

Tars' Tale-Spins



Tars Cheema

Sudden, unexpected losses hurt. My friend – our dairy industry's friend – David Janssens – died of a heart attack on July 21, leaving everyone in shock. When I learned that he was cycling between Dawson Creek and High River, AB, I instantly imagined vast fields of farmland and David looking for his next farmer to chat with. He intentionally chose this location as it's Canada's northernmost commercial farming area.

While I knew of some of his two-wheeled adventures, his family tallied his epic cycling trips to 27 states and 14 countries. And it will not surprise those of us who knew him well that he couldn't wait to find someone to talk with about their farming enterprise. Curiosity and a genuine obsession to learn while making friends with anyone who crossed his path defined him.

Demonstrating Leadership Early

I met David at UBC in 1980 – he and Sandy were 4th year 'aggies' and I had just arrived from UVic into my second year, searching for cow-people in the ag faculty. There were several of us including Holger Schwichtenberg and Gord Peterson and we often hung out in the aggie lounge in the basement of the MacMillan (forestry) building. David had studied his third year at the U. of Guelph, in an exchange program with UBC. This was a pivotal element in our early connection, resulting in my eventual migration to Guelph where I completed my Animal Sciences undergrad in '86.

Nearly everyone looked up to David – not just because he was like eight feet tall, but also because he was already establishing himself as a leader in exploits taking on the engineers ('gears') in a range of shenanigans! He also got involved in all aggie events.

Gord Peterson recalls an aggie ski trip that saw David folded up in a shopping cart, being raced up and down a long second story hotel balcony...there may have been some beverages involved.

Holger gained early respect for David playing intramural hockey at UBC, where he recalls being flat on his back, looking up at David following a solid check. "And I've been looking up to him ever since. His enthusiasm greatly exceeded his skating ability, but he loved playing and he played hard," Holger smirked with long-established admiration.

The Aggie newsletter detailed many colourful activities often ending with, "A good time was had by all." Mercifully, there was no internet, which today preserves far too many moments which ought to be left to fade with our aging memories.

Returning to Nicomekl

Marrying Sandy was undoubtedly a positive influence on David as he completed his MBA and moved into his ag banking career with CIBC. Late in 1986, he brought all that experience home to Nicomekl Farm where eventually David and Sandy took over the entire expanding dairy operation, which later became one of the earliest organic dairies in BC.

David's second cousin, Carl Uytdehaag, recalls the generosity of David's family, taking in the Fraston herd for five months when their barns burned in 1988. "One morning, I saw David filling a pail of water – he appeared

David worked for CIBC for two years following completion of his MBA



annoyed as he took it in his truck down the road. When he returned with an empty pail, I learned that he'd gone to wake up the hired hand who missed his 6am shift again! He wasn't late again," Carl laughed.

Another hired man had an entirely different experience under David's mentorship. Arjen Wijnsma started working alongside the Janssens family in 2003 as a new immigrant. "Dave was instrumental in my growth as a young adult. His work ethic was something I had not experienced before, always finding ways to keep you engaged, handing out responsibilities that you felt honoured to try to live up to."

David's Human Legacy

It's hard to separate out David's professional and people sides – they were bonded. Many of us had the same experience of talking about our kids with him when we were together – it was **not** always about dairy business! "David was extremely loyal to his family – as we traveled over the years, it was very clear that he was really proud of each of his kids and he always enjoyed sharing updates about them," fellow Milk Board director, Tom Hoogendoorn shared. Rightfully proud – Sandy and David's children all completed university degrees and have established successful careers. Nick runs the 600-cow dairy operation after completing his Animal Sciences degree at the U. of Guelph. With a BA and Masters in Public Admin, Natalie's career path has taken her from the CDC to IAF and she is now Executive Director of BC's Turkey Marketing Board. Hillary spent years competitively rowing for Canada, earning a Bronze medal at the 2021 Tokyo Summer Olympics, before settling into her medical studies. She's now an ER doctor in Vancouver. Growing up actively helping on the farm has infused work ethic that has served each of them well!

