

MONTGOMERY FARMS

Love of the Land

Getting to Know the Family Behind Jamison Ag & Turf



VIEW OF JAMISON FIELDS IN DICKERSON, MD

Head down a winding gravel road off Rt. 28 and you'll find the main operations for Jamison Ag and Turf, a crop and turf farm in Poolesville. While it may not meet the quintessential idea of a farm, with animals, a red barn, or a farmhouse, Jamison Ag and Turf is every bit a family farm with traditional roots and a modern outlook on the future.

The Jamison family includes Jamie Jamison, his wife Kathy, and their three sons, Joe, Pat, and Mike. Jamie grew up on a neighboring tract of land, and farming has been in the family for the last three generations. After serving in Vietnam, Jamie returned to Maryland to farm in Poolesville. He decided to diversify from his father's Holstein operation and grow row crops such as wheat, which was a very profitable crop in the 1970s. Over time, Jamie's farm continued in his family's farming tradition as the three Jamison sons joined their parents in managing the operation.

Each member of the family fulfills a role, but Kathy is the matriarch of the farm. "She's the backbone of the company. She runs all the books and she does all the

"Agriculture is very important and using sound science is very important."

-Mike Jamison

administrative paperwork," said Mike. "Everyone down at the Farm Service Agency knows Mom because she's always on the phone with them."

All three of the Jamison sons have been fortunate enough to return to work the family farm – a tradition that too many farm families have not been able to continue. For some, the next generation chooses a different profession; yet for others, the children or grandchildren who want to continue farming are prevented from doing so because of economic or real estate barriers.

The Jamison family overcame these hurdles in part by leaving the farm to go to college. Joe, the eldest, earned a degree in agribusiness from the University of Maryland; Pat went to East Carolina University and earned a

degree in finance; and Mike also attended East Carolina to earn a business degree. These experiences brought different expertise and interests back to the family farm.

One key component of the farm's success over the years is the Jamison family's bond. "My parents have always instilled a very close relationship with family," says Mike. "I work with my two brothers and I can say we work very well together. There are definitely times when we butt heads, but we always try to voice that concern . . . and make it work."

It takes more than family resilience to farm successfully for so long, however. Mike says that being progressive and maintaining a belief in caring for the land sustainably are the other key factors in their success. "What has kept it successful is being progressive and now I look at my father, [who] was always working with not just himself but other leaders in the County, people like Bob Raver and the Extension agents and so forth, looking at different ways to produce the crop." Mike described the need for an economy of scale in many aspects of agriculture to be profitable, but also farming as a way of life. "I think that it's just

that culture of not every year's going to be great, but you have to persevere through the rough times."

Farming has changed in dramatic ways even over the last fifty years. The farm now uses techniques that collectively are called precision agriculture, and the Jamisons emphasize sustainability in



THE JAMISON FAMILY ON THE FARM



MIKE WITH THE FARM'S DOGS

their farming practices. The family takes pride in being able to maintain the land's health, and as Mike points out, conservation practices are a benefit to the operation as well by enabling them to produce more without harming the land and natural resources. When asked how they produce more product with fewer inputs and save more money, but do it in a much more conservation-based mindset, Mike says, "It's basically using technologies to produce more with less."

Precision agriculture is a type of farming that uses technology to monitor soil health, improve crop health and yields, and make data collection more efficient. Technologies such as GPS and GIS (Geographic Information System) are used by farmers to more effectively plant fields, monitor field conditions, and monitor crop health and yields. By utilizing technology in this way, the farmer can use resources more efficiently, thereby using less in order to get the same or better crop yield.

In many ways, precision agriculture has made farmers' lives easier. But transitioning to using the new technology takes time and

the wait can add unforeseen complications. Mike and his brothers have driven tractors for many years, in varying states of upgraded technology, and driving a tractor all day can take a toll both mentally and physically. Not long ago, Pat became an example of the physical toll farming takes on the body when he had to undergo major back surgery. "I think some people get the mindset, 'Oh, well, you're in the tractor all day, you're just sitting down.' [But] the doctor said beating and bouncing in those tractors all those years is one of the things that's done it."

