

## ***The Impact of Covid 19 on the Carruthers Family***

*Neil Carruthers '85 S, '91 C & Gail (nee Priest) '90 C, (M. 1992), raised 2 daughters on their farm near Frenchman Butte, SK. Amy '20 C, began her Masters this fall. Laura '22 is 3rd yr. Crop Science.*

### **Neil**

While attending the Western Canadian Dairy Seminar in Red Deer, an announcement over the intercom informed us that the Alberta government was limiting the size of crowds due to Coronavirus. Within minutes, the 600 plus attendees dispersed and the Convention Center was empty. Earlier that day, I was performing year end reviews with my team. As a Regional Business Manager with Merck Animal Health, it is a lot of fun to sit down with your field force to go over the highlights of 2019. After the reviews, the plan was to have a team supper to celebrate the retirement of Dr. Roy Lewis. The night promised to be full of laughs as we all told our favourite Dr. Lewis stories. Two weeks prior, when trying to book a restaurant for a party of 20, I was getting a lot of “we are very busy that night and can’t accommodate you.” As fate would have it, we were the only group in the restaurant on the night of March 12. The next day, I drove from Red Deer through Edmonton, back to our farm near Frenchman Butte, SK. I have driven this same route hundreds of times in my 30 years in the animal health business, but the drive on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> of March will be one I will never forget. Usually the Queen E II is very busy, but on this day, it was eerily quiet. I wondered to myself - “Where is everyone?” and the answer became obvious as I crested a hill at Sherwood Park and saw a massive lineup... Everyone was at Costco!

As I write this on Friday, the 13<sup>th</sup> of November, nine months have passed and boy has my schedule changed! Typically flying 40 flights per year from Saskatoon or Edmonton to Montreal or New York, I have had four flights this year, with none since March. While it is great to be home most nights, I can tell you the Hilton took great care of me. One morning, I explained to my wife that the Hilton shells my hard boiled eggs, and that she should up her game! The comment led to an eye-roll from Gail; but as yet, no peeled eggs. My day to day work from home now consists of virtual meeting after virtual meeting. While I do miss the old way of doing business, we need to embrace our new reality. My wish is that in the future we can find some middle ground of in-person and virtual meetings to drive business forward.

Often, I ask people I meet to list three of their best life decisions. One of my best decisions was being an Agro. My education has led me to work for great companies like Federated Co-op, Pfizer, and Merck. My career choice has also allowed Gail and I and our two daughters Amy and Laura to build up our farming/ranching operation in Frenchman Butte and Biggar, SK.



L-R: Amy, Gail, Neil, Laura

### **Gail**

The last two public gatherings I attended were the SAGA Reunion weekend and the College of Agriculture & Bioresources 2020 Grad banquet. Socializing activities were obviously hit hard by the restrictions, so in the evenings Neil and I pulled out some old games like cribbage and scrabble. If anyone knows how to play two-person Kaiser, please let me know because Neil really hates cribbage! Pandemic living is manageable on the farm. We go outside without anyone caring that we aren't wearing a mask, unlike city dwellers who can't even walk their dog without being judged. On the downside, however, the *Skip the Dishes* fellow we called three weeks ago still hasn't shown up! We are also so thankful that our parents are living in their own homes and not in a senior's lodge under lockdown. In terms of our farming activities, we bought grass cattle in February, but we were concerned beef prices might drop due to all the spring restaurant closures. So, when the feeder market took a bit of a jump in May, we sold our grassers and rented out the pasture. In hindsight, there would have been some profit with them, but we chose to cut our risk. Amy's summer job was delayed due to Covid, so we put her to work fencing, repairing equipment, and seeding. I also tried to fit in a long over-due basement renovation when Amy was home, but sadly couldn't convince Neil it was needed.

