

Extension Home Economist Reflects On Life And Career

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Lancaster Farming Staff
LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.)
— For 30 years, Doris Thomas has been writing a column for Lancaster Farming.

"Have You Heard" informs readers about the latest information on nutrition, diet, and textiles.

Because Doris is also the Penn State home economist for Lancaster County Extension, many countians equate her position to mean that she is the professional chief of all home economists.

She is considered the expert on every topic concerning food, nutrition, purchasing, sewing, and crafts.

"Ask Doris Thomas," is the antithesis to any problem consumers might ask from "how do I wash my silk blouse?" to "can I refreeze strawberries after they thaw?"

Whatever the question, Doris knew or researched the answer.

Perhaps, even more than a home economist, Doris was an educator. She taught classes on cooking, dealing with stress, money and time management, home decorating, and more.

"I enjoy teaching and being an educator," Doris said.

"This job allowed me to work with people who wanted to learn and who gave a lot of 'warm fuz-zies' that made my job so worthwhile," she said.

"I never aspired to be a career person — it just happened," Doris said of her tenure with the extension.

Unlike today's female executives moving up the ladder, Doris said that she set no career goals and had no chartered plan for her life.

For Doris, doors opened, and she walked through them to enjoy a rewarding profession.

Her life began 65 years ago, when she was born to parents who were in their 40s.

"My parents were great parents, but because they were older, and my grandmother lived with us, things needed to be kept quiet. Because she was an only child, couldn't invite friends to her home, and had no close neighbors, Doris spent many hours reading and playing the piano.

The now petite Doris, said that during those growing up years she was overweight and to her dismay needed to buy her clothing from the chubby department. A teacher guided Doris in setting up a balanced diet that reeducated her "rotten eating habits" and allowed her to lose weight gradually and maintain her weight loss. It was that success in losing weight by proper eating habits that propelled Doris into desiring to become a dietician.

When the time came for Doris to enter college, returning GI soldiers were filling campuses. Doris's father was suspicious of the intent of the GI soldiers, and decided that Doris should attend Hood College, a women's college.

The decision to send Doris to Hood turned out to be a positive experience for Doris who pursued a home economic's degree. That was a popular choice for women in those years. In her sophomore year, Doris decided to teach rather than become a dietician.

The same month that she graduated with honors from college, she married her eighth-grade boyfriend, Charles, who owned an insurance agency.



After 30 years as a professional home economist and columnist, Doris Thomas is retiring.

In that era, it was difficult for a woman to get a job if she was married because employers believed she would soon quit to raise a family.

But Doris was offered a job as a home economist in the Solanco School District.

After two and a half years of teaching, Doris's husband returned to college to finish his degree. Doris quit her job and moved to Philadelphia with him. Prospective employers were even more skeptical of hiring Doris. Not only was she a married woman, but she was married to a student — categorized as being exceptionally transitional.

She was hired as a home economist for UGI. It was her responsibility to visit the homes of those who purchased a gas stove and make sure that they knew how to use it properly. During her two-year stint with UGI, Doris also gave cooking demonstrations.

Then her husband joined the Air Force for four years, during which the couple lived in California, Oklahoma, and Mississippi. Their daughter Debbie was born and Doris did not have an away from home job during those four years.

When the Thomases returned to Quarryville and Charles resumed his job as an insurance broker, Doris's mother came to live with them. Almost immediately, Doris was asked to teach home economics at Solanco High School although she had not applied for the job.

"Since my mother was living with us, there really wasn't a need for two women to keep house, so I decided to go back to work," Doris said.

A few years later, a friend suggested Doris apply for the position as extension home economist. She did. And that is where she found her niche for the next 30 years except for a short sabbatical when she earned her master's degree in business administration.

Doris said, when she first started writing her column for this paper, it was called, "Ladies, Have You Heard?" In the 1960s, she was advised that the title was discrimi-

natory against men so she dropped the "Ladies." She also wrote a column for the local newspaper and gave the same advice on a local radio program.

During Doris's tenure in the extension, she learned to adapt to many changes. In the beginning, her job required her to regularly speak to each individual Pennsylvania Society of Farm Women group that met in the county. She taught sewing classes where as many as 1,800 women would register for free classes.

Policy changes resulted in a charge for the classes that needed to be taught, not by the extension home economist but by extension-taught assistants.

While Doris fulfilled her duties, her husband carried on a valiant three-year struggle against cancer before he died in 1984.

"He was determined to lick it," Doris said of her husband who amazed doctors by rallying many times after he was expected to die. He had throat and lung cancer that, after radical surgery resulted in chronic pulmonary disease. After radiation treatments, he was never able to eat again and needed to be fed by machine as he slept.

The couple's only daughter took care of most of his nursing needs.

"My work kept me sane," said Doris as she recalled the years of watching his six-foot frame shrink to 108 pounds.

By this time, changes in the extension program required her to put more emphasis on nutrition. This change pleased Doris who said, "My main interest always was with foods and nutrition." The extension developed the Expanded Foods And Nutrition Education Program in order to educate low income mothers on how to shop and cook.

Doris hired nutritional aides to work under her oversight. These aides visit low-income families to give one-to-one help.

In the beginning EFNEP aides taught money management and parenting skills in addition to food preparation. Later, they were instructed to stick to standardized

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