



# When he's not building, he's dancing



• **By Lisa Boonstoppel-Pot**

Months on the road away from his home in Brazil, Peter Eltink loves his work installing chicken cages

*Peter Eltink says he never has a bad day, as he sees the joy in each day while working hard to install housing systems in Ontario layer barns*

**F**or new layer barns in Ontario, it's all about the enriched housing. In Quebec, it's more organic, free range and aviary systems. Whichever system egg producers choose, Peter Eltink, with his infectious smile and decades of experience, is the man to install them.

Eltink is a Dutchman, a Brazilian, a cage installer and a dancer. He knows seven languages, is starting a fish farm in Brazil, runs a restaurant at his partner's hotel during his "downtime" and is on the road for months, away from family, when he comes to Canada to install Hellmann Poultry housing systems for farmers like Jeff and Linda Van Wyk of Wykville Farms.

At the VanWyk's socially-distanced open house in October, Jeff and Linda had nothing but praise for Eltink, a man who always has a story to tell. "The guy can talk about anything," laughs Jeff. "From immigrating 50 years ago to life in Brazil to caging in Ontario, he was very entertaining. He was also very good at what he did and handles employees very well."

Eltink oversaw the installation of enriched housing at the VanWyk layer barn which was built by Vanderlaan Construction out of Exeter. With new codes of practice for the care and handling of pullets and laying hens, chicken farmers have to reduce the number of hens in conventional cages. For the VanWyks, that meant reducing bird numbers

from seven to four in the existing barn and required the construction of a new barn to house the displaced birds. The new, enriched-housing barn provides more space per bird and includes "enriched" features such as perches, scratch pads, increased lighting and a private nesting area in each section. The new barn can house 14,000 birds with space to add three more tiers, for a total of 28,000 birds as quota holdings expand.

Jeff wasn't exactly thrilled to spend over a million dollars to build a new barn in order to house the same number of chickens and produce the same number of eggs. However, with four children potentially wanting to farm in the future, it made sense to expand rather than sell quota. Now that the barn is finished and the kinks have been straightened out, he says the chickens are adapting well to the new system. In the older barn, with four birds to a cage instead of seven, he's finding the "thinned out" spacing easier to manage.

Jeff chose enriched housing over an aviary system because he has more experience with this management style. Plus, he has worked with Hellmann Poultry and has had really good luck with the company and the housing systems. Interestingly enough, the existing layer barn was Peter's first installation in Ontario some 20 years ago!

"One day, while I was working as a maintenance man in

food plants in Rio de Janeiro, I got a call from Germany that they wanted me to install cages in Brazil,” remembers Peter, who was speaking by phone from Quebec, where he is working on another installation. Soon, he was installing systems in Ontario with VanWyks being the first barn he worked in.

“For many years, I was the only supervisor installing cages for Hellmann Poultry in Canada. Now, they sell so many systems we have seven supervisors with 54 people in Canada putting together all these cages,” says Peter, speaking on the phone from Quebec. He’s staying with his oldest son who is also a crew supervisor with Hellmann Poultry. This is a nice change for Peter, who doesn’t often get to spend time with family. He hasn’t seen his other son (who also works for Hellmann Poultry) for over two years.

It’s an interesting life. Some might say a lonely life but Peter says he is never, ever lonely. “I am mostly alone in this world. I go to work, I go to sleep. With the coronavirus, it is even worse,” he says. “But if you like travel and a challenge and different cultures, food and language, then you do it because you like it.” Consequently, he can speak, read and write Dutch, English and Portuguese. “I can speak Italian and French and can defend myself in Quebec. I also have Indonesian and Malay (Malaysia) because they are close to each other.” He has quite an interesting accent, having taken on the flavour of several languages. “My feelings are Brazilian but the way I walk and talk is SO Dutch,” he laughs.