Busy though David was, he made time to show up at Natalie's volleyball games at U Vic and would attend rowing events in Victoria where Hillary was training. Unfortunately, Hillary was unable to join David for a Colin James concert in Duncan in March 2020, so Kash and I stepped in to *take one for the team!* We had a wonderful time with David all evening and it turned out to be the best concert of 2020!! (Covid shut everything down right after this event).

Farming neighbour and childhood friend, John Tamis learned to play hockey with Dave when Cloverdale opened its first arena. "Whether it was indoor or outdoor hockey, Dave's determination was second to none! As adults, we had many constructive conversations and no matter what our opinions were, there was always mutual respect. When we decided to retire from the dairy industry, Dave gave some very thoughtful and fruitful advice which helped validate our decision."

Whether friend, staff, stakeholder, director or CEO, David always had time to engage with you – in the most genuine and meaningful way.

Fellow Milk Board director, Kevin Mammel shared this, "I especially remember his unique way of drawing us into personal sharing – he called it 'time on the couch.' It was a lighthearted way of getting us to open up and talk about the 'other' things we could be struggling with – and

he would often be the first one to open up and share his struggles."

Retired BCMMB Executive Assistant Lori Sharpe shared, "When David came into our office, he was the most respectful gentleman. He always made a point to tell me how much he appreciated the work/presentations/documents etc. which were prepared for him (and other board members). Just a genuine, sincere person."

Another Milk Board director, Jeremy Wiebe says, "Beyond being a formidable presence in the boardroom, he was such a loyal friend; always had my back. And we enjoyed the lighter side as we traveled." Tom Hoogendoorn agreed. "David was fun to travel with – he had a good sense of humour, and he could easily laugh at himself too."

David followed his father's footsteps, becoming a WestGen director. Here too, he impacted the people. "What truly distinguished David was his understanding that people are at the heart of every successful organization. No matter his position or responsibilities, he always made time for others. Whether speaking with a new or long-serving team member, or an industry partner, David took the time to listen, understand, and learn from their perspective," WestGen shared.

Retired WestGen GM, Brad Howard chuckled about David's fun side. "He had a definite sense of humour and could laugh at himself. One day he came to a Board meeting in a yellow Volkswagen Bug. Convertible no less. He said he always wanted one and after growing a farm with hundreds of acres in crops and equal amounts of cows and quota, he gave himself enough slack to go buy one. Watching him drive around, with more than half of him out in the wind and air, bugs in his teeth and a smile on his face, it was hard not to admire the kid in him!"



David and Sandy were honoured to be BC's Outstanding Young Farmers in 1999.

David's Deep Industry Imprint

The dairy industry is blessed with many selfless servants – putting in countless hours, often at a cost to their family, farm and relationships. Without the guidance and safeguarding of dedicated directors, generation after generation, our industry would stagnate or be broken by those who don't value the vitality supply-management brings to the rural fabric of this country. David's dairy director résumé is long and varied – underpinned by the people who carried the load at home – Nick, Sandy and the dedicated Nicomekl staff.

David's stalwart belief in education made him particularly well-suited to support the South Coastal Dairy Education Association (SCDEA) and DIREC – the Dairy Industry Research and Education Committee at BC Dairy from 1990 to 2010.

When David served as BC Holstein Branch President from 1994-96, he took on the important role of overseeing the 'Come Alive in '95' National Holstein Convention. Joan Wikkerink, the Convention Coordinator, worked closely with him, noting his steady hand and good nature. Joan became Branch Secretary following the Convention. "I soon learned that I had to be prepared with detailed, factual materials to back-up the numbers.



Proud to save a few bucks of producers' money by renting the smallest car available in Prince George for a Milk Board meeting!

But David was always ready to support and answer questions – he was a wealth of information that could be tapped into at anytime. It was a pleasure to work with Dave again when he volunteered at the recent Convention – supporting, challenging and sharing some laughs.”

