

Nelson finds success in the details

By HOLLY SPANGLER

RICK Nelson is one of those folks you could call a “details” guy. He likes learning the intricacies of everything from option strategies to computer spreadsheets to planter row units. He monitors every farm expense three different ways. And he pays attention to the details of cultivating relationships with those around him.

That very attention to the finer points of his farm and his life has earned Rick the designation of Master Farmer in 2009.

Hailing from Paxton, Rick began farming with his father shortly after graduating from the University of Illinois in 1974. His father ran a diversified operation of farming, custom harvesting, spraying and excavating.

The lesson in diversification stuck, and today, the Nelson farm continues to bear the hallmarks of variety.

When many Illinois farmers diversify, they do so with livestock. But that was one move Rick decided against early in his hog-raising days of 4-H and FFA.

“The more I worked with hogs, the less I liked it,” Rick laughs. “I like running machinery, and I like making management and financial decisions.”

Trying on new ideas

To that end, he farms 2,100 acres in rural Ford County. He gets it all done with a variety of labor sources, including his retired father and several part-time employees. He also exchanges custom work for labor with a neighboring farmer. Rick’s youngest son, Mike, worked part-time during his college career and recently returned to the farm full-time. His wife, Pat, helps with book work and, as Rick says, “keeps the

Key Points

- Rick Nelson raises corn and soybeans on 2,100 acres near Paxton.
- The Nelsons volunteer extensively with their local church and cooperatives.
- Rick’s son Mike recently returned to farm full time with his dad.

wheels turning.”

Rick spent a lot of time in the 1970s and ’80s building waterways for local farmers in conjunction with Soil Conservation Service programs. Today, he still runs an elevated scraper and a backhoe for building dams, berms, waterways, channels and basins.

Over the years, Rick has modified or built planters, tool bars and sprayers. He strip tills about 60% of his corn and no-tills 60% of his beans. He added Trimble’s RTK

autoguidance system this past fall, making it possible to accurately match his fall strip building and spring planting. The planter is controlled by a Pro600 universal control console and is capable of variable population control and seed mapping.

The Nelson farm is also involved in a rootworm research project with entomologists at the University of Illinois, studying the mobility of rootworms during the growing season, and the potential for a later-planted trap crop to control rootworm resistance and reduce input costs.

Off the farm, Rick serves as vice chairman of the Growmark board of directors, as treasurer of Heritage FS and as president of Ludlow Cooperative Elevator. It’s not uncommon for him to hop aboard Growmark’s corporate jet to Iowa, where he and others lend their expertise to FS member companies



DIVERSITY AWARENESS: A fan of variety, Rick Nelson dislikes redundant, repetitive chores — one of many reasons he doesn’t raise livestock. “Feeding the barn cats is the extent of my chores,” he jokes. “And the cats are on the bubble.”



PEW STUDY: Pat and Rick Nelson invest much energy and effort in their local church. Pat works part-time as a secretary there, and Rick has taken on a variety of projects and leadership positions.

there. Long a believer in the cooperative business model, Rick formed the East Central Illinois Cooperative Association to promote the benefits of cooperatives to young farmers.

Living with intent

Back home, he has organized marketing clubs and spearheaded a campaign that successfully opposed a rails-to-trails right-of-way effort and preserved the rights of landowners next to the railroad.

A member of the local Gideons and of the Evangelical Covenant Church of Paxton, Rick has served in various deacon and board positions. He’s heavily involved in worship music and has taught Sunday School for the past decade. On his bookshelf right now: “Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus.” “It’s heavy but pleasurable reading,” he adds.

Rick and Pat have two sons: Chris and his wife, Sharon, and Mike and his wife, Amanda. Chris recently graduated from seminary and is interviewing for a pastor position. Mike farms full-time with his dad.

Though yields, finances and boards are important, the guidelines by which Rick lives and farms offer perhaps the most insight into his success:

■ *The world is run by those who show up.* The folks who commit the time and mental effort make the decisions. “You have no right to complain if you could have participated but chose not to,” he says.

■ *Do what you can do.* Volunteer, order your priorities and do your homework. Evaluate your weaknesses and improve them; recognize your talents and use them.

■ *Follow through on commitments.* Organizations count on people who attend meetings, are mentally engaged, are reliable and get things done.

■ *Treat everyone fairly.* Treat people the way you want to be treated. “Taking advantage of someone is not why God placed you on this earth,” he concludes.

A musical hobby



DRUMMER BOY: Rick Nelson spends Sunday mornings playing with a praise and worship team.

HE may be a farmer by trade, but Rick Nelson’s a musician at heart. He’s spent much of his life playing rock and roll, and even traveled the Midwest with a band before his sons were born.

Yet several years ago, he began to realize the impact music could have in sharing the Gospel. Since then, the drummer, vocalist and sometime sound man has concentrated his efforts in three different bands, including John 316, Kwench and Damascus Road. And at various times, he’s also been able to play with his sons.

Sunday mornings find him either behind the sound board next to his wife, Pat, who runs the projection system; or playing at the drum set during worship music at their church, the Evangelical Covenant Church of Paxton.

And Rick has another project these days: a community outreach called Rock ‘n’ Roll Church. The idea is to reach people who wouldn’t normally come to church by using secular music from the Rolling Stones, the Beatles and other bands, set within a nontraditional worship service.