



Jen and Brooks White, with their children Sawyer and Piper, on their 600-head bison farm.

Meet Manitoba's Outstanding Young Farmers for 2018

BY ANNE COTÉ

MANITOBA'S YOUNG FARMERS are exploring ways to maximize profit from farm production, and every year one Manitoba farm family under the age of 40 is recognized by the Manitoba Outstanding Young Farmers Program for their efforts.

Recently, the husband and wife team of Brooks and Jen White, who own and operate Borderland Agriculture, were named Manitoba's Outstanding Young Farmers for 2018. They are also KAP members. >>



The Whites at the Manitoba Outstanding Young Farmers Awards, with Manitoba Agriculture Minister Ralph Eichler. The Whites now go on to the national event, to be held in Winnipeg in November.

The pair have been working to improve the profitability of their 7,500-acre farm for several years and it's been a huge learning curve, especially for Jen who had never farmed before marrying Brooks 14 years ago.

"I have no background in agriculture at all. So everything I've basically learned is from Brooks. And he's a great teacher," Jen said.

Brooks is a fifth-generation producer on the farm he renamed Borderland Agriculture once he took it over. He said it seemed like an appropriate name because the land borders both Saskatchewan and North Dakota, the latter being where Jen grew up.

Brooks began his involvement in the farm in 1999 as a minority shareholder, and in 2012 he acquired the rest of the shares. Neither of his siblings had any interest in farming.

Before he began full-time farming Brooks earned a diploma in agriculture from the University of Manitoba. He said part of his course work was developing a farm plan. In that plan, he took the farm's marginal cropland and any areas subject to excess moisture, and converted them into a bison operation where grass replaced grain crops.

"After graduating I came back to the farm and followed through with the plan from school," Brooks said. "I always knew that if I was going to farm I wanted to be involved in livestock... but we were a straight grain farm."

Brooks and Jen started the bison operation with 33 heifers of their own and developed a bison boarding farm giving absentee owners, folks who wanted to own animals but didn't want to manage or care for them, a place to keep them. This brought the total number of bison to 150.

Brooks said eventually they bought out some of those animals because when BSE hit the absentee owners no longer had any interest in them. This increased the number of animals in the Borderland Agriculture herd. This, along with regular breeding, grew the herd to the 600 head it is now.

Brooks noted that his interest in livestock began when he visited elk farms with his dad. Now raising bison not only meets his initial goal of changing the function of the farm but also supports his plans to follow regenerative farming practices and restore the nutrient levels in the soil.

The Whites sell the bison through Canadian Prairie Bison; they are members of this co-op that markets a branded product. Their animals are processed at True North

Foods in Carman, a federally approved facility, or at a plant near Denver, Colorado.

“It depends where the customer is,” Brooks explained, adding the cost of shipping is also a big factor when choosing a processor.

Brooks said some animals are sent to the U.S. live, and most are sold between 18 and 24 months of age. Some animals are held back a year and sold as bred heifers.

Over the years the couple has attended any workshop they heard about that they thought would be helpful for them on their farm. Jen said they attended a grazing workshop in Virden, travelled to Brandon to hear a guest speaker at the Brandon Research Centre and attended a no-till conference in Kansas. They’ve also attended agriculture-related events in Regina and Saskatoon.

Both Brooks and Jen enrolled in the two year Canadian Total Excellence in Agricultural Management (CTEAM) sessions. The CTEAM website indicates the course is designed specifically for producers and ranchers, and consists of week-long sessions held in four different cities across Canada. CTEAM sessions are described as experiences that “will develop and implement your own strategic and operations plans for your farm.”

Jen said the CTEAM sessions were held over a period of two years and participants attended two sessions a year.

“I wouldn’t be able to go and be a part of any of it if wasn’t for our support system — and that’s one of the reasons I enjoy farm living,” she said. “It’s been good. It’s been great for raising small kids. It takes a village to raise a family basically. As our kids get older you start to realize that really is true.”

Both sets of grandparents live nearby and the couple has friends who are also willing to help care for their children when needed.

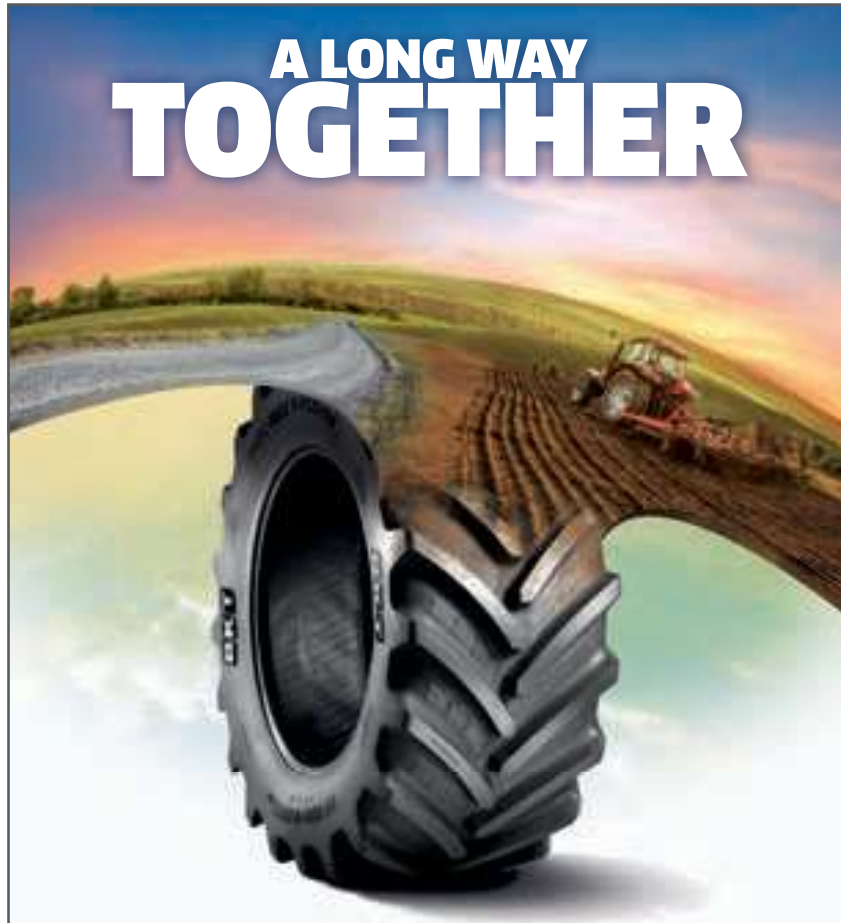
“If it weren’t for them we wouldn’t be able to go and learn all these new things, and take in all the exciting conferences,” Jen said.

Jen and Brooks have two children: son Sawyer, who is now seven; and daughter Piper aged four.

Brooks noted that having his dad nearby is a great resource for him. His dad is retired now but shows up on the farm regularly and always finds something to do. In addition to providing an extra pair of hands to help keep things going, Brooks said his dad provides him with invaluable experience and knowledge.

Brooks said he’s not clear yet on what events the couple will be involved in over the next few months, but is sure he’ll be meeting a number of people who will be great contacts and mentors in the years to come.

Brooks and Jen will be participating in Canada’s Outstanding Young Farmer competition that will be held in Winnipeg in November. *FV*



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