

Hog producer details personal struggle with mental health issues

As the Christmas of 2012 approached in the rural Ontario community of Listowel, Stewart Skinner stood alone in his hog barn with an extension cord in his hand.

He wasn't planning on using the cord for any farm related task. Instead, he was looking for a place to hang it from the rafters so he could commit suicide.

Stewart, who will be 35 this year, shared his powerful story with the Island potato industry during the recent PEI Potato Conference.

"I just wanted the pain to stop," Skinner told the meeting. "I was prepared to end it but this little voice in my head kept saying over and over 'don't do it'."



Stewart Skinner

He put down the cord, called his father and told him just how bad things were.

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After Stewart graduated with a masters degree from the Ontario Agriculture College in 2010, he assumed a greater role in Stonaleen Farms, immediately undertaking a major expansion. That allowed Larry Skinner to pursue a dream of his own – to become an ordained minister. His mother, Nancy, is a kindergarten teacher.

The market was on an upswing and Stewart said "I felt like I had the world by the tail." Then the market collapsed and by 2012 "We were bleeding money."

Larry listened as his son poured out his heart about the growing farm debt, his inability to sleep and his feeling of failure.

After he finished, Stewart had one of his first positive thoughts in months because "I realized that regardless of how I performed on the farm, I still had people that loved me unconditionally."

His father assumed a greater role on the farm along with continuing his studies. Stewart realized he needed some time away from the farm and went to Kenya on a mission trip. Stewart told the potato conference "one of the things I learned was how lucky I

was to be living in Canada."

Despite having little in the way of material goods, Stewart said people he encountered in Kenya were among the happiest he has ever met. He explained "I turned 28 while I was in Kenya and I realized I didn't need stuff to be happy."

Even with that realization, Stewart said he was not ready to go back to farming full time. They sold the expansion project to another farmer and he began what turned out to be an unsuccessful bid for political office, running as a Liberal candidate in the 2015 election that saw Kathleen Wynne turfed from power.

He then embarked on a short career as a civil servant, working for the provincial ministry of agriculture and commuting from Listowel to Toronto. However, he soon decided he was spending too much time away from his wife Jess and newborn son Bryce.

Since returning to the farm, he has started an agricultural consulting business. He explained. "I always loved to troubleshoot animal production issues."

He said one of the challenges in identifying mental health issues in friends, family or colleagues is that people dealing with mental health issues can go to great lengths to hide that fact. However, "if you suspect a friend or colleague is dealing with such issues don't be afraid to have those conversations."

Here on PEI, there is a confidential farm assistance program available to the farmers, employees and their families to help producers deal with such issues as stress and anxiety, depression, financial concerns, alcohol and drug misuse and a host of other issues. Frank Bulger, who is one of two counsellors, said the service was set up approximately 15 years ago by the provincial government and the Federation of Agriculture.

"Take time to count your blessings," Stewart advised the growers, many of whom are coming off one of the worst production years in recent memory. "It doesn't matter how much money is in the bank account; when my son smiles at me, life is awesome."