

REX AND KERRY WILLIAMS ARE SONOMA COUNTY FAIR'S RANCHERS OF THE YEAR

Story by Tim Tesconi ~ Photo by Susan Johnson Photography

Rex and Kerry Williams, the Sonoma County Fair's top ranchers for 2008, are proving that you don't have to marry or inherit a farm to be ranchers.

But the Williams, who run 300 head of ewes on leased land, also are proving it takes passion, hard work and sheer determination to be ranchers in Sonoma County, particularly, when you start from scratch with no land or livestock. It's a sacrifice many people would not make. For Rex and Kerry, first generation Sonoma County ranchers who live in Sebastopol, the long hours and hard work are the price for the rural life they are carving for themselves and children, Wyatt, 13, and Olivia, 5.

"If we didn't absolutely love what we do it would be stupid because of the hours we spend doing this," said Rex, 42, who works full time as the maintenance supervisor at St. Francis Winery. Rex likes to say his day job helps support his ranching habit.

"I leave after an eight hour shift at the winery, go home and start another eight hour shift with the sheep. But if you love what you do, it's not work."

Kerry is just as passionate. She has given up her full-time job to build the family's livestock business, developing direct markets for Williams Ranches Lamb. She prefers herding sheep to the stress of managing budgets and employees in an office environment.

"For me, ranching is who I am," said Kerry, formerly the executive director of the Sotoyome Resource Conservation District. "I am the happiest and most fulfilled when I am on the land and working with the livestock."

She has no regrets about giving up her office job, even when lambing in the freezing cold or bagging wool in the summer heat. She finds it rewarding to produce high-quality lamb that is gilding Sonoma County's reputation as California's premier wine and food region.

"The worst day on the ranch is still better than sitting at a desk in the office," said Kerry, who runs the family's day-to-day sheep operation while Rex holds down his day job at the winery. She moves between leased ranches in Sebastopol and the Laguna de Santa Rosa on Llano Road to tend the 300 ewes. The Williams have a commercial flock of Dorsets and also raise purebred Dorset and Southdown sheep, which they show at fairs.

Guard dogs watch over the flock, fending off predators. The Williams' herding dogs help round up the sheep. Except for their dogs and part-time help from a high school agriculture student, the Williams do all of the work themselves.

It's Rex and Kerry's dream to one day become full-time ranchers in Sonoma County and they are diligently working towards that lofty goal. They said they will have to double their ewe flock to 600 head to make it financially feasible.

The Williams' dedication to agriculture and their leadership on the county's farm front captured the attention of the Sonoma County Fair, which named Rex and Kerry the Outstanding North Bay Ranchers for 2008. The Williams Family will be honored at the Sonoma County Fair's Farmers Day program on Saturday, July 26 in the Chris Beck Arena. The fair runs July 22 through Aug. 4.

"Ranchers like the Williams Family are maintaining the agricultural heritage of Sonoma County and the county fair," said the fair's board of directors in naming Rex and Kerry the county's top ranchers.

Rex and Kerry said the award means a lot to them because they are committed to being livestock ranchers in Sonoma County.

But in many ways, Rex and Kerry Williams of Sebastopol epitomize the modern American farm family, hard-working people dedicated to family, land, livestock and community. They are not adverse to leasing land. They are more sensitive to environmental issues than previous generations of ranchers and they embrace marketing as a way to enhance the

operation.

Rex and Kerry are starting to market their lamb to select retail stores and this month the Williams Ranch Lamb will be in the meat counter at Skyhawk Village Market, the upscale Santa Rosa food emporium owned by Mike Runyan.

The Williams sell many of their lambs directly to consumers, eliminating the middleman so they can earn more money on each lamb going out the ranch gate. The Williams say developing and maintaining a marketing network requires more work but it's a way to enhance their profits so they can financially survive as livestock ranchers in Sonoma County.

"We live in an area where people really appreciate good food and want to be involved in how their food is produced and where it comes from. They support locally grown products. We look at the Bay Area's unique commitment to quality food as an opportunity," said Kerry. She has developed a website, www.williamsranches.com to reach consumers and tell the family's story.

Kerry said her biggest reward is hearing from satisfied consumers. "It just makes my day when someone calls to say our lamb was the best lamb they have ever tasted," said Kerry.

The Williams are always looking for the next opportunity and market niche to expand their business. They are seriously considering establishing a sheep dairy to produce sheep milk cheese, which is in high demand. Kerry said if the plan moves forward they will breed a line of milking sheep and lease an old cow dairy to convert to a milk barn for sheep.

For now, Rex and Kerry are increasing their flock, expanding their markets and finding more land to graze. The Williams are what might be called grazers. They provide grazing services for privately owned wetland mitigation banks, a Santa Rosa wildlife preserve and along the grassy levies of the City of Santa Rosa's waste water storage ponds.

It would seem Rex and Kerry would have little time for anything else but they are active in the community, fairs and agricultural organizations. Both children are actively involved in 4-H, exhibiting sheep, meat goats and rabbits.

The Williams family is a respected fixture at fairs, livestock shows and other events where the ranching community gathers. Rex is a veteran auctioneer who has provided his services as an auctioneer at the Sonoma County Fair Jr. Livestock auctions for 20 years as well as other 4-H and FFA events across the county.

Rex and Kerry are both 4-H leaders and members of the Sonoma County Purebred Sheep Breeders Associations, California Wool Growers Association and Sonoma County Farm Bureau.

Rex and Kerry said they are proud to be part of Sonoma County agriculture and plan to be ranching for the long haul. And beyond, said Rex.

"In heaven I will be herding sheep and baling hay," said Rex.



The Williams Family, Wyatt, Rex, Olivia and Kerry with their sheep

"When I was an itty, bitty kid watching the awards presentation to the Outstanding Rancher at the Sonoma County Fair, I said

value of their Williams Ranch Lamb, which is sold throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. Their logo is "From Our Pastures to Your

"When I was an itty, bitty kid watching the awards presentation to the Outstanding Rancher at the Sonoma County Fair, I said to myself someday that will be me," said Rex.

to myself someday that will be me," said Rex. "But I knew winning that award was like flying to the moon. When you look at the ranchers who have won the award before us, the list represents families who have been farming for generations on family land."

Table."

Rex and Kerry lease a house, land and barns from Phebe Sorensen, who with her late husband John once operated a Christmas tree farm on the property. The Sorensen Ranch is the base for the Williams' livestock