

Living the dream

Speech given at the Family Friendly Farms Convention in Geneva, February 2, 2008.

My name is Ulf Kintzel. I am a native of East Germany. I am married to Barbara, a native of Poland. We have three children: 9-year-old Sarah, 5-year-old Johann and Lech, who is 3.

We live in Rushville on a 100-acre farm. The farm is entirely in pasture and I raise sheep. My wife works as a computer specialist. Although I have been working in sheep farming for more than 20 years, this is our very first farm.



The family on our first anniversary in the FLX area: Happy as a pig in mud.

Our biographies differ a bit. Both my wife and I grew up in communism. Where and how I grew up does still shape my perspective. Although my wife was a bit too young at the time, I remember it vividly. Communism didn't allow for personal freedoms. It didn't allow much of private ownership and it certainly didn't allow entrepreneurship. Communism inhibits the will to make decisions and to take on responsibilities on your own. The only way to do that would be as a member of the Communist Party. I didn't want to become one. When the Communist system collapsed in East Germany I was ready for it. But the experience I LIVED through

helps me still today to put things in perspective. I know how big the influence of government can be. It also helps us to appreciate that we don't have such government.

Both my wife and I came to the US in the mid 90s with lots of ideas and idealism but absolutely no possessions. We settled at first in New Jersey. I rented most of my pasture from the State. But dealing with the State of NJ turned out to be most difficult. In addition, the once rural part we lived in, Sussex County, became more and more congested. With the city folks that moved into the neighborhood came a change of attitude towards farming, one that was not in favor of farming. The quality of life for us started to suffer. By accident did we discover the FLX area and we decided to try a new beginning. We purchased the land, had a house and a barn put up and moved here in the fall of 2006.

Our lives have improved immediately and enormously since we made this move. Do you know the feeling when you make a change in your life, even if it is turning out alright, it never catches up with your day dreams. It never turns out quite as good as you envisioned it. Well, for the first time in my life the real world exceeded my expectations. First of all, owning your farm and not having to drive to the place I rent changes everything. I walk out of the basement door and if I fall down twice I am already at the place of my work. The kids can come and go. In the summer my wife sends them out into the field to me. My wife likes the fact that she can look out the window and see me. She says it makes her feel good.

I had always a number of plans that I didn't follow through or only tackled partly because my stay elsewhere was always temporarily. It is different now when I assume I'll be working my farm for another 20 years or so. I now raise more chickens, ducks and geese for the family than we ever have. I started raising pigeons for squabs and I intend to raise rabbits soon. Whatever can be pasture raised is pasture raised. All this is food for us. We buy no meat in the store or supermarket.

When I look at the food, especially meat that can be bought in these super markets I remember the food scandals, the recalls of ground meat and spinach. I think of the cardboard taste of the steaks. I think of the hormones that may be in the meat and the milk. I think of the pig factories where the pork may come from that I see in these stores. I think of High Fructose Corn Syrup - which makes me gain weight in a heart beat. I think of the processed foods - ham comes to mind. And I don't like it. This is not to bash anyone. I truly just don't like it. It is a far cry from the real food I grew up with. It is far removed from the real tastes from my childhood. Also, I have not bought the idea of some of the modern science. I don't believe that fat is bad for you. I never believed that margarine is better than butter. I don't check what my cholesterol level is. And I do love red meat.

Owning our own farm allows us to go back in time so to speak to the real food with the real tastes, and back to the sounds and smells of my childhood. I love to

hear my rooster at – yes- 4 AM. I like to hear the sound of my pigeons which bring back childhood memories. I like the smell of the soil when it awakes in the spring and yes, I like the smell of my dogs even on a wet day. I remember the pig being killed in the back yard and put up on a letter while the first pieces of meat were being boiled in a pot and I remember the old mother on the farm I spent so many days of my life plugging the old hens that didn't lay anymore. And now we have it all for ourselves, no more day dreams or wishful thinking. Nowadays we harvest all of the poultry ourselves. In fact killing chickens is a family day for us like a road trip for somebody else. You think we're a little odd? Maybe we are. And those chickens sure taste good.

