



Top Notch Calves' Jonathan and Joanne Leigh (top). New Equity partners Karin Scott and Chris Horan, with daughters Sienna and Esmae.

New equity partners

Virginia Wright

It was in 2003 that Joanne and Jonathan Leigh turned their love of calf-rearing into a business when they dedicated 40 hectares of their 93-hectare dairy farm near Tirau to Top Notch Calves.

Thanks to the Leigh philosophy of getting it right first time, their three, large, purpose-built sheds which can house 3000 calves at any one time have stood the test of time. They raise 3000 calves in the autumn and 4500 in the spring, including 1500 mixed heifer replacements and beef calves raised on contract for dairy farms, plus Friesian bulls and white faced bulls and heifers.

The calves spend their first approximately six weeks in the half-inside, half-outside pens designed with easy cleaning and calf health in mind. It's a winning combination for both calf welfare and the environment with the healthy weaner calves weighing around 100kgs sold on for finishing elsewhere.

Nearly 20 years later Joanne and Jonathan are embarking on a new development for their calf-rearing business as they join forces with another couple, equally enamoured of calf-rearing, and move into a new phase.

While they're keeping their dairy farm, they're undertaking their own form of succession by turning Top Notch Calves into a company in which they'll be the majority shareholders with their new partners gradually building up equity until they're 50-50. As of March 1 2023, Chris Horan and Karin Scott, together with their two daughters Esmae (7), and Sienna (5), will live on farm as the equity partnership gets underway.

"They've both been in banking and they've already been rearing calves on their own lifestyle block. They see it as a vehicle for growing their wealth and our wealth," says Joanne.

"Chris is the same age as John was when we started the business in 2003. It's ideal, and gives us a chance to step back from the day to day running of it all." Seven years ago the Leighs moved to what they called the Lake Farm near Lake Karapiro.

The Leighs' three children loved growing up on the farm but they're now scattered around the world following their own dreams and showing little sign of wanting to come and work alongside their parents.

"Top Notch Calves was our dream and we've just loved it, but we want them to follow what their dreams are. Whereas Chris and Karin love calf-rearing too and they can't wait to come and be part of taking it to the next level, which means we can follow our kids and support them which is really important to us," says Joanne.

Their oldest son Cameron's dream came from his time at university and has little to do with farming. He and a mate started The Flatpack Company selling easily assembled beds which arrive on the same day as the student buyer moves into their flat. If they're successful with their expansion into America his parents want to be able to visit him.

Their daughter Rebecca (20) is on a sports scholarship at Stanford University. She rows for New Zealand and took part in the under 23 World Rowing Championships in Italy in July 2022. They went and watched her compete. William (21) made the most of Lake Karapiro to hone his barefoot waterskiing skills and competed with the New Zealand team at the Oceania Waterski Champs in November this year. His parents were there to cheer him on.

As Joanne says succession isn't necessarily about family, and they're excited about being able to utilize some of the asset they've worked hard building up to do other things while they're still young enough, in their early 50's, to enjoy them. Meanwhile with the new business partners comes new enthusiasm, new plans and good ideas for tweaks and efficiencies on farm including more automation. Joanne and John are loving it. "We still love calves and we love farming but we do really look forward to Chris and Karin joining our business and taking it to the next level. It's re-invigorating actually, you can get a bit old and a bit stuck in your ways and someone else comes in and it's exciting again," says Joanne

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