



karen dakin

She always wanted to be a farmer and when the DC-area native moved to Parrish to re-invent herself, she met Jerry Dakin whose family has been raising cows in Florida since 1973. The couple owns the Dakin Dairy Farms consisting of four corporations, 2300 Holstein and Jersey cows, and 1200 acres in Myakka City.

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s a child growing up near Washington, DC, Karen Espinola Dakin always wanted to be a farmer.

In the midst of a career that included part ownership of a telecommunications company, she knew that her life had to change. Divorced with a three-year old daughter, she moved to a 10-acre plot in Parrish where she grew herbs and onions. She also earned a real estate license and worked at Panther Ridge.

During her “growing” days she met her husband Jerry at the feed store. They dated for three years, married, and today they own the Dakin Dairy Farms consisting of four corporations, 2300 Holstein and Jersey cows, and 1200 acres in Myakka City. She is the face of the company, coordinating marketing activities, community outreach, and educational programming as well as serving on the executive team of all four corporations. Her husband manages the farms that have 84 employees, and produce, bottle, and distribute 70,000 to 90,000 gallons of milk products a week.

Karen says, “Jerry took me to the dairy farm where his family had been raising cows since 1973. I saw compost, not manure. I have a love affair with the land. Jerry was born and raised in farming. He loves cows! When we married, he had 250 cows on a family farm. In 2001 we moved off the farm and purchased our first acreage in Myakka City. We grew the herd to 700 and purchased another 350 acres. Two years ago we purchased an additional 700 acres and last year added 150 acres. We lease other acreage to grow hay, hi-protein grasses, and corn.”

The farm is one of 140 dairy farms in Florida and one of three in Manatee County—the one owned by Karen and Jerry and the other two owned by his brothers. In 2002 they built a cutting-edge dairy farm that engages in environmentally sustainable practices and modern processes. They are committed to retaking, reusing, and recycling resources with composting as their primary practice. They capture manure for compost, but Karen’s bucket list includes generating electricity with it.

This process has been successful in areas where the soil is not sandy as it is in Florida. She says there is new technology, but it is still being evaluated. Karen’s love affair with the land carries over to their cows and their well-being. A Ph.D. nutritionist assists in planning a balanced diet of grasses that contains natural beta-carotene, vitamins D and E, omegas, and conjugated linoleic acids to produce high-quality dairy products. Cotton seed, citrus skin and pulp, and other nutrients are blended in a salad mixer three times a day to assure that the cows receive a healthy diet that produces sweet and nutritious milk. She says the Florida heat presents a challenge for dairy farmers; therefore, they have open barns with misters and fans to keep the cows clean, dry, and healthy.

“Land stewardship is multi-faceted,” Karen says. “Amazing sustainable practices equate to healthy soil and a healthy environment. We continue to see wildlife such as deer, turkeys, birds, and butterflies because of our stewardship of the land. I am first and foremost a God-loving person. I honor God every day as my driving force. It is not all about the bottom line. I have a very creative mind that is always

drawing pictures. I am visionary and always mindful of the big picture. I saw all of this 10 years ago. My advice is to pray first, work out plans on paper, think it through, and surround yourself with good people. I am confident that faith will direct me to good decisions. I work through challenges and possess incredible peace and patience. It’s how you walk through the to-do list and the frustration when things go wrong.”

Five years ago Jerry and Karen decided to bottle the milk they produced on the farm. As Karen says this was “against the grain.” Against all odds and opposition from all parts of the industry, they began bottling whole milk, two and one percent milk, fat-free milk, chocolate milk, and cream. (They are the only dairy farm in Florida open to the public that bottles its milk on site.) The farm sells liquid milk products only (although they may venture into cheese production in the future) including bulk milk and bottled milk under the U-Save store brand. The Dakin brand milk is sold in every Whole Foods store in Florida and at the farm.

All of their products remain in Florida. As an industry that straddles the line between agriculture and tourism, the working farm is open to the public and many schoolchildren in Sarasota and Manatee counties take field trips to the farm. A small market with an inviting front porch sells Dakin milk and picnic food as well as a variety of items that interest children. Birthday parties, hayrides, educational tours of the facility, Strider bikes, and seasonal corn mazes make this an agri-tourism stop for local residents and tourists. Shaded picnic tables with swings and slides invite visitors and schoolchildren to eat their lunch or just enjoy a quiet day in the country.

Karen’s focus this year is on community outreach to learn about surrounding counties, connect with who’s who in sustainable natural resources, and collaborate with restaurants and the hotel industry. She is deeply committed to preserving the land and everything that encourages sustainable living. Last fall she participated in a sustainable tourism meeting sponsored by the USF Patel College of Global Sustainability. The goals were to provide input to the United Nations on world tourism, sustainable consumption and production, and sustainable development. Karen was invited to participate due to her expertise and continued dedication to sustainable agriculture and tourism.

Born to an OB/GYN physician father from the Dominican Republic and a mother who was the daughter of Russian immigrants, Karen was raised in Arlington, Virginia. Her daughter, Alexandra, and two granddaughters live in Florida and her two sisters live in Virginia. She and Jerry are attentive to both sides of the family. Her leisure activities include fishing, snow skiing, camping, and traveling with trips to Alaska and Italy.

With farms and ranches that have been in families for generations continuing to be sold for residential and commercial developments, Karen and her husband are true to their mission of employing environmentally sustainable practices and processes, supplying nutrient-rich nourishment to their herd, and producing fresh milk products on a family-owned farm in Manatee County. ♻️

Story: Carol Darling
Photo: Evelyn England