

## I am a proud dairy farmer

by Joseph Gienza

I AM a dairy farmer. That's all I've ever been. There once were a lot of folks who could say that. As of March, there are 9,600 of us in Wisconsin. In Trempealeau County only 160 are still milking. Wow! In March 1999, the numbers indicated there were 22,000 in the state and 420 in my northwestern Wisconsin county. Do you see where this trend is going?

You'd think someone would build a fence around us and charge admission to view us in our natural habitat or Congress would put an endangered species protection act on us.

Yes, I am a dairy farmer. It's my job, my life, my career, my religion, my passion, my home — all rolled into one. Most people are too busy to get to the basics of life, too busy trying to get rich quick. I get to deal with the basics of life every single day: birth, death, soil, sun, growth, mud, storms, calm, parched, wet, and, above all, stress.

I am proud to be a dairy farmer. No one could be prouder of their career than I am of mine. My contribution to society is very simple, yet it's as grand as that of anyone who graduated from an elite liberal arts college.

I tend a herd of dairy cows that produce what evolution has chosen as the most naturally nutritious food for the most developed animals in the food chain — people. Evolution took thousands of years of trial and error, millions of genetic events to decide that milk is it. Its nutritional value puts milk above coffee, energy drinks, beer, or soda. Milk it is!

Milk doesn't cause fatal car crashes or domestic violence. You don't need an identification card to purchase it any time of the day or night. It won't stain your clothes if spilled. Consider all the great products that are made from milk, whether they are hot, cold, cultured, or frozen. I couldn't begin to count them all.

Today, the American farmer feeds 144 people every day. Fifty years ago, each farmer fed 22 people. We've come a long way. The American farmer is expected to feed, fuel, and clothe the world, take all the risk with no guarantee of receiving fair compensation for their hard work.

One hundred percent of the people on this planet eat food. Where do they think this food comes from?

Not from a store, it's from a farm. Yet, the farmer is the least appreciated person on earth. Not many people become famous for milking cows, but a lot of famous people couldn't do what we farmers do. Professional athletes make tens of millions of dollars per year and contribute little to society.

The world population is growing. Where is their food going to come from when more farmers are getting out? The average age of the American farmer today is the oldest in this country's history.

Dairy farmers work extremely hard just to survive. What industry works for less than minimum wage, puts in hours well beyond the traditional eight-hour work day, seven days a week, with no overtime pay, no benefits of any kind, and no retirement fund? How many?

Farmers have no control on the price we receive for our products; we have to take what the processor gives us. Is that fair?

We do it because we have passion for the land and what we do.

The author is a dairy farmer in Arcadia, Wis.