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FARMER OF THE YEAR: Triumph over tough times

Widowed at 34 with three young children, woman fights to keep, grow, family farm

By GINA KINSLOW
Glasgow Daily Times

GLASGOW — Loretta Lyons was on her way to her grandson's high school graduation when she received a call on her cell phone informing her she had won Swishers Sweet/Southern Expo Sunbelt Kentucky Farmer of the Year.

She was a bit surprised to learn the news.

"I almost had a wreck," she said with a laugh. "I was excited. I almost couldn't believe it."

Lyons' youngest son, Kevin, who is the agriculture Extension agent for Monroe County, along with Roger Gillenwater, president of Monroe County Farm Bureau, nominated her for the award.

"You have to be nominated and fill out an application," Lyons said. "They judge all the applications and then they pick the top three. When they called and told me I was in the top three I kind of joked and asked, 'How many was in it, three?'"

Lyons grew up on a farm. In 1961, she joined her husband, Hade, in managing the dairy farm near Tompkinsville on which she now lives. The name of the farm is Hade's Triple "K" Dairy, Inc. The letter "K" represents the names of Lyons' children — Kerry, Kevin and Kela.

"When my husband and I first started, we just had 30 (cattle to milk) or so," she said.

The couple balanced managing a dairy farm with their careers as educators.

When Hade died in 1976, the 34-year-old mother of three was forced to make a decision about what would be best for her and her family.

"She basically had to make a decision whether she was going to sell the farm and raise us teaching school, or whether she was going to quit teaching and become a farmer," said Kerry. "She asked me if I would ever want to be a farmer, and I said, 'Well, I might.'"

Hearing those words from her 15-year-old son helped make up her mind. A few days later, she quit her job as a teacher at Tompkinsville Elementary and took up farming full time.

But Lyons didn't have to shoulder all of it by herself. She had help from family members, including her brother-in-law, Rondell.

"We could never have made it without him," said Kerry. "He just did what he thought he had to do. He was probably as much on our farm as he was on his own farm."

It was Rondell who was patient about teaching Lyons and her children how to manage their farm, Kerry said.

Kerry believes it his mother's story of being a single parent, as well as a dairy farmer, that helped her win the award.

"There's not too many 34-year-old women who would quit teaching to become a farmer," he said.

Kerry describes his mother as being the type of farmer who is "conservative when she needs to be and with a broader vision

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Photos



Loretta Lyons stands at the family farm near Tompkinsville. She has been named the Swisher Sweets / Sunbelt Expo Kentucky Farmer of the Year. **Submitted /Special to the Daily Times** (Click for larger image)

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when she needs."

Through the years of managing the family farm, Kerry said his mom never forgot how important 4-H was to him, his brother and sister, nor how important church was.

Kevin Lyons said he nominated his mother because "she's got a unique life story. She's had experiences that tested her a bit."

Kevin was 11 when his dad died. "A lot of people encouraged her to sell the farm" he said of the decision his mom faced. He remembers her asking if they wanted to keep farming. Once her sons said yes, "she was determined to keep it (the farm) and was able to watch it grow."

He added: "I guess the bottom line is when you talk to her, she'll tell you her faith has carried her through some tough times. She couldn't have done any of it without God."

In 1999, the family sold their milking herd.

"Now we raise Holstein replacement heifers for a farm in Fair Oaks, Ind.," Lyons said.

They generally manage between 800 to 900 head of cattle.

"It's a lot of work, but it's not tied down seven days a week and 365 days a year that you have to be in a certain place."

Not being tied down to the farm gives Lyons the opportunity to be involved with a lot of civic organizations.

She is a charter member of the Community Homemaker Club in Monroe County, and she is also a Master Farm Homemaker. In the past, she has served as president of the Kentucky Farm Homemakers Guild.

Lyons has six grandchildren and it is her hope and dream that some of them will take an interest in the farm.

"I want them to do whatever they want to do, but if they want to farm I want to give them the opportunity," she said.

Reporter Amber Dilley contributed to this story.

About the program

By AMBER DILLEY

Getting nominated for the Farmer of the Year award first requires a state nomination.

Janie Batson with the Sunbelt Agriculture Expo said that farmers who wish to be nominated can fill out a form through the area Farm Bureau service offices.

"It is up to them to determine who they are going to nominate for state winner for that state," she said. "The people at Sunbelt then choose the Farmer of the Year."

Batson said that the form is very in-depth.

"They (the farmers) have to put how many years they've been farming, they list their farming status, their crops or whatever they are involved in," she said. "They have to list their leaderships and experience in the community and dates on that. They have to give a history on how they got started farming, what they started out with and, through the years, how they have progressed."

The form is submitted to the state's sponsoring organization, Kentucky Farm Bureau. Winners from each state are invited to the expo in Georgia where the national Farmer of the Year is announced.

The program started in 1990, and has awarded \$650,000 to state and overall winners.



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