

# Three generations of education, one future of empathy

BY PAUL W. JACKSON

With all the education a recent DVM diploma from Michigan State University (MSU) could pack into his brain, Ben Bartlett stood before downtrodden beef producers in the Upper Peninsula with an educator's mission: To dispense some of that knowledge.

He had just been installed as manager of MSU's Chatham Experiment Station, specializing in dairy and livestock. It was 1983.

"The year was a real disaster," he said. "I was just trying to help people cope, and probably doing more learning than helping, but I stood there and told them they needed to be more efficient. I was very logical, very accurate, but there were people who wanted to come right over their tables to choke me. They said they'd gotten as efficient as they could be, and they were working their butts off already. Well, I knew I was right, but didn't know I was saying it the wrong way. I couldn't figure out why they were so angry until one day I asked myself how I would feel if someone came into my office and told me I had to be more efficient. It turned into a great learning experience in how to take their perspectives into account, and my message changed."

The lesson easily could have been discarded like notes from an internal parasite lecture, but it's endured throughout Ben's career as a veterinarian and an educator. And like quilt squares from generations past, the message was sewn into the mind of son BJ, the current Cheboygan County Extension director and Ag and Natural Resources educator for Cheboygan, Emmet and Otsego counties.

What better reason, BJ said, for him and his young family to raise chickens and sell eggs or toil in a market garden or regret that he didn't listen to stories told by his maternal grandfather, Warren Cook, an MSU Extension agent who began his career in Oscoda County in 1954.

"My line has always been that I'm not smart enough to do anything else," chuckled BJ. "But I credit my dad that I learned the value of being involved in farming and in farmers' lives. That's why I started the



**BJ and Ben represent two generations of Bartletts to serve MSU Extension. BJ's maternal grandfather Warren Cook also was a Northern Michigan ag agent, beginning work in 1954.**

market garden, because I was getting a lot of gardening questions here. And just because I have chickens, I've become the area's poultry go-to guy. We have poultry and gardening experts on campus to call and get answers, but I feel less credible if I haven't done it myself."

Ben was already learning by experience when he started with MSU Extension in 1977. He brought 10 head of cattle with him to a leased farm and cared for the landowner's sheep. In 1981, he bought the place and sold the cattle. They were just too hard on facilities built for sheep.

And so BJ and his two older sisters grew up on the land he hopes to farm someday, and not just to bolster his experience and integrity.

Mostly, it's ties to that land – those memories of growing up among farmers – that gives BJ empathy for farmers,

the desire to help them and the need to be one.

"I blame Mom and Dad and thank them at the same time," he said, laugh-

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**BJ Bartlett shot his first buck, a 10-point whose head still overlooks his living room, at age 14 as dad Ben served as guide.**



is important to both big and small. The diversity in agriculture provides economic stability. The guy selling sweet corn from his back yard for two months of the year doesn't generate the dollars that the guy milking 500 cows does, but he supports the local community by buying at the local elevator."

That's just one reason, the father and son agree, that the animosity between big and small farms has to change. One is not more important than another, even when one says the other isn't really a farmer; that this one's a factory and that one's a hobby.

"What difference does it make if their operation is important to me or not?" asks BJ. "For the small guy, it's important to him. That sweet corn adds to his bottom line. He's contributing to the food supply chain in his own way. It's just a shorter chain. And it's my job to help the producer, whether he has a 100-square-foot garden or 2,000 acres."

During the next 30 years, building on changes from the past 30 will be crucial if agriculture is going to travel down the most advantageous branch of the Y.

"I hope that in the next 30 years we realize that people who are stewards of the land do a lot more than produce food," Ben said. "They perform functions that are important to society. The guy selling raspberries for \$6 a pint at the side of the road performs a service for society besides the food. It doesn't matter if it's worth \$6 to me. If a person perceives it's better, and is happy with it, then it's better to him and it's worth it to him."

Besides that, BJ said, even if Extension agents or farmers provide people with all the facts in the book, that doesn't force attitudes to change. "We'll never have the right answer until it's the right answer for you," he said.

That doesn't mean the father and son belittle education and facts. It's what got each of them where they are today. But experience, communication and empathy become anchors as facts change with research findings.

"Part of having an effective message for farmers," said Ben, "is to know that there are some things you can't change. In 1983, we couldn't change the interest rates, and today we can't change the price of milk. But we can empathize and offer to help. Sometimes it's important just to let them know there's someone out there who cares and is ready to help in any way possible."

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