, BRAMVILLE JOEL LUCKY CHARMS EX-95 3E, the first 95-point cow at the farm.

Admittedly not very "techy," the only automation in the new parlour is automatic take-offs. The herd has grown to 60 milk cows, and although there is room in the barn to expand further, Joanne has no plans for that. "I was able to convince FCC that the barn would be so much more efficient that we wouldn't need to get bigger!"

Because a Strong Woman Raised Me

Joanne is quick to credit her mom as her biggest supporter and her best mentor. "My mom is the toughest woman I know, both emotionally and physically. She raised four kids - three of whom had the 'need for speed' and were accident-prone!" Fran worked several years in pain, needing two knee replacements that she "didn't have time to

get because she knew that she wouldn't be able to work," says Joanne, who has already had shoulder surgery and nearly lost her foot in a farm accident in 2024. "That's where I get my 'push through the pain' attitude."

In 2017, when she turned 65, Fran retired. "She got two new knees and hasn't milked a cow since," laughs Joanne. Fran knew that if she didn't quit 'cold turkey' in the barn, she never would. Although she still helps by pushing up feed, Fran has turned her attention to her big gardens where she grows veggies, potatoes, and has a pumpkin patch with her granddaughter.

Despite being a busy cream shipper and taking care of the family and her cows, Fran dedicated countless hours to many industry boards. She served as a director of the Western Canadian Livestock Expo for 30 years and was one of the early members of the Interprovincial Committee for WCC. She was also actively involved in the Saskatchewan Jersey Cattle Club, now Jersey West. "My mom was a driving force for Jersey shows in Saskatchewan," says Joanne, noting that the Bramville herd is the only 100% Jersey herd in the province. "She loves the Jersey cow," adds Joanne, "I got teased a lot for showing Jerseys as a kid, before Jerseys were cool!" As such, it was a proud moment last August when BRAMVILLE BRIGHT KRISPIE became the first-ever Jersey Grand Champion at WCC.

Joanne continued in Fran's footsteps in the industry, serving on the Jersey Canada board for eight years in various roles, including as president in 2021. "It's important to have a voice from the west," says Joanne, "It took up a lot of time - especially in the later years - but I was passionate about seeing my term through and extremely grateful to Steven and my help at home to make that possible." Although there were ups and downs during those years, Joanne learned a lot. "Through barn tours, AGMs, genetics, and other directors, you learn so much - my time on the board was not wasted." Maddie often came along with Joanne to the meetings and was welcomed with open arms. "There is space for women everywhere; the world has evolved enough," Joanne says.

Learning and Leading by Example

The intel she gleaned while on the Jersey Canada board, coupled with experiences on other farms and her fearlessness in asking questions, has been the recipe for success for Joanne. "I'm a person who asks a lot of questions to a lot of people," she says, and has good friends and neighbours in a variety of different trades that she can turn to for advice. "I ask people who have experience and try to learn from as many people as possible," she adds, like John Welch, a friend in the beef and grain industry, and David Morey, a fellow Jersey breeder. "I believe that every failure is not a failure, but a learning experience."

Joanne has aimed to instill some of the key qualities she learned from her mom into the next generation, including her



Just like her mom, Maddie loves all critters and enjoys going out to check the herd.

daughter, who is currently eight years old and in grade three. "I want Maddie to know that she has a voice, that it's important, and that she should use it." Watching Maddie do all the things she did and raising her the same way she was raised on their farm has been incredible. Like Joanne, Maddie loves everything that moves, including her cow - BRAMVILLE JOEL LUCKY CHARMS EX-95 3E, the first 95-point cow on the farm. "I've had

the opportunity to sell Lucky Charms a couple times," Joanne says of the cow that was Grand Champion at Alberta Dairy Congress in 2023, "but I don't want to crush her spirit, so we're keeping her cow."

Joanne's niece, Cassandra Knouse, has also been an integral part of the team at Bramville. "She's spent a lot of her life with me," says Joanne. At 16, Cassandra started working for Joanne in the summers, worked full-time in 2017 when Maddie was born, went off to Lakeland College to complete the dairy program, and returned in 2022. "She is basically my right-hand, she's had to run the place almost on her own at times, so it will be a sad day when she leaves," says Joanne.

The belief that integrity is everything and a strong work ethic will get you far has shaped the way Joanne was raised, the way she runs her business, and the way she leads the next generation of strong dairy women - through passion, perseverance and determination.



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