**P**eter is the youngest child of 13 children, with his Dutch parents immigrating to Brazil to a piece of property that was all trees. The family had to create a farm out of bush. “There was no house. No electricity. No toilet. He took an ax and started to farm,” Peter says of his father. With so many children, not every one of them could be farmers though Peter did farm for a while in Brazil on rented land. He’s had quite a varied career and has experience driving trucks, playing professional volleyball, working construction, growing strawberries



*Taken just days before the new chickens arrived, Jeff VanWyk (right and below with son, Kyle) was busy cleaning up supplies and making calls to coordinate all the work to be done in the new barn (above). Installer Peter Eltink’s first and latest chicken cage installation was at Wykville Farms located near Holmesville and Goderich.*



and building machines while living in Holland, Brazil, Indonesia and Germany at different times in his life.

"I am now 61 and all the experience from my past jobs helps me with this job now. This job is a bit of carpentry, construction, electrical and machinist. You need to know a little bit of everything and that's why I like it," says Peter. It pays well and lets him travel, though current travel restrictions have kept him in Ontario longer than he is used to.

Usually, he returns to his wife in Brazil every few months. "All the time there are different rules so I decided to stay in Canada until the jobs are done."

The couple regularly talks on the phone and while COVID-19 has kept them apart longer than usual, they are used to being separated. She runs a hotel in Brazil and when he goes home, he likes to rest for a day or two. "Then, the fourth or fifth day I get bored and I have to work. I want to wake up and know what I have to do. I do not want to sit at home and watch the birds. I have no patience for this."

So when he's home in Brazil he opens the restaurant attached to the hotel and when he leaves, he closes it down. "For me to really relax is to be in the kitchen and make food. That is my first hobby," says Peter. Gardening and landscaping are others. When not cooking and gardening, he continues his studies on how to establish a fish farm to raise Piraruca (*Arapaima gigas*) a large, freshwater fish found in Brazil. "That is what I will do in retirement. It is like chickens in cages ... I will learn to farm them with the right temperature, water and oxygen. Maybe I will also sell the systems to other farmers who want to start."

Clearly, Peter is a man with a lot of experience, energy and ideas. He's fun to chat with because he has such a positive attitude about life, work and how to enjoy every single day. Given his transient life staying in Air BnBs (he prefers these to hotels) away from family, one might assume he's lonely. "Nope, never", he says.

"I never feel myself lonely. I play harmonica. I listen to music. I try to dance every night for an hour for the

exercise!" he exclaims. "You just put on the music you like and go through the movements. Any movements! You can dance to classics or jazz and include the stretches. Just dance!"

Peter remembers Jeff asking him why he is always happy. "I tell him that for more than 10 years, I have not turned on the television. I do not need to watch the news when they repeat everyday the same things. That works on your spirit. I do not need to know if something bad happens because I cannot solve the problem." Though he rarely eats in restaurants anymore, if a television is on when he enters, he will leave. "That television tries to tell you what to eat and what to wear and I do not need that. Walk alone by yourself. Nobody needs to tell you those things."

In fact, he is very intentional about his attitude. "I have never had a day where I thought I would not be okay today. I think in the morning you set your mind to whatever you want. If you want to be sad that day, you will be sad. If you wake up and hear the singing of a bird and see the leaf fall off a tree, and you find it beautiful, then everything will be beautiful that day. You make your day."

It helps, Peter says, when you have a job you love to do. He genuinely enjoys his work putting together housing systems for

chickens and meeting the farmers who manage the barns. "I love what I do. I wake up every morning between four and five o'clock. I am ready for work. If you wake up and think 'damn, I have to go to work today' well, forget it! You better go look for something else even if it pays less. It is better to be happy."

A reader, Peter learned from an article that 70 per cent of people in the Netherlands are not happy with their job. "How can you say it is a good morning if you hate your work? That is crazy! Maybe you think I am lucky because it has never happened to me but I never choose for the things that I do not like. I am not lucky. It is a mindset."

The cage installer/philosopher has one more important piece of advice to share. "I say 'I love you' but I also say 'I love me'. If you love yourself, everything can happen!"

This conversation took place on late-October morning before Peter headed off to his current installation in Quebec. It was easy to see why Jeff and Linda recommended I have a chat with Peter when their barn was done. His energy and enthusiasm for life is infectious. He has left his mark in a very practical way through his handiwork supervising chicken housing but also via his positive spirit and simple wisdom, gleaned from multi-cultural experience and a positive outlook on life. ◇



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