

OUR TOWNS

Gayville
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Valley Ag: A Big Idea Grown From Seed

USD Alums Turn 'Ambitious' Idea Into Thriving Gayville Business

BY LORETTA SORENSEN
P&D Correspondent

GAYVILLE — Ten years ago, Greg and Tara Pirak had ambitious business aspirations. They have since turned those dreams into a rewarding reality with Valley Ag Supply, the spraying and fertilizer business they established in Gayville in 2000.

It's not surprising that the two met as students at the University of South Dakota business school. Shortly after becoming acquainted, Greg expressed his desire to develop the business.

"I thought it was a good idea," Tara said. "I grew up on a farm near Akron (Iowa) and I like working with farmers. The fact that I thought Greg was cute didn't hurt either."

In 1999, while Tara completed her degree, she and Greg began developing business details.

"We bring opposite strengths to the table," Tara said. "Greg is really good at strategic planning and looking at what needs to be done over the next five years. I'm skilled at day-to-day details. He began working on purchasing a sprayer, truck and trailer. I developed a customer and product list. By January 2000, our business was officially recognized by the state of South Dakota."

Valley Ag Supply was initially housed in a Vermillion building and had additional partners. Greg located a 1962 International truck a farmer had converted from an Elk Point fire truck into a flatbed to haul a water tank. He also found a three-year-old sprayer in Indiana as he was returning from Christmas vacation with his family near Cleveland.

"It cost about as much as a small house, and we had five years to pay for it," he said. "At that point, we hadn't done a dollar's worth of business yet." Within a few months of launching their business, Greg and Tara bought out their colleagues.

"We weren't married at the time; we were just dating," Greg said.

"To begin with, I sprayed and Tara drove the truck. She was finishing her degree and also studied to obtain a CDL so she could drive the truck."

In the autumn of 2000, Greg and Tara jointly purchased a building in Gayville that they remodeled to house their business.

"We worked all through the winter to refurbish the building," Tara said. "My parents helped with the project. By Valentine's Day 2001, Greg proposed to me and we married that September. In March 2001 we had our grand opening in

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GREG PIRAK

Gayville."

Now the Piraks and their three sons reside in Gayville, and both Greg and Tara say they're pleased to be located in the rural community. They've found "outstanding" employees, as many as 25 in summer months, who play a large role in their success.

"Ron and Bob Madsen also work out of our shed and run their own sprayers," Greg said. "We have two of our own sprayers and several agronomists who work with customers to develop crop plans. We're also working on planter units so they're ready for spring and are very accurate."

Soil samples obtained each fall help Valley Ag Supply staff determine a farmer's needs for weed and pest control, and fertilizer application. Greg said they're sensitive to the monetary and environmental costs associated with application of their products.

"Once snow cover is gone, we deliver seed and start fertilizing," Greg said. "As planters hit the fields, we're extremely busy, working ahead of them to fertilize and then behind them to overlay chemicals and nitrogen after they plant. Throughout the summer, our agronomists constantly scout fields to see if there's bug pressure or anything that looks unusual. Their work allows us to help farmers plan what comes next."

Tara notes that one of Valley Ag Supply's underlying principles for success has been commitment to seeing that customers have what they need and that it's used efficiently and effectively.

"We want our customers to be profitable," she said. "We work hard to partner with them in what they're doing so they get the best value out of the products they're using. We're also very careful to use sound environmental practices."

In order to quickly respond to changing weather conditions, Valley Ag Supply maintains three truck drivers year-round so they can get equipment into fields on short notice.

The Piraks also point to local



PHOTO: LORETTA SORENSEN
The owners of Gayville's Valley Ag Supply credit their employees for much of their success. At the height of the growing season, the company employs as many as 25 people in order to serve the needs of area farmers. Pictured are owners Tara and Greg Pirak (center) and (left to right) Laura Lane, Daryl Nystrup, Lanie Lemberg, Alan Richelieu, Scott Staum, Doug Severson, Joey Hanson, Cory Wiegner and Cathy Nelson.

changes in their industry that opened the door for them to address some underserved areas.

"In the beginning, there were people who were willing to give us their business," Tara said. "We will always make sure those original customers are well served. Many have been like family to us. We've continued to re-invest in our infrastructure. Every year, we think we're going into the season over-equipped, but when people call, we're able to take care of their needs."

Since they brought their business to Gayville, the Piraks have added a fertilizer plant in the rear of their building. They also constructed a seed warehouse just outside the town.

"It seems like every time we expanded, we felt we risked quite a bit," Greg said. "Once that change proved to be successful, we stepped out a little further. That's the process we've continued to use to move forward. Our latest expansion is adding some office space to our building."

Looking down the road, Greg said that his "bad habit of eating" will keep the couple engaged in promoting and building their business.

"In a tough economy, farmers may pull back on the amount of inputs they spend on their crop," Greg said. "But the crops will be planted. From what we hear, ethanol seems to be here to stay. Some people get frustrated with using crops for fuel, but before tractors replaced horses, livestock consumed a major portion of the crops. I believe, over the long term, agriculture will be pretty stable. There's new mouths to feed every day, and more fuel and fiber needs."

The Piraks also believe they have a valuable service to offer farmers who see more technological changes every season.

"Growers need businesses like ours so they can do what they're good at — farming — instead of trying to learn everything about seed and crop inputs," she said. "They know we have the knowledge to help. That allows them to work on their combine or tractor and call on us for seed fertility and crop protection."

FAIRVIEW TOWNSHIP

Annual Meeting
& Election

Tuesday, March 2, 2010
7 p.m. at Burbank School

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Cracker Barrel
Sessions

Saturday, Feb. 20th

10 a.m.-Noon at the Vermillion Public Library

Saturday, March 6th

10 a.m.-Noon at the Vermillion Fire Hall Station
Conference Room

The VCDC, VFW Auxiliary, Delta Kappa Gamma,
Clay County Democrats and the Clay County
Republicans are sponsoring these events.

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The Vermillion Area Community Foundation wants to thank those members and businesses of the community who so generously contributed \$27,315 to our endowment during 2009.

We publish their names in recognition of their generosity. These funds will increase our income for community projects starting in 2011.

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The Vermillion Area Community Foundation is accepting proposals for projects to improve our community. Forms for submitting proposals by groups or organizations are available at the Chamber of Commerce office.

While funds available are limited, we can fully fund small one-time requests, or partially fund larger projects.

Your annual donations to our Foundation will provide us with increasing funds each year for worthwhile projects.

The Vermillion Area Community Foundation Annual Meeting will be held at 4 p.m., Wednesday, March 10, 2010 at the public library. The public is invited to attend.