

James Frantzen Responds to His Parents' Decision to Bequest Their Land to PFI

by James Frantzen

“What about James?” has been a common question the Frantzens have fielded since announcing at the PFI annual conference that they are bequeathing their farm to Practical Farmers. The Frantzens have three children, but James is the only one farming with his parents. Here is James’s response.

What does this decision mean to your farming future?

The decision protects me long-term. If I had to purchase this farmland, I would have great debt for a number of years. That would really tie my hands from being able to improve or expand the farm. Taking that burden of farmland debt out of the picture might open up doors to other opportunities down the road.

I’m still going to have debt purchasing machinery, livestock, and grain – and that’s no small matter on this operation. This is a complex operation. If I don’t have to buy farmland, I’ll be able to focus on purchasing the correct equipment, the correct genetics for our livestock or maybe growing different grains.

What questions have you been asked about your parents’ decision?

A common one is: “If they wanted to avoid the tax issues or if they wanted me to avoid debt, why didn’t Mom and Dad just sell the farm to you for a dollar or just give you the farm?” Well, that’s not fair to my two sisters. Even if the farm were just handed over to me, an asset like farmland is power when you walk into a bank. But it’s also a banker’s next best friend because they can take that asset away.

From left: Tom, Irene and James Frantzen with family dog Samantha.



What dreams do you have for the farm?

I’d like to expand the farm’s diversity. I’d like to increase the number of hogs we have, possibly increase cattle. It might be possible to add land to the farm. If that does take place, maybe we’d add some crops we’ve never grown before. I’d like to keep looking at different renewable energy resources: solar panels or producing our own oil and blending our own biodiesel to cut down on our fossil fuel use on the farm. I want this farm to be open to Practical Farmers of Iowa members, staff and beyond.

It’s hard to get a picture-perfect farm. It takes a lot of money and a lot of paint, but we want a working farm that is fairly picture-friendly. We want a farm that helps educate through cover cropping or grain production demonstrations, energy conservation, through solar and

geothermal energy production, and through different livestock research trials with swine and beef. I want the farm to be open as a model farm for Practical Farmers of Iowa to do any research trials. I envision the farm to be open for educational youth groups such as FFA.

Do you want to speak more broadly about how parents can help their children get started farming?

Generational transfer is unique to every situation and every farm family. Our family is providing an example for generational transfer, but we certainly don’t foresee everyone doing this. This is what fit for us. You have to sit down as a family and discuss what’s going to fit best. You have to go over multiple aspects and multiple future scenarios, whether they are economic or family-related. What happens if Dad dies, what if Mom dies, what if Dad and Mom die together, what if I die, what if all three of us die, what if Mom and I die, or what if Dad and I die? You have to think of every little, different approach. What would happen to the farm and what would happen to the land?

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Do you have any special memories of the farm?

My sisters and I always enjoy sharing farm memories. One of my fond memories is planting trees around the place to provide natural habitat and windbreaks for the farm. As a family we always worked together shelling corn. We pick the corn on the ear, as much as possible, and after half a year or so the corn is dry in the corn cribs, and we have to then separate corn from the husks. This is a traditional farming agricultural practice that’s not practiced much anymore. We’re proud to say that we own three corn shellers. I foresee shelling corn as long as I can do it. We have saved a lot of money over the decades on this practice. The memories of working together as a family is something I want to continue, whether it’s with my own family or with our family through Practical Farmers of Iowa.

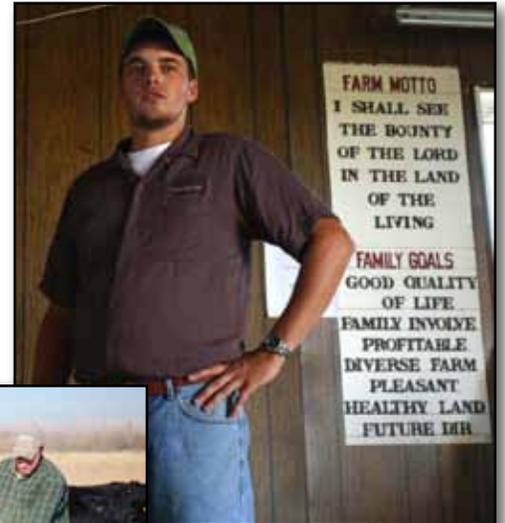
We want an open farm. Whoever wants to come and spend a weekend, week, or a month or two and help work on the farm can come. There’s a lot of hard work to do, but there’s a lot of fun work to do. I want to keep the farm as a different work environment than the standard conventional farm.

Anything else you want to add?

When I first bought my acreage a few miles north of the farm, I thought: What can I do with such a limited small area of land? What can the Frantzen Farm provide from one generation to the next? What other crops and livestock can we produce? How much can we produce on such a small tract of land since we are smaller than the average Iowa farm? How much can we feed back to this land with different cover cropping and different land production models?

It all goes back to the legacy. We belong to the farm. By gifting the farm to Practical Farmers of Iowa, my folks are preserving that legacy for when we are no longer here.

This is not only the Tom and Irene Frantzen legacy, this is not the James Frantzen legacy: This is the Frantzen Family legacy. It goes back to my grandparents John and Dorothy Frantzen and great-grandparents Joe and Rose Frantzen. The Frantzens have farmed in this county for 100 years, and in the country for many more. We want to preserve what we have done – and what we hope to do – here. ■



▲ Above: James stands next to the farm motto: “I shall see the bounty of the Lord in the land of the living.”



◀ Left: Tom and James check the condition of one of their cattle.

More Thoughts from Tom and Irene

The impact this plan has on our son is significant. Much thought went into this. People can say, “Why don’t you just will him a third of your farm?” But right away that starts dividing the farm up, and that’s against our goals. If James would purchase even at a reduced price, he would end up with a burden that’s far higher than the average rent. The purchase and the interest are real burdens he would carry as long as he would have that contract. If James is a good tenant with Practical Farmers of Iowa, he’s not going to lose his tenancy. He has an operating base and that is a very sound financial situation for him to be in if he wishes to expand his operation. We think the impact on him is probably more psychological because he won’t be a farmland owner. But in practical terms, he is probably better off. It does solve his generational transfer problem. He is a Frantzen, it is the Frantzen farm. Hopefully he will be here for many years and hopefully he will have descendants to carry that on. This plan is not without thought for him, but this plan also looks into the reality of the difficulties we face when property valuations have gone to the insane levels they are at today.

—Tom and Irene Frantzen