

Community Profile

President of local Ag federation applies life lessons to farming cause

BY SARAH FISHER

Don't mistake Julien Papineau's slight voice for lack of character. He is soft-spoken, but the 34-year-old president of the Essex County Federation of Agriculture is firmly committed to his cause.

Papineau represents 1,500 members of the federation, many of whom are struggling to maintain their farms at a time when the cost of producing grain and oilseed crops is more than their expected payment per bushel.

Papineau's cell phone gives the details. A text of information from the Chicago Board of Trade shows Essex County farmers are losing on average \$1.42 a bushel on corn, \$2.51 per bushel for soybeans and \$.47 a bushel for next year's wheat yield. Some farmers will have to "get out," he said.

"We're fighting for emergency aid," Papineau said at Tim Hortons in Belle River Sept. 29. "We don't have a long-term (government subsidy) program in place, so we need another bail-out."

The ECFA has lobbied for several government bail-outs as well as a subsidy program similar to that of the U.S. and Quebec that guarantees farmers a flat rate for their grain and oil seed crops. Without that protection local farmers have suffered because of easy access to cheaper American grown crops like corn.

As ECFA President, Papineau has represented the farmers' cause in Ottawa as well as to provincial legislators, but he didn't always take such a public role in farming. When he graduated from the University of Windsor with a degree in business administration in 1998, his brother Robert

was the primary farmer in the family. Papineau was working part-time at the co-op in Stoney Point and finishing his degree while Robert and their father Victor farmed the family's property, including their homestead on West Belle River Road. In April 1999, Robert, 33, died of acute pro-myelocytic leukemia, a malignancy of the bone marrow.

"He was doing his first set of chemo when he went into a coma and died," Papineau said. "He had 80 percent odds of surviving beyond a year so it was kind of a shocker. ... I wish it had been different and we could have farmed together."

When Robert died Papineau took on a new role. He and his brother Gerald and sister Gisèle had always helped on the farm, but he was now the primary farmer. He bought Robert's equipment from his estate and went to work while continuing his co-op job. It wasn't a decision he thought about twice.

"It wasn't something that needed a lot of thought, and my wife was supportive of that," he said.

The loss was an upheaval for the family. Robert was the best man at Papineau's wedding in 1992 where he met his future wife, Christa, the maid of honour.



Julien Papineau, the Essex County Federation of Agriculture president, stands on the steps of a combine outside his father's barn on West Belle River Road. The homestead, where Papineau grew up, is the centre for his farming operation that includes 1,000 acres of corn, wheat and soybeans.

Tragedy happens to many people, Papineau said, but he has found the lesson it teaches is especially poignant for farmers. Your expectations and the path your life takes may be totally different, he said.

Papineau would like to continue farming in Essex County. Unlike most ECFA members, he has another option available to him. His wife Shannon's status as a dual citizen would allow the family to move their farming centre to the U.S. He could grow the same crops he plants on the 1,000 acres he farms now and live close enough to visit his parents

and siblings on a regular basis. He's considered it, but not seriously.

"I think about that and how things would be like over there, but this is where my roots are," he said. "This is where the Papineau family has farmed for over 120 years."

Anne Anger, the ECFA's secretary, said Papineau is effective as the group's president because he is also a farmer.

"I think they respect his opinion," Anger said about the membership. "With the economic situation farmers are in they do look to him for guidance. ... He

can empathize with farmers. The fact that he is also a farmer gives what he says more weight."

In his off time Papineau is committed to spending time with his family, including his four children James, 13, Alisha, 12, Amelia, 10 and Anna, 7. He has continued his work as a certified crop adviser, one of his off-season jobs. While he juggles his work commitments, he makes a point of being home as much as possible, and not working on Sundays.

"The experience of losing my brother has taught me to appreciate our time together," he said.



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