As mentioned earlier, David was a director of WestGen before serving as President from 2008–2013, during a time of management change. “David’s leadership, vision, and commitment helped shape WestGen into the organization it is today. One of his most significant contributions was his instrumental role in the creation of the WestGen Endowment Fund,” WestGen recognized.

I recall well his rationale in 2004 as he described his vision for the Endowment Fund and why he believed in the long future of this farmer-founded organization.

David was not bound by small thinking.

From late 2013 to 2019, David was a BC Dairy director, which included being the DFC rep from 2014–2018.

Louis Schurmann said what many thought, “David’s size and stature brought automatic respect. He was a good listener; he analyzed and had a methodical approach. He was flexible with his views as he understood things better and tried to pull people and plans together. He was there to do what was best for the industry – he was never in it for his own gain! David was a credit and asset to our whole industry in so many ways,” Louis summed it up nicely.

Holger shared a variety of comments from his colleagues at BC Dairy and the BCMMB at David’s service. “David was there to be active. He read. He thought things through. He asked questions. He told me once that we needed those ‘difficult’ people on boards – ‘You don’t want a bunch of yes people – you need to have some opposition.’ David was also not afraid to disagree – he could be blunt and say what needed to be said even if it wasn’t comfortable for the room.”

Many remember David’s final stretch of impact coming through his time as a Milk Board director from 2019 to 2024. Chair Janice Comeau shared this statement with me last November after David’s term wrapped up. “David’s deep knowledge, based on the success of his own organic farm, his critical thinking and his willingness to ask difficult questions, greatly strengthened our board deliberations and consistently improved the quality of our decisions.”

David Speaking Up for Dairy

More in recent years, David became well known (and appreciated) for asking not only good questions at dairy meetings, but for offering praise to leaders and presenters for the work they did. At WestGen’s AGM this past Spring, he recognized Brian O’Connor’s long career at Eastgen, in addition to acknowledging WestGen’s leadership which helped the company grow into a significant player, from its long-ago humble roots. As Angela Hamming said to me, “He was good at that – always encouraging us to be involved – *don’t sit on the sidelines*. Many of us don’t have the courage to stand up and speak, but David did and always had the right words to say!”

Back at the January 2026 Mainland Milk Producers AGM, David was visibly emotional as he gave an impassioned speech in which he praised producers who continue to thrive amid changes and challenges in business while imploring younger producers to step up, **get informed and get involved!**

He admitted to me later that he felt an urgency to encourage others, as his time of influence was quickly concluding.

Dairy Speaking up for David

I was overwhelmed by the number of people who felt honoured to share their sentiments about David. Clearly, he had affected people deeply.

“The conversations were always intelligent and left you thinking about issues from *the other side*. I will miss him dearly as my mentor, industry leader and most of all my friend,” Arjen summed up.

“Despite his big presence and big influence, he was a pretty humble guy,” offered Holger.

A local producer told me that David biked onto their farm on his way back from Vancouver earlier this summer, initiating a wonderful visit and creating a cherished memory. “We never know when we see each other for the last time.” *Let those words sink in.*

“David deserved a much longer life than he got, but the world is a better place for having had him in it,” – Brad Howard.

David’s influence on the industry was profound – both in technical and human ways. When you encourage, inspire, make others feel valued – the impacts are multiplied as beneficiaries radiate the same actions.

David and Sandy’s daughter Natalie shared some heartfelt words at David’s service. “He was larger than life, smart and fiercely capable. He squeezed every drop out of his 67 years. He showed how much he cared through the quiet work of his hands, the steady rhythm of his days and the unwavering way he showed up for the people, community and the land he loved.”

It’s okay to cry because it’s over. But please also remember to smile because David happened, and we got to join him for part of the ride.



Stopping to engage with a farmer in March 2025 in Mato Grosso, Brazil. Cycling and agriculture were true passions for David.

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