

Extension Services' Number One Secretary

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LANCASTER — Lancaster County has long been known as the number one agricultural producer in the state of Pennsylvania. Now it also boasts the "number one" secretary in the state, county and University agricultural extension offices.

It seems only fitting that Suzanne Schmalhofer, a veteran secretary at Lancaster's Cooperative Extension Service Office, was honored by The Pennsylvania State University chapter of Epsilon Sigma Phi. The honorary society for extension workers presented Suzanne with their Extension Secretarial Award. This is the first time it has come to Lancaster County, since it was initiated in 1975.

The recognition came as a surprise to Suzanne, who was attending a secretaries' conference at Penn State University with other extension secretaries, when the announcement was made. She says, "I had no idea. I was surprised. I didn't realize it was an

annual thing."

She adds, "I was happy that Jay thought enough of me to nominate me for the award."

Indeed, County Extension Director Jay Irwin was equally pleased that she was chosen for the honor, but not surprised. In his nomination of Suzanne, he noted her "positive and pleasant attitude" and her understanding of the Extension's mission to supply information to a wide range of clientele.

Irwin said, "Suzanne has done an excellent job in our county as office manager. She coordinates the whole work load and does it very, very efficiently. We have a tremendous workload, and because of Suzanne we have one of the most efficient offices in the state." He noted that the secretaries do the work for seven professional people, in addition to the total Expanded Foods and Nutrition program. Irwin adds, "It is a total team effort for us, but every team needs a leader and an inspiration."

It is often Suzanne's voice that the thousands of callers hear when

they dial the Lancaster County Extension Service, and in her 24 years there she has gotten to know a lot of people. "I like the clientele. When I first started I worked with 4-H'ers who now have older 4-H'ers themselves. I have gotten to know a lot of farmers."

Suzanne began working for the Extension Service when the office was located in the Post Office building in downtown Lancaster. After she graduated from Lancaster Catholic High School where she had taken academic work, she chose not to go to college and instead went to Lancaster Business College. When she graduated from there, personnel from the college recommended that she apply for a position with the Extension Service.

She recalls, "Mr. Smith hired me. I was 18 years-old and from the city, but he said he'd try me." She laughs as she recalls not knowing what Extension or 4-H was, nor alfalfa, nor many other agricultural terms. "It was very educational and a great learning experience for me. It makes me appreciate what goes into making food, and the hard work and long hours farmers have." She said she has also learned a lot about cooking, as she works with the home economists in typing newsletters and answering calls. "I learned that a lot of what my mother did was wrong."

Retired County Extension Director M. Max Smith says that he was very pleased to learn of Suzanne's recognition. "She was the kind of secretary that helped you along. I think that having a good secretary is one of the most important assets for every executive. She is the kind of girl that every secretary should be."

Smith admits that he had been looking for a farm girl who "understood the language," but adds, "She had a lot of ability as a secretary and I had confidence in her. She picked up the language real quick. I was glad when I heard she won the award because it showed I made the right decision. She is very deserving."

Learning as she went along, Suzanne says, "I loved it." She liked it so well, that after leaving for six years and working for an insurance company in Washington, D.C., she came back when she and her husband, Jim, moved to the Lancaster area again. In total, she has 24 years of service with the office.

Suzanne credits Laretta Kreider with helping her get an understanding of the job, though Laretta was part-time and Suzanne was full time when she first took the job. However, Laretta had been there and understood the office. Later Laretta became fulltime and when Suzanne returned to Lancaster the office had two full-time people. "It was Laretta who taught me the office procedure and how to keep everyone happy."

The staff has grown since those earlier days, and Suzanne is now office manager and supervises the work of two other fulltime secretaries and one part-time secretary. Occasionally this staff swells to another part time worker in the summer. She also keeps financial records for the County Extension Association, which has a budget of \$141,000.

Suzanne remembers happily



Suzanne Schmalhofer works at her word processor where she spends a lot of time each day in her position as head secretary and office manager at the Lancaster County Extension Office.

when the Farm and Home Center was built and the Extension Office moved to its present location on Arcadia Drive. "It was such an improvement. It was like a hotel compared to where we were." She notes that the whole office encompassed about as much space as the secretaries now have just for themselves.

She feels the move was also appreciated by most farmers since there is lots of free parking available at the Farm and Home Center. Also, she says, they like it if they come to her office looking for one of the other agricultural agency offices and she can tell them it's "just down the hall."

She has gone through many changes during the years she has been employed with the Extension Office. "We went from hand-folding and a crank mimeo to machine folding and a copy machine. We are also in the computer age. It was hard to get adjusted to that, but the computer is very helpful. "We've had computers for three years, and I never thought I'd learn to like it like I do."

In addition to using the word processor, Suzanne is efficient at handling electronic mail, something that she says is "efficient and quick. If you send a memo in the morning you get the answer by afternoon. There is no need to make phone calls, and there is less mail."

To learn to use the computer she attended regional training seminars conducted by the University, but says, "I learned most just by fooling around with it."

She remembers when the Extension Service did its own testing of lime, and when the mailing list was

simply one large list. Now there are individual mailing lists for homemakers, dairy farmers, livestock farmers, and many others.

Typically, today's caller is more informed than in the days when she first began working. Suzanne says, "They are better able to explain their problem — there is more literature available to them."

She admits that there is a diversity of callers to their office. "We get the strangest calls. Sometimes they want you to say what they know isn't so. We get a lot of calls from people who don't know where else to call." It is these people that the secretaries must assist by referring them to an agency that is appropriate. Sometimes people call and ask just what the purpose of the Extension office is. She adds, "A secretary is the first person someone talks to, so we try to be pleasant. We set the tone for their attitude."

In his nomination of Suzanne, Irwin noted that she is often willing to stay beyond 5:00 if there is still work to be completed. This calls for an understanding family, and Suzanne gets complete support from her husband and her 17-year-old daughter Laura.

Suzanne is quick to give credit to the other fulltime secretaries, Diane Groff and Gail Bubernack. "We're a team. I didn't do anything really special. We all work together."

One of the best aspects of the job, according to Suzanne is the variety. "I like it because it is never boring. There is always something we can do. I can honestly say I never mind getting up in the morning and going to work."



County Extension Director Jay Irwin, left, presents the Epsilon Sigma Phi Secretarial Award to Lancaster County Extension Service Office Manager Suzanne Schmalhofer. Established in 1975, the award recognizes outstanding work by a secretary in the county or University Extension Service offices.



It is often Suzanne's voice who greets the hundreds of callers to the Extension Office. She said they try to help everyone who calls by referring them to the proper agent or the appropriate agency.

Homestead Notes