

Operating a dairy is one of the most demanding jobs in the world. Cows must be milked twice a day, every day, year round.

Each cow has one calf per year and milks for 10 months. Then she needs a two-month break before bearing another calf and starting the process over. A typical dairy farmer can expect to have calves throughout the year.

There is no such thing as a day off. And vacation time? That's hard to come by.

Unless, of course, you are Jerry and Amy Geisler.

## Dairy genius

by Kathleen M. Basi

Jerry and Amy grew up on dairy farms only a few miles away from each other in northern Wisconsin. In the spring of 1988, when they decided to get married they went to a premarital seminar, which is where they first heard about NFP.

"It clicked for us right away," Jerry said, "because we had been doing that all our life with cows." In a dairy herd, cows are impregnated via artificial insemination. Because the farmers control the process, they have to keep track of their cows' cycles — including monitoring mucus that would look very familiar to women who use NFP.

Jerry and Amy had been married for a decade before it occurred to them they could use their NFP knowledge to give themselves some time off. "We were coming back from a party — we'd had to leave early because we had to get home to milk. We said, 'What are we going home for? We're missing the party!' And it occurred to us: 'Why don't we breed the cows so they all calve at the same time?'"

That year the Geislars waited until Thanksgiving Day to start breeding and they bred the herd at the same time. That meant that the cows all went into their rest period during July and August the following year in preparation for fall calving.

And just like that, the Geisler family had six to eight weeks off milking.

It's not exactly a vacation; they still

have to put up the crops. But the break from milking frees them to travel with their five children, have leisurely breakfasts by the campfire, or do projects that wouldn't get done otherwise.

Of course, like humans, not all cows get pregnant on schedule. "They may not

can have eight to 10 cows showing signs of fertility in one day. I have to take a piece of paper out to keep track of them all."

But Jerry thinks finances are the real obstacle. "When we quit milking cows, we don't get a paycheck for six to eight weeks. I think the biggest holdback for a lot of farmers is they can't make it without that check



ovulate, I may not get them bred at the right time, or it may be bad semen," said Jerry. "But in our herd, we have a really good conception rate."

Synchronizing the herd is possible because Jerry does his own insemination, without having to depend on an artificial insemination technician's schedule. "I will breed early morning, late at night — I watch them. I know when they need to be bred."

Jerry keeps trying until the window closes for a September or October delivery. Any cow that does not calve in September or October gets sold to another farmer.

It sounds terrific.

So why doesn't everyone do it?

First, because the time off comes at a price. "Fall is very intense," Amy said, "with canning and getting going with schooling and getting the harvest in, on top of calving."

Jerry puts it this way: "We can have five to eight cows calve the same day. Sometimes I will get up several times in the night to check on the cows. We can't afford to lose one. And when I start inseminating, we

coming in. In the wintertime when the cows are milking good, we put away a couple checks to make it through that dry time."

Sound familiar? Times of feasting, times of abstinence?

For the Geislars, marrying NFP to their vocation as farmers has been a rich blessing. "We have a lot more fun, more time for the kids," Jerry said. "We're really busy in the fall and early winter, and then everything levels out. It's hard work for a short time but not forever."

Perhaps the greatest blessing is the chance to show their five children, all homeschooled, how faith and work can be intertwined. "Even the 6-year-old knows what clear mucus means," Jerry said with a laugh. "Many of our nieces and nephews have learned about the natural rhythms of life here on the farm."

Everyone has their job. "The girls take care of the calves, the oldest son does all the feeding," Amy noted. "They're learning about life."