

Young Farmer Spokesperson Tells Value Of Program

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Adams Co. Correspondent
GETTYSBURG — "The real value of this program is that it provides an opportunity for the farming community to reach its neighbors who may now be a generation removed from the farm... It could be used at the State Cornucopia Dinner, Ag Progress Days, and so many other media events that we already have in place." These are Melinda Johnston's thoughts as she retires this week as Pennsylvania's 1987 Young Farmer Spokesperson for Agriculture.

Johnston represented Pennsylvania in early December in the national contest held this year in Peoria, Illinois. The contest, in its 13th year, is sponsored by Elanco Products Company, and is held in conjunction with the National Young Farmer Educational Institute.

A new representative from PA will be named this week at the State Convention of Young Farmers and that person will compete next December in Ohio.

Johnston recalls becoming interested in the program when another local winner encouraged her to consider entering. The contest requires a five-minute presentation on one of four topics. These topics include: (1) Discuss how farm exports benefit urban consumers; (2) the use of fertilizers, chemicals, and feed additives as important tools; (3) stewardship of the land; or (4) How to get the most from your food dollar.

Following the presentation, the contestant is then given a 5 minute question period on their chosen topic, when competing on the state level. In national competition, the question period is ten minutes long and the questions can pertain to any aspect of agriculture.

Holding a degree in Home Economics and a minor in Communi-

cations from James Madison University in Virginia, Johnston was readily attracted to the topic of "How To Get The Most From Your Food Dollar." She explained, "I had a strong background in public speaking and this topic seemed tailored to my interest. When I was in school there was a real rise in consumer economics. That interest is still very strong and this was an area that drew on my expertise."

In addition to her education background, Melinda drew on her farming background to flavor her presentation as well. Her family operates Mason-Dixon Farms, Gettysburg. The operation includes a 1200 cow dairy herd, a large cropping operation, and a milk processing and distribution plant.

Melinda's husband Tom now works in crop management and production for the Mason-Dixon operation. Prior to returning to the home operation Melinda worked for three years for the PSU Extension Service and Tom was Executive Director of the Lancaster County Conservation District. They have four children ages three through nine.

Johnston also feels that their work experience away from the farm colored their perceptions of farm management problems and career choices. She states, "We've had a chance to see of the advantages and disadvantages of farming either big or small. We've also had a chance to see how much people are losing touch with agriculture. We're involved in a lot of activities where we might be the only farm couple there. We're the only representative of what used to be a majority occupation."

She added, "At the national level of competition, three winners are chosen and they are taken on a media blitz. They do radio and

T.V. shows, have a lot of press coverage in national newspapers, and make several public appearances. On the state level we need more coordination to utilize our spokesperson more effectively." She envisions a committee with representation from the State Young Farmers Association, the spokesperson, and someone from that person's local chapter to work together.

Addressing the concerns of agriculture today and for tomorrow, Johnston lists several areas that farmers need to become involved with in conjunction with their urban neighbors and consumers. She lists land conservation as a top priority followed by the protection of underground water purity as her top concerns. She also stresses the need for American agriculture to remain American owned and operated.

Johnston encourages more participation in the contest and utilization of the winners as a means improved communications between the agricultural and urban communities. She states, "Pennsylvania should have more participation in this program. The state winner gets their way paid to the national convention and you get to talk with other young farmers there from all over the country. It's a very good program."



Melinda Johnston, Gettysburg, poses with the plaque she received as the 1987 Young Farmers Spokesperson for Agriculture. Her topic at the state and national level was, "How to Get the Most From Food Dollar." While Johnston ends her tenure in this position this week, she stresses the need for better utilization of an agricultural spokesperson at state and local media events.



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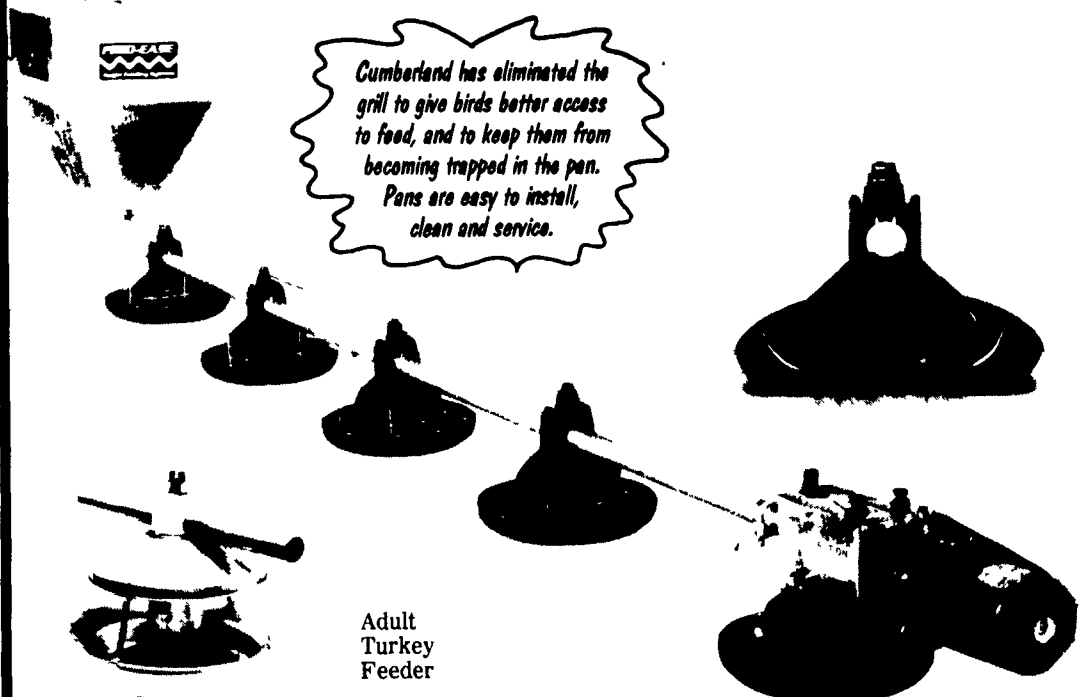
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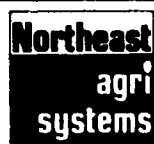
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