

President's Letter
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I recently had the opportunity to attend my 50th high school reunion in northeast Ohio. Out of a class of 100 graduates, only 35 were able to make it there. They came from states from all corners of the country, including Hawaii, California, Florida, and Minnesota.

We lamented the losses of our classmates who went to Vietnam and never returned, as well as those who were forced to fight in that ill-fated war and who died way too young after coming home. Two of my good friends died of cancer at early ages after returning from battle. Fifty years later, I still cannot come up with a good reason for the U.S. having lost over 50,000 of our young men and women in Vietnam. To many baby boomers, the draft is a reminder that individual citizens have very little control over anything the government does. Having a very low draft number, I remember the fear in my heart over possibly being forced to fight in a war that I could not support. Remembering our fallen classmates, we were reminded of the fact that it takes many years and many concerned and vocal citizens to change the course of history and to reign in an overly aggressive chief executive who does not want to look “weak” in the eyes of others. Today’s Middle East battles look an awful lot like what we remembered from the Vietnam era.

We remembered others who were no longer with us. Various tragedies such as car or plane crashes had claimed the lives of a few of our friends. Those who were in attendance that night couldn’t help but comment about the actions “Father Time” had executed on our bodies; however, one of our classmates was a construction company owner and he actually looked like he did when he wrestled in high school. He finally admitted to doing hundreds of pushups daily just to get ready to go to work and to climbing rocks just for fun. He was a great example of the benefits of staying active.

Some of the more memorable conversations of the evening focused on our respective career choices and how we made our livings. Among the group was a retired postal worker, a NASA Hubble Telescope photographer, a couple of automotive geniuses, high school teachers, truck drivers, two travel agents, a legal assistant, and a Ford Motors executive. One of our old classmates had been a banker for years, working in his family-owned small bank, but the financial collapse in 2008 and 2009 and the resulting turmoil and regulatory nightmare had caused him to change careers.

One of my best friends from high school was a recently retired scientist who told of touring the Ohio River Valley in his huge motor home. He was hitting the reunion on his way home from the trip. He was a diehard believer in “global warming” and all the associated climate disasters. I knew that it would not do any good to comment on his personal transport vehicle spewing large amounts of “emissions,” especially after he had a few beers.

People asked me about my being a veterinarian and what kinds of animals I worked on before I had “retired.” When I replied that I am still working and that my family owns and operates a dairy farm near Roswell, New Mexico, the usual questions followed, such as inquiries about how many cows we milk and about the 1947 UFO crash. Many of my classmates asked about whether our dairy was organic, GMO-free, and gluten-free. Since none of my former classmates had any agriculture or dairy background, I tried to dig deeper into the concerns of what I would call very well educated, sophisticated consumers. The common perception is that all cows are on antibiotics all of the time. As I described the operation of a modern dairy and the hospital protocols for treating sick cows and antibiotic withdrawal times that had to be followed before any treated cow could be put back into production, many of my friends were very surprised. They could not believe that in an organic dairy, if a cow gets sick and needs to be treated she had to be either sold or beefed because she would no longer be fit to be classified as an “organic” cow. Many of the people I talked to were amazed at the fact that NO milk could ever be sold in this country if it contained any antibiotics at all.

I described some of the dilemmas for dairy farmers that are inherent within the milk marketing system and the price setting that goes on in our industry. When the topic of advertising of dairy products came up, I spoke of the “circular firing squad” description as it applies to individual marketing groups trying to distinguish their product as being superior to others of equal quality produced in the same manner. Some of the claims used in advertisements, such as, “Our milk has no hormones or antibiotics,” infer that other milk products DO have these undesirable additives. This tactic ultimately serves to decrease the total demand for dairy products and all producers lose in the end.

Many of my former classmates thought that if a dairy farm was very large, it was automatically considered to be a “large factory farm.” They were quite surprised that we, as dairy families, have a deep and unshakeable commitment to producing healthy, wholesome, nutritious milk and that we take extra effort to be sure our animals are properly cared for. They were interested to learn that many of our cows have strong individual personalities and that we know many of them by their distinctive behavior patterns, as well as by their totally unique and beautiful black and white markings.

I realized that few people understand what dairy farmers do or how we do it. What I learned from this diverse group of former classmates from all over the country is that perception is everything, especially when people are trying to make healthy choices for feeding their families. I learned that dairy producers, acting as individuals and through our combined efforts in the form of Dairy Max and Co-op marketing initiatives, need to make even more of an effort to educate consumers and to market the nutritional advantages of our products.