I am also interested in nature. I love identifying birds and plants. This winter I built three dozen blue bird houses. I wonder what birds I will attract with them. There are already many rare and beautiful birds on our farm during the summer like the Bobolink, the meadow lark, the horned lark, the Indigo Bunting – to name a few. This becomes even more fun when your kids get involved. My daughter can point out birds like the Bobolink and can tell the Blue Jay by his call. My first son surprised me last year by identifying Rag Weed and Pennsylvania Smart Weed. And my three year old can tell you when you show Timothy to him that this is Timothy. When you show him and Aster he'll tell you it is Timothy. When you show him a Daisy he'll tell you it is Timothy.....

And then there is hunting. Hunting isn't something that is culturally ingrained in German society. So, this is new to me. I got my first deer last season I had a lot of fun. A couple of friends of mine and I made already plans for next year's hunting season. And I can't wait when my kids are old enough that we can hunt together on the farm....

Of course, the main reason for the farm is raising sheep and making a living in doing so. And there is little that I like more than that. I never go out into the barn or into the pasture disliking what I am doing and wishing that I could do something else that day. Or do nothing. I consider it extreme luck if you like what you are doing and making a living with it at the same time. It's kind of doing your hobby the whole day every day. There are so many people who hate what they do for living. I am certainly not one of them.

And I like to be an entrepreneur. I like finding the markets for my lambs. I am now in the process selling some of my lambs under a newly formed label called "Certified Natural New York". I like making decisions. And I like having the edge in the market world.

We know that we won't get rich doing what we're doing. I would like to offer a little story to illustrate how we feel about getting rich. I used to do a lot of herding dog training in New Jersey. I had this customer who trained his dog with me. He was 35 years old, worked on Wall Street, made half a million dollars salary at the time, lived in a 7,000 square foot home with a family of four. He spent most of his

time away from home, at the office or at airports, he saw his kids during the week when they were asleep, his wife was complaining about him never being home. He had no noticeable values, he thought America's foundation was greed. He said so. After one of our many discussions about life and values he asked me if I don't like him, if he should quit training with me. I put my hand on his shoulder and said: "No, I want you to stay. Whenever I get tempted, whenever I hear of others making more money than I do I want to be able to look at you. You will be a perfect reminder for me that money indeed doesn't buy happiness."

I find something else noteworthy. I have often wondered if we would have the same joy, excitement and happiness if our farm would be in any other place in the US. Yes, there are other nice areas but we find the FLX area is special. There is still a sense of community where we live. I didn't get that feeling back in New Jersey. The opportunities to "entertain" our family are great. We can go blueberry picking on a nice crisp August morning that brings back the first memories of fall. We can buy our grapes directly from the vineyard owner, meeting at her vineyard where the sweet golden grapes reflect the morning sun. Our kids can play with other farmers' kids and when I go to town hall or to the local mechanic I am asked: "Are you that guy with the sheep on top of the hill? Nice sheep you got there" I answer "Yes, I am." and I often would like to add: Thank you for noticing us. Thank you for making us feel at home away from home.

The picture wouldn't be complete if I wouldn't mention my Mennonite neighbors, the friendship we have with some of them and the influence they had particularly on me. I remember seeing one of these Mennonite friends while driving past his farm. He had sat down in the middle of the day with one of his young sons who had brought his father a piece of Melon. Sure, he had enough to do that day. I knew that as a fact. Yet, he took the time to spend some time with his son. This picture I felt was symptomatic for how I have experienced my Mennonite neighbors dealing with their children. They, the children, seem to be part of the whole that they were willing to take time for. Their patience with their children has helped me to become a better father. I am not blowing a fuse as often as I could and I take more often time out for my kids to answer their questions instead of telling them that I am busy. And I like to stop in once in a while to chat with my Mennonite friends or to discuss farming issues or have lunch together or exchange a cookie recipe and the list goes on. And I certainly like to do business with them. I know that the good deal I often get, sealed by a hand shake is as good as a written contract or better. Just like in the old days when a man kept his word that he gave.

Back to our farm. It is particularly spectacular for us since we grew up under a system that would have not allowed such lifestyle or the ownership of a farm. What adds to our joy is that we fully acknowledge and appreciate how fortunate we are. In other words, knowing that we have it good makes us feel twice as happy. And we don't take it for granted. My wife and I believe that the worldly

system we live in matters. We see the lack of rule of law in many other countries. We see that there is more bureaucracy in Europe and higher taxes, too. We smile when we hear others complaining about too much bureaucracy and high tax burden. We think we know better. And yes, that means we cherish this free country.

So, my wife and I feel that we literally are living our own dream. We are very excited about it. Let's see if we can pass on this feeling to our three children.

Thank you very much.