

Collins Family Covers Chores While Dad Serves In Legislature

BY RITA SHADE

New Jersey Correspondent

ELMER — What you notice first is the unadulterated, unpretentious good humor and affection.

Gathered round the oak table in the kitchen, the Collins family trades inside jokes at a Henny Youngman clip, uninhibited by a stranger listening in. Dad alternately plays straight man and instigator, with perfect timing.

"Betsy gets up at 6 in the morning to start chores. I get up about five minutes later," Jack Collins says, trying to sneak one by.

The "moooooo" of the family Jersey cow waifs through the back door.

"You get up when, Dad?" 9-year-old son Sean says, feigning bad-hearing.

"On which day, Dad. Which year?" chuckles 19-year-old daughter Joellen, having snared the fish with her own bait. Seventeen-year-old Dawn and 10-year-old Rebecca join in the fun.

"Well, maybe not FIVE minutes," Jack grins.

He's good naturedly excused. After all, now that he's serving in the New Jersey Legislature the time demands of public office mean he can snooze a little later in the morning.

The family round-table discussion leads to a recitation of daily chores and responsibilities. The kids divvy up the evening and weekend feedings. Betsy Collins — mom, wife, teacher, student and cow-milker extraordinaire — handles the morning feedings and milking.

"What does Jack do?"

"Yeah, what do you do?" echo Betsy and the children, who give in to a belly-laugh.

"Well," says Jack. "Every operation has to have an administrator."

The children are fresh-faced, polite, comfortable giving a public smooch to dad, a hug to mom. They talk openly about their feelings of

growing up on a farm, and how they think they're better off for having the daily responsibilities and working hand-in-hand with one another. And, somehow, through the hectic pace of the New Jersey Assembly, campaigns, full-time jobs and full-time school and full-time farm chores, the family feels it is closer together than ever before.

But, that's getting ahead of the story.

It was a trip to Kutztown, Pa., that did it.

Jack Collins returned from that beautiful country terrain with the college basketball team he was coaching and decided he wanted to move to a farm.

"I wanted a horse. I wanted to live on a farm. I told Betsy, she said okay and we started looking in South Jersey."

Betsy and Jack, with two pre-schoolers in tow, rejected a few handy-man specials and then quickly settled on a three-acre

homestead here that had weathered more than a century.

Besides, the ad for the farm said it offered a "potential tennis court site." True. But you'd have to squint with both eyes, use a considerable amount of imagination and walk gingerly around the chickens to envision a ball in play.

"I had no illusions about being able to fix anything," said Jack without one denial from his family. "I didn't know the difference between a hammer and a screwdriver. But I loved livestock. Watching them grow."

Needless to say, the tennis court never came to be.

A neighbor's steers and a purchased pair of piglets pre-dated the dreamed-of horse, and a certified Old MacDonald collection of barnyard animals followed.

Today, 12 years later, much has changed, yet much is the same.

The children now number four. The pigs multiplied to 40 and a prized collection of farm-raised peacocks strut among the horses, chickens, two cows, one goat and one sheep and a pet turkey.

"The pigs are the profitable part of the farm operation," says Jack as he displays a system of gates and chutes he rigged up to make it easier to load pigs for market.

But the peacocks are another story.

"He says he wanted to wait until he had 10 pairs before he started to sell the chicks," laughs Betsy. "But everytime someone stops by the road to ask about them and I send them to the barn, they come back without any peacocks."

Betsy and the kids agree: Dad is just trying to pull the peacock feathers over their eyes — he doesn't want to part with them.

A few years back, Jack hung up his award-winning coach's hat at Glassboro State College and, two year ago, stepped into the role of executive assistant to the president at the college. Betsy returned to teaching basic math skills to freshmen at the college and launched her studies for a master's degree, focusing on computers in the classroom.

And then Jack did it again.

"I came home one night about 2 in the morning. Told Betsy they wanted me to run for the

Assembly. I knew she would say 'okay, do it.'" Jack said.

So, in his team-winning fashion, Jack garnered the highest votes in the four-way race for two seats. His upset victory in the Salem-Gloucester-Cumberland county district made him the second farmer serving in the New Jersey Legislature.

Jack acknowledges his is a part-time homesteading operation. But, despite the family levity, their farming is a serious endeavor. And these past 12 years have taught him tremendous respect for those who devote their lives to agriculture.

"I don't think there's any tougher profession — the farming profession. The ultimate controller is the weather. And I don't know of any other industry where you are TOLD what price your product is going to be," says Jack.

Serving as Assistant Majority Whip and on key committees in the Assembly, Collins is able to gain support for legislation aimed at protecting his primarily rural district.

Legislation he introduced this session calls for heavier funding of the Economic Development Authority for agricultural loans, and an advisory board to the EDA composed of agricultural members.

Another of his bills, sent to the Governor for signature, would reimburse farmers for crops lost due to confiscated land. The current New Jersey law compensates a farmer for his land and buildings only.

"We have to decide, as a community, whether we want to keep this aspect of our heritage. Farming is a lifestyle, a commitment, to the quality of life. I think we have to do everything we can to help the farmer," he says.

Although the demands of public life have cut into the time he can spend on farm chores, and family suppers have been replaced by round-table discussions over breakfast, Jack still has his down-to-earth priorities.

"I told Betsy the first thing I was going to do with my paycheck from the Legislature was buy her a truck," he said.



The Collins family often has to cover extra farm chores to make time for father and husband Jack to serve in the New Jersey Legislature. Family members, from left, are Jack and Betsy, Sean and Rebecca (in truck bed) and Dawn and Joellen.

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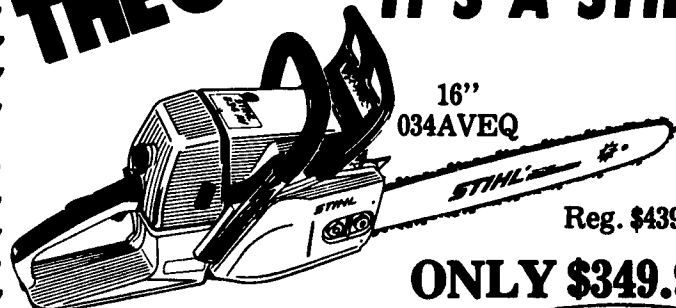
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