

# Dairy Farm Mom Opens Home and Heart To Kids

BY LOU ANN GOOD

"Our home is always open." Fran Bushong said as her eyes swept across her spacious renovated kitchen where baskets, dried flowers and collectibles hang from the rafters.

The Bushong's Lebanon County farmhouse is large enough to host the 40-60 4-H kids Fran directs; yet, homey enough with Fran's homespun touches to make their own three children and various foster teens feel at home.

This busy housewife was always determined to be in farming. In 1964, she was the first female FFA'er in the nation. And

in 1968, she was the first girl to receive the Keystone Award.

Today Fran and her husband Dale own an 85-acre dairy farm in Lebanon. With their children Matt, 16; twelve year-old twins Melanie and Michele and one permanent foster son Allan, 18; they milk 85 cows three times a day.

Family is top priority for the Bushongs who explained, "we planned our milking schedule for 5 a.m., 1 p.m. and 9 p.m. so we can attend all the kid's games at school and all their 4-H activities." Matt plays football and the twins play field hockey.

The Bushongs work in shifts



This busy mom grabs a pan from the ladder she hung herself. Fran Bushong, Lebanon, tore out walls & ceilings of their formerly 20-room farmhouse to make the rooms more spacious.

together to see that all the chores are done smoothly and on time. "If you don't work together as a family, you'll never make it on the farm," Fran pointed out. The twins wash the cows and change the milkers while their parents and two older brothers milk.

The Bushong's farm is a place where kids congregate and feel at home. In fact, for many it is the first home they have actually known. Over the past years, the Bushongs have been parents to 15 foster-placed teens.

Most of them are troubled teens who test their limits. Many of the Bushong's friends question, "How can you love these kids unconditionally?"

Fran explained, "All you can do is feed and love them." Fran said, "If you try to make them do things a certain way, it won't work."

She recalled one twelve-year-old girl, who sobbed after she was placed in their home after her mother had coached her to become a prostitute, "I just want to be a normal twelve year-old. I'm tired of pretending I'm 20."

Fran's advice to her: "Go out in the field and pick a calf and a cat to take care of. You can have them as long as you're here."

Fran has strong beliefs about today's kids. She said, "They need responsibility. Too many have been entertained all their life by TV and spectator games."

Of course, on a farm there is always tons of work to do. And Fran admits, "If people aren't care-

ful, the farm will run them instead of them running the farm."

The Bushongs are careful not to let that happen. Although they have a daily schedule, some days they drop it all and say, "Today, we're taking off to go swimming."

This family has always been quick to help others in need. Several years ago, Allan, who is their only permanent foster child, was kicked out of his home with no place to go. He begged the Bushongs, "Please, let me come and live with you. Teach me how to farm."

The Bushongs love Allan as their own and Fran points out, "When we got him, we thought we were doing him a favor. We didn't expect anything in return. But as it turns out, he helps us out in many ways."

This summer the Bushongs were able to visit relatives in Missouri while Allan stayed behind and ran the farm. Some people asked the Bushongs, "How can you vacation and let an 18-year-old kid run the farm?" But Fran said, "If we can't trust him to do it right, than we didn't train him to do a good job."

Fran doesn't pretend to have the perfect family. "We have disagreements. We have bills. We have challenges—milk prices spiral downward, unpredictable weather could cause us to lose everything in one season."

When the Bushongs face a problem, Fran said, "we stop and hold hands and pray and something happens inside. Our kids see how God provides, but we want our kids to see that money is not the most important part of life. We can have all those things and still not be happy. Only the Lord can provide that."

It seems unbelievable that this busy woman who is constantly helping others was at one time depressed and suicidal.

Fran grew up the oldest of eight children on a Pennsylvania farm. Her childhood memories are punctuated with splintering glass and the screaming rages as her alcohol-

ic father chased her mother with knives and anything else he could grab.

Fran thought she left her unhappy childhood behind when she married a FFA'er whom she met at a state convention.

She was determined to have the exact opposite of her childhood homelife. But 1½ years after her marriage, tragedy struck. Fran's husband was killed in a traffic accident and left her with a four-month old son.

Angry and bitter that a man as wonderful as her husband was killed in a senseless accident while criminals led an apparent trouble-free life, Fran withdrew into a deep depression for two years. Suicide, she decided, was the only escape available to her.

"I went into the bathroom," Fran recalled, "I poured a bottle of pills in my hand, but when I tried to lift them to my mouth, I couldn't."

For three hours Fran struggled to swallow the pills. Tired of fighting, Fran sensed that she had a choice—"to sink or swim." Fran recalled, "I prayed, 'God, I want to swim, but I don't know how.'"

Fran believes in that moment her life was changed. She sensed that she needed to stop trying to understand why her husband was killed and trust God."

The young widow began to take an interest in life again. Fran did not believe she would ever marry again, but soon she met Dale. "Our story is like a love story," she admits. "He's so patient, loving and understanding." In 1974 they were married and in 1975, they had twin girls

"You see," Fran said, "I was at the bottom. I was bitter and angry. That is why I can love the foster kids we take in. I know what it is like to have nothing, be nothing, to want to die and then to experience God's unconditional love. That's why we want to take these kids in. To show them there is another way to live."

Farming and home responsibilities have not stopped Fran from

(Turn to Page B4)



Fran loves milking cows. She has the distinction of being both the first female FFA'er and the first female recipient of the FFA Keystone Award.



The Bushong family milks 85 cows three times each day. "Everyone does their part or we couldn't do it," Fran said. Pictured from left, Allan, Melanie, Fran, Dale, Michele, and Matt.

## Homestead Notes