On March 16<sup>th</sup> my employer, the local R.M., directed me to work from home. Neil's work requires him to be a bit of an internet hog, so it was great that most of my communication was via email and telephone, with only one or two virtual meetings per week. I found that my work efficiency increased due to reduced interruptions compared to when working in the office. It is sometimes challenging to share our land line (no cell service here), but we have managed. On July 6<sup>th</sup> I returned to the office with precautions and social distancing. Many of the restrictions were lifted by then, and Neil and I were able to pack away the scrabble and cribbage boards. Summer passed without much change, and only one of our Saskatoon relatives testing positive for Covid – luckily with very mild symptoms. Now, with masks

mandatory across the province, I sure hope we don't have to endure another strict lock-down this winter like we did in the early spring – but only time and our behaviour will tell. So in preparation for long evenings, I pulled out the cribbage board from its cupboard. Neil took one look at it and headed down to the basement and started knocking out walls. And so the renovation begins!

### **Amy**

March 12th, Covid eve, was just another Thursday Ag Night with 200 of my closest friends. Little did I know it would be the last Ag Night I would attend. As an Agro, we all go through the sad realization that our Ag Nights are limited (my sister claims this news hits us extroverts a little harder - but I don't understand how this isn't heartbreaking news for everyone). This spring, 4th year students like me faced that sad realization far too early. Now as the snow falls and we settle in for the winter, we see that Covid-19 has hunkered down and is here to stay. For how long? Your guess is as good as mine.

As a first year Ag Ec Masters student, Covid-19 has not impacted my life as much as many of my peers. When I committed to this degree, I was prepped to forfeit my social life for the next eight months regardless of the situation. Therefore, the global pandemic did not alter my life outside of school too dearly. For many of my fellow classmates, however, that was not the case. With classes being moved entirely online, my international peers are taking part in classes from their home countries. I sure miss getting to know my classmates and seeing them every day in class. For me, the absence of meeting new people, one of the most important parts of a post-secondary education, has been the most devastating part of the global pandemic.

My Covid-19 experience has definitely had its challenges but it has also brought joy to my life in new ways. I am grateful for the extra time I had to spend on the farm with my family this spring when the start of my summer job was delayed. My friend group, who may otherwise have drifted over time, has become closer because of this pandemic. Weekly Facetime allows us to stay in touch as we are now all living in different areas of SK and AB. As our days get shorter and the nights colder, I am aware of the impact that a limited social life and the stress of this pandemic could have on us all. As I am sure those reading are aware, the Agro community is always there for its fellow members. If this winter is a little tougher than normal, know that there is a fellow Agro just a Facetime, Zoom or phone call away.

### **Laura**

As a 3rd year Crop Science student, I was excited last March that I didn't have to write any lab finals. By October, however, I was longing to be back on campus. Over the last nine months, even we introverts realized how important social interaction can be. Many aspects of my life have changed over the last months; no Thursday nights out with friends, no daily trips to campus, and no warm holiday escape in the winter. But as with all change, we adapt; and even in difficult times I hope that most people choose to see the positive side. For me, this new world means the freedom to schedule my days however I would like. Spending my mornings at the gym is the highlight of my day and something I couldn't do with regularly scheduled morning classes on campus. What we are living through has undoubtedly had a significant effect on our mental health, which is why exercise has been the most important part of every day for me.

Online school also gives us the freedom to study from anywhere we would like. While we would all love to be on a beach chair in Mexico, that isn't quite possible yet. I had been planning to travel abroad this summer and while I am disappointed that didn't take place I have been able to find new ways to have a bit of an adventure. I am hoping to spend the spring and summer of 2022 in B.C. working on fruit farms while taking classes. While we can't quite do whatever we would like during a pandemic, I always like to focus on the things that I can control. And when things get tough as they inevitably do, Thursday night Zoom calls with your friends and early mornings at the gym can sure work wonders for your mental health. I hope that this article finds all who are reading it doing well, finding ways to see loved ones, being kind to one another, and learning to look on the bright side.