Tractors are now equipped with GPS and other technologies that make it easier to auto-steer, which leads to improved planting and less overall fatigue on the driver. Mike notes how GPS being used to help guide the tractor has actually improved their operations: "The tractor will steer itself, we're not overlapping as much, therefore we're not wasting as much seed, we're not wasting as much fuel ... that's less wear and tear on your equipment because you're making fewer passes. It's better for the employees. They like it because there's less user fatigue." In the future, perhaps technology will be able to address the physical strain on the body as well.

Not only has the combination of farming and technology created improvements for the farmers themselves, it has also opened up an entirely new job field, particularly in the last decade. Mike describes conversations he has had with software writers in California, and how computer scientists are learning to appreciate the science and unique challenges of agriculture to improve their products and make them more useful. "It's kind of neat," Mike says. "People that have never been on a farm before, doing work to make agriculture more profitable."

Technology addresses not only how farmers operate, but how they can use less land to produce more. According to information from the UN's [Food and Agriculture Organization \(FAO\)](#), 29% of the globe is land surface, but only about 11% of the world's land area is used for crop production. That's a very small portion of the globe that can be utilized for food production, and arable land is being lost daily to development, erosion, and pollution, among other factors.

A favorite example of Mike's is a demonstration called the apple metaphor:

"This apple represents the world . . . You're going to cut the apple into 4 sections."



"Out of all that world to grow crops on . . . that's water. Automatically, you take away that 75% there."



"So then you're left with this one-fourth that's left here. Well, this is

the land of the world that you have to grow crops on.”

Mike turns his attention to the



quarter slice of apple and continues to slice it into smaller and smaller sections, discarding pieces as he describes being unable to grow food in deserts, on mountains, in very cold areas like Antarctica, in marshes, and other such places. When he's finished, he holds up a tiny sliver of apple.

“And if you take the peel right here, this is the topsoil of the world. So in this topsoil, this is what you have to produce to feed the entire



“It’s got to be in your heart if you’re going to want to do this.”

-Mike Jamison

world.”

This is where sustainability, conservation practices, and technologies utilized in precision ag play a crucial role. Mike explains that technology plays a vital role in developing new hybrid crops that can withstand adverse conditions and climate change, and how technologies are advancing to track trends in local weather patterns that affect a farmer’s ability to grow crops. “Agriculture is very important and using sound science is very important.”

The Agricultural Reserve, which stretches roughly from Laytonsville to Poolesville and spans the entire northern border of Montgomery County, encompasses 93,000 acres of conserved land. This Reserve is a key component in helping the County’s 500-plus agricultural operations thrive.

Mike sees the Ag Reserve as a key element in what makes the County not only a farming county, but a viable and exceptional place to live and work. “It’s very unique that you have over a million people in a county but ... you have land that you can use to produce food to feed local areas ... you don’t have to rely on shipping in from different states. You’re self-sufficient. It’s great for the economy as well. If you did away with all of those farms, you’d be just another metropolis in the area that isn’t unique.”

While development in the County tends to be hotly debated, there are many residents who are of the

opinion that maintaining the farming industry and open spaces are crucial for the County’s economy, culture, and tourism. In addition, Mike points out that once farmland is developed, it typically doesn’t return to viable farmland or even open space later on.

As for helping farmers thrive, and especially assisting newer and younger farmers who express an interest in beginning farms in the County, high barriers of entry and economic struggle are two of the biggest hurdles Mike sees. “I think there’s got to be assistance with the price of real estate. How can you cash flow the purchase of a piece of property and farm it simultaneously? And how are their hands tied with regulations once they are able to operate this farm? How do you stay competitive with other areas of the country, or the region?”

Like many farmers in the Montgomery County area, Mike feels farming is about love of the land and conserving resources as much as possible. “If you’re in it just for the money, then it’s not for you ... A lot of risk is involved and there isn’t always a guarantee that you’re going to make money that year, and so it’s got to be a leap of faith, so to speak ... It’s got to be in your heart if you’re going to want to do this.”

Find out more about Jamison Ag and Turf at their website, www.jamisonagandturf.com.

You can also connect with the Jamisons at their Facebook page: www.facebook.com/jamisonagandturf

