

# Immigrant Indiana dairy grasps American dream

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FRANKTON, Ind. — Friends and family of Tejo Willemsen, a central Indiana dairy farmer, experienced a heart-wrenching moment as he announced an expansion of his farm in Frankton, while paying tribute to the father and daughter he lost just six years ago.

"This is a big day for me," said Willemsen on Sept. 13 in front of his family and friends. "This is a day to reflect on everything we've been through, including all the major tragedies in our family."

Willemsen immigrated from The Netherlands with his wife Alberdine in 2001 with hopes and plans in hand to pursue his "American Dream," by building a state-of-the-art dairy facility in Madison County, Ind. According to Willemsen, his drive and ambition results from the support and love provided by his father Evert, who operated a small dairy farm in The Netherlands.

"My father passed away the first day we broke ground here (in 2001)," said Willemsen, as a tear streamed down his face. "He never got to see this farm, but I know he is up there watching over me as we break ground here today."

One-by-one Willemsen paid tribute to all those who helped him pursue his dream of farming, especially his father.

"He was my biggest supporter," he said. "He has given me the chance that I never would've had without him."

To memorialize his lost father, Evert and his daughter, Julia, Willemsen asked his wife and mother to step forward and place the first two shovels tied with yellow ribbons in the ground, followed by a moment of silence.

Willemsen, 29 years old at the time, lost his daughter in a tragic farm accident just two months after his father died.

As he looked to the sky, he said, "Julia, you passed away five years ago, but you have never left my heart."

Friends, fellow farmers, neighbors and family members, including his 9-year-old son, Thomas, joined Willemsen to break ground on the new facility that will house nearly 6,000 dairy cows. Willemsen seemingly remembered all those who helped make his dream a reality, including Keith Hudson, Jerry McCord, Wes Likens, Doug Drake, John Johnson and Lt. Gov. Becky Skillman.

"A lot of people had faith in us from the beginning ... probably got us through a lot and have since pushed us to succeed," Willemsen said. "I hope you see this dairy as not only good for me, but good for you," he added, dedicating the event and the expansion to his friends and family.

Skillman, who attended the event, also provided a few touching comments during the groundbreaking, adding that "In the past six years, Tejo has been a model citizen and a model farmer, giving back to his community at every opportunity.

He truly epitomizes what is the best in Indiana agriculture. Congratulations Tejo on your expansion and I look forward to watching you grow even more."

With expansion details already underway, Willemsen said that new concrete was recently poured for pads that will be needed to store large amounts of silage required for the additional 4,200 cows. Next, Willemsen will begin laying out and building manure management facilities, which will be ready by the end of 2007. He said that the entire project will be completed by fall 2008, creating 40 additional jobs for the Madison County area. According to Willemsen, many of the 4,200 additional cows have been purchased and are currently being raised on farms in Indiana and Oklahoma.

Even though Willemsen would not provide an exact amount, it's predicted that he will invest millions in the new facility, complete with freestall barns, a new parlor and much more, contributing significantly to the local economy in Madison County.

"I'm confident in the risk I'm taking here, but at this time I don't feel this risk is as much as when I first came here," said Willemsen, who purchased his first 40 acres

of American soil from Jerry McCord early in 2001.

### **Community support**

While many farmers with hopes of expanding their livestock operations face withstanding opposition and controversy, Willemsen seems to be relatively unscathed during the process.

In fact on Aug. 15, Willemsen received a unanimous vote by the Madison County Board of Zoning Appeals 5-0 in favor of his expansion project to add an additional 4,200 dairy cows.

"Tejo has welcomed tremendous support from his community and I think that certainly other Indiana farmers might be inspired by Tejo's American dream," remarked Skillman.

"He didn't just want help from one person, he needed help from the neighborhood and he has done a great job doing that in this community, said McCord, a neighboring cattle and grain farmer, who helped Willemsen start his operation by selling him a 40-acre tract of Hoosier farmland.

Herb Likens, who served as the emcee for the afternoon event, said that he liked Willemsen from the first time he met him.

"As he mentioned, our operations are very similar, we don't stray far to get the job done," said Likens, who operates a grain farm with his brother and son in Madison County.

Helping a young farmer pursue a dream, the Likens family provides some of the grain used to feed Willemsen's dairy cows.

Both McCord and Likens agreed, they have always admired Willemsen's work ethic and management skills.

"He is one of those guys that's never satisfied unless he works a 20-hour day. It's hard to keep up with him," said McCord.

"There was never a doubt in my mind that Tejo would succeed with this farm," he added. "And the neat thing is, he was willing to share his accomplishments today with other people and that is really special."