

Juggling multiple businesses makes this farm tick

BY TREVOR BACQUE

Life is a series of decisions. And for Dallas Vert and Natasha Pospisil — 2019 Outstanding Young Farmers' Program award winners for Alberta — making those decisions is based on a combination of gut instinct, number crunching and logic-driven analysis.

Their decision making process is just one reason these 30-something farmers succeed in their small hamlet of Kirriemuir, AB, located 3.5 hours east of Edmonton. The other reason is their decision to run multiple businesses, including the 11,000-acre family farm.

"We always like to challenge ourselves and that's in all aspects of our lives," says Vert. "We don't get bored easily, but if you don't do different things, you're not learning, and we like to learn something every single day."

REDEFINING "BUSY"

Vert runs the grain farm with the help of three employees. When the farm can be left alone he tends to other work through his custom farming business. When that's not pressing, he goes to work at his fertilizer plant, Dryland Agro Services, or he advises farmers about insurance offerings through Global Ag Risk Solutions.

Not to be outdone, Pospisil has an equally packed, yet completely different schedule and to-do list. This year marks one decade since she agreed to purchase the hamlet's general store. In reviving one of the area's central gathering places, she helps ensure the community continues to thrive.

But it's more than coffee and gasoline she has on offer. Pospisil is also the postmaster general, commissioner of oaths and a dealer for both NAPA and Westward parts. And as if that isn't enough, she also sells hail insurance for Palliser and consults with farmers through Section 25 Management because she is, after all, a licensed land agent.

Oh, and she also looks after the couple's three kids. In the summer when school's out, they spend most of their time with her at the store, the family's unofficial headquarters. "I think of the store as a lifeline to the community," says Pospisil. "If you don't have those things, you don't have a community. If I want to live here I am going to have to choose to do my part to keep the community going." »





Dallas Vert and Natasha Pospisil won the 2019 Outstanding Young Farmers' Program award for Alberta. They farm at a small hamlet just east of Edmonton, AB.



With multiple business ventures, their lives are a veritable circus act full of constant juggling to succeed at work and home. It's common to find Pospisil taking care of farm finances at the general store while nursing their infant son, or to spot Vert in the field well after dark, or see him plug in a few extra hours at Dryland Agro.

THE BUSINESS OF MAKING BUSINESS DECISIONS

With business, some decisions come quick, others take time. For instance, whether or not to add the odd quarter section? Well, Vert files that under easy — gut instinct — because land, even if overpriced, will eventually give you a strong return on investment. However, this year when he switched away from yellow peas to maple peas, that was a cold, hard, mathematical decision, partly because the seed was triple the cost.

"It's outrageously expensive," he says. "You calculate out your net return versus yellow peas and the numbers just made sense. You bite the bullet. When I was planning, yellow peas were a \$6 per bushel return, maple peas were \$11. You have to sit down and figure that out."

Vert tries to adhere to the five per cent rule. Annually, he focuses on one or two things to improve by five per cent, such as dropping input costs by five per cent, or boosting another part of the income stream by the same. If done right, things should dramatically improve in short order. "If we can change one or two things, at the end of the year, it makes for great rewards," he says.

There are times, though, when life can come at a family fast. In 2017, they lost Vert's father, Steve, at 62 after a six-year battle with progressive supranuclear palsy, a degenerative condition similar to Parkinson's. For the business, it meant that 22 quarter sections in his parents' name needed a quick decision on whether to sell or not, despite everyone's delicate state.

The mindset for this decision was one of survival, says Vert of the buyout. "It was a pretty hard time not only in my personal life, losing a father, but with our marriage. Anytime there's death in the family it puts stress on everybody. It makes you push through a little bit harder and not worry about the stuff that you cannot change. You do what you have to do to get by and away you go."

This kind of unwavering and straightforward practicality has served Vert and Pospisil well. Vert mentions that old saying about how people are successful

because, when opportunity knocks, they don't complain about the noise. "That really describes Natasha and I because we're always open to new avenues of opportunity," he says.

Often, business acumen is gained through failure and setbacks, says Vert. He recalls a time when workers asked for higher wages. He balked at the idea and let them walk. What seemed like a shrewd business decision at the time wound up being a good lesson.

"I let them go because I thought I couldn't afford to have them around," he says. "Now I'm realizing that in order to have good quality help, you have to pay. Even though you're paying more, it saves you in the long run. They're happier, they care and they take care of your equipment."

ALWAYS BE PREPARED

Both Vert and Pospisil are quick to move people around among their businesses during slower periods and there is never a shortage of tasks to complete. Key drivers of their success are communication and preparation.

"We're farming 11,000 acres and running other businesses on the side. You really have to manage your time," says Vert. "Natasha and I are very good at that. We can get away with three full-timers."

His time-management strategy involves getting up around 6 a.m. to have some uninterrupted hours to himself before the day really gets going. "If you can get two hours to yourself in the office without any interruptions, that slingshots your day because you know what everyone is doing," he says.

For Pospisil and the store, it's less about divide and conquer and more about integration, which is why the kids are often in tow when she goes to work. "That's how it is because there is no division," she says. "The kids are woven into what we are doing and I think that's why it works. They benefit from it and I think they enjoy it," she explains. "I could have quit once I had kids, but I didn't. I found a way to make it work and then had three. Finding solutions keeps you engaged and committed to your business."

Breaks are necessary, though. The family is deeply involved in the community and have a cabin at Ministikwan Lake, SK, where Pospisil grew up — and they certainly make use of it. Vert's logic is that it's healthy to leave the farm, especially if all you have is a farm. **FF**



"I could have quit once I had kids, but I didn't. I found a way to make it work and then had three. Finding solutions keeps you engaged and committed to your business"

Natasha Pospisil