

Family of the Year

Families of John, Joe, and Mark Schwartz.

Humble beginnings have led to humbling success for the families of John and Rosie Schwartz, Joe and Judy Schwartz, and Mark and Anita Schwartz. Together, these brothers and their families have built a family business based on their shared core values of integrity, respect, excellence, innovation and adaptability.

John, Joe, and Mark, along with their siblings, grew up on their parent's, Jim and Irene Schwartz, dairy farm near Sleepy Eye. Schwartz Farms originated in 1978 when they started crop farming.

"We were raised on a dairy farm and started crop farming with dad, sharing machinery," John said. "Then we started farming on our own and eventually started raising pigs."

"We started out buying a few feeder pigs. The first pigs we bought was when we overran the grain bin and had to feed up the corn that was spilled," Joe remembered. "We fed pigs on outside lots. The first barn we built was for grain storage, but we converted it to house hogs. We really thought we had something back then!"

John and Joe continued to purchase feeder pigs throughout the 80's. They first started working with a contract farrowing farm in 1992. As time went on, it became obvious to the Schwartz family the industry was changing and they needed to pursue other avenues for supplying pigs.

"In the late 90's we took ownership of our first sow farm. We tried to gradually expand that way, supplying the packers with what they wanted," said John. "In the meantime, we brought on some very talented employees, and some are still with us today. They helped us get where we are. It was really a team effort, employees and contractors, all of us together."

"1998 was a big change in that we acquired a 5,000 head sow farm. Prior to that, we only had 5,000 sows under contract production, so it doubled us," Mark said. "That was a big undertaking at the time."

While growing opportunities were being pursued by the Schwartz brothers, they were also implementing new practices on their farm.

"In 1996, we started working wean-to-finish," John said. "We were probably one of the first farms in the state that went away from the standard nursery-to-finish model. That gave us a lot more flexibility, streamlined things and opened up more opportunities."

In the early 2000's the Schwartz family acquired a farm in South Dakota and continued growing with that model. In 2015, they gained ownership of sow farms in Nebraska, expanding their farm to reach across four states. Throughout the farms' growth, team members and independent farm families continued to be key to Schwartz Farms' success.

"We're at approximately 350 full-time employees and over 250 independent contractors. We owe it all to them," John says. "It's a risky business. You can't do it without good people."

As the farm grew, so did the need for more team members.

"I remember telling Sheila, our HR director, when I hired her, 'You'll never get in trouble for making a good and honest mistake,' and that's what we've tried to do with all of our employees," John said.

John demonstrated the motto, "Reward excellent mistakes, not mediocre successes," with the belief that good people make good mistakes.

"You have to try and lead by example," John said. "If they're not making mistakes, they probably are not trying enough things to get better. We try to treat everyone like family."

"We try to make sure we are understanding of the people doing the job every day," Joe said.

"It's not easy work. It's physical work for many parts of the jobs in the barn. Knowing that and also having done it ourselves, we communicate and respect the dignity of the worker," Mark said.

"You're almost humbled by the fact employees are as excited as they are to get up and do what they do," John added. "Treat them right and they'll do good work for you."

That mentality has led to a business culture that embraces team members, their families, and the communities where they live and work. The Schwartz family has been deliberate about having a presence in the community, being active in pork organizations, and supporting schools and programs like 4-H and the National FFA Organization.

"Some of the 4-H and FFA members have parents that work for us or contract grow for us and it's important to support them. They could lead to the next generation of contractors or employees," Mark said. "We put together a scholarship program for kids that work for us part-time in the summers for a certain amount of hours and they receive a scholarship at a trade school or a university. It's been very popular."

"It goes to our mission statement. We want to raise quality pork while creating opportunities in rural communities," John said.

Schwartz Farms as a whole has been involved in numerous tours and volunteering opportunities working to connect consumers and influencers with pig farms and pork. Groups of social influencers, grocery retailers, and even religious leaders have seen behind the barn door and are now able to put a face with pig farming.

"A lot of times, the people who visit have only seen, read, or heard about one side of the industry, and it wasn't ours," Joe said.

Mark added, "It's been a good experience for everyone involved. They get to hear our story and get first-hand experience."

While hosting people who are unfamiliar with pork production comes with some uncertainty, the Schwartz brothers have found value in sharing their farm with others.

"It's just a matter of saying, 'We're proud of what we are doing and we enjoy it. Come see it,'" John said.

The brothers are grateful for organizations like the Pork Checkoff and voluntary checkoff that provide resources and unite and support advocacy efforts for Minnesota's pig farmers.

As the family farm has grown, each brother has taken their own role within the family business.

John serves as president and CEO of Schwartz Farms. Joe is the crop production manager and oversees the cattle operations. Mark is the director of production systems, with special care and emphasis on farrowing.

The next Schwartz generation is making its way back to the farm as well. John's son, Dan, serves as corporate counsel, while Joe's sons, Brian and Tim, specialize in finishing and farrowing, respectively.

While John, Joe and Mark are happy to welcome the second generation back to the farm, they found a lot of value in the second generation working off the farm before returning.

"It's just a maturation process," Mark said. "It's good for them to see what else is out there and network with people from those jobs, and we benefit when they bring those things back to the business."

John added, "There is so little to lose and so much to gain by working for a different employer. You can definitely pick up some ideas on management styles and culture of companies, and prove that you are qualified and can have an impact for the company, not just to us but the employees, too."

On what it means to have a second generation interested in returning, Mark said, "I think it's a sign of a healthy, vibrant business. If they didn't want to come back, that might indicate they didn't see a future."

The Schwartz brothers have built themselves a business that started from humble beginnings but has become a prominent enterprise in the pork industry, making them deserving of this year's Family of the Year Recognition.

"We're honored, proud, and humbled. There's a lot of people who deserve this award," John said.

"We're proud of our family and everything they've done, but the employees and the contractors made it possible."