

From Farmer to County Commissioner

Work Smarter, Not Harder Is Miller's Goal

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READING (Berks Co.) —

When Ernie Miller was 13 years old, he almost died from a stomach operation gone awry. For more than one year, he was so weak, that people predicted that he'd never fulfill his life-long dream to farm. But Miller proved them wrong.

Not only did he take over the family farm with its 40 acres but he increased it piece by piece until it now measures 600 acres.

Miller also had another dream. He said, "I made up my mind early in life that by the time I was 50 years old, I would be doing something else with my time (while someone else did the farmwork)."

He is now chairman of the Berks County Board of Commissioners.

"That early crisis in my life, forced me to slow up and think — and search for ways to work smarter, not harder," said Miller.

That doesn't mean that his road to success did not meet with struggles and some failures both in farming and politics.

When he first tried to borrow money to expand his farming operation, he was turned down by FmHA. When he first entered the political arena, it was difficult to get people to take him seriously and Miller lost his first bid for county commissioner.

But, he did not give up. In both instances, he searched for a different angle to achieve his goals.

For the farm expansion, he found a cosigner for the loan. But it wasn't too many years before he received credibility and bankers trusted him.

Of his ability to increase his farm, Miller said, "People said I was crazy at the time; now they say I'm lucky."

"But timing was everything," he said. "My belief has been that when other people run, you walk; when others walk, you run."

In the next election, Miller ran for office again, this time capitalizing on his farm background and his success in it.

He won — in fact he had more votes than the other candidates running for election.

Miller said his involvement in politics stemmed from frustration. About 15 years ago, he wasn't happy with zoning decisions so he attended a township supervisor's meeting. When the township supervisor retorted to Miller's questions about the decision by saying that's the way it is and that's the way it's going to be, Miller promised him, "The next election, I'm going to run against you and win."

Miller did win and served as a township supervisor for 12 years before running for the commissioner's office.

In his office on the 13th floor that overlooks the city of Reading, one cannot forget Ernie's agricultural roots. Dozens of cow figurines, dairy-related accessories, and paintings of his farm are displayed in his office.

Every June, for the past three years that he has been in office, Miller holds a dairy celebration for people who work in county government. This year, during the lunch hour, county dairy princesses dished up ice cream for 600 county officials and workers. Pa. Dairy Princess Jennifer Grimes told the crowd about dairy farming, which was telecast on the local news.

Miller said that his farm back-

ground has helped considerably in many of the duties for which he is responsible such as the soil conservation committee. It was Miller who helped establish land preservation in the county. He worked to get the Clean and Green Act to reassess farms for their use rather than a tax rollover.

The list of organizations to which he has belonged is endless, but some of those include federal appointment to the National Milk Promotion Board, active in Jaycees, a previous state spokesman for ag, involvement in many agricultural associations such as Grange where he held almost every office in local and county level, and was on the legislative council, president of Council of Farm Organizations (umbrella for group of farm organizations).

It has been Miller's philosophy to rise to the top in organizations and offer what you can and then step aside.

"All my life, I spent a lot of time on boards and at meetings. The only difference between now and then is that now I get paid to attend meetings," Miller said.

Lack of a college education has not been detrimental to Miller because, he says, through farming, reading, and involvement in many organizations, he has received the broadest base education.

"Farming gave me more common sense than education, because you learn a lot more when you lose your own money than you do when it's the public's money," he said.

Many of his farming innovations were decided upon from his observation of other successful farmers and from reading relentlessly. Miller was the first to go to total confined feeding after reading about California's dairy operation.

"In the 1960s, people laughed at me, when I installed a herringbone parlour. I was the first to put it in and people said, it wouldn't work," Miller said.

It did. Just like many other ideas that he tried.

"Never' is never a good enough answer," for me," said Miller, who said his bout with illness as a teenager forced him to think and read more in search of innovative ways of doing things.

"You can't save time by stopping your watch but by stopping to watch," he said. "I do a lot of observing," he said.

While he's attending to county duties, Miller's wife and two sons in partnership on the farm, take care of things at home, where 250 Holsteins are milked. Corn, alfalfa, and some barley is grown for the dairy.

"My wife wasn't a farm girl when I married her, but now she loves the farm. When I decided to run for public office I had to promise her that she could work in the barn rather than go to meetings," Miller said.

Miller calls himself "the silent partner" on the farm. He has derived much pleasure from turning farming responsibilities over to his sons.

"Many farmers don't have the opportunity to have their sons stay on the farm," Miller said.

His sons, Miller said, had the opportunity to grow into farming at an early age because he was always involved in so many other activities. Although you can be away too much, the positive side is that my sons did not feel intimidated by working in my shadow



Ernie Miller finds being a farmer is an asset in his work as a Berks County Commissioner.

and they learned to make decisions on their own, Miller said.

The Millers also have two daughters, one who was the state dairy princess in 1978.

Chemical insecticides and pesticides have been kept at a minimum for the past five years. It was through extensive reading, that Miller decided to cut back on chemical and fertilizer use.

Miller said that he admires farmers who are content, but for him, it seems "it's either grow or die."

Miller said that he has no desire for another elected position.

"Here I have more hands on and can effect legislation more quickly and more effectively than in a state office. Plus I'm closer to the people," he said.

Miller considers himself radical on farmland preservation. He said that many years ago he did a study and found that township growth did not result in more income for the area but in more expenses. He tried to convince people of this

finding for many years but it wasn't until recently that this study was confirmed by experts.

Miller emphasized the need for farmers to become involved in their county planning commission and school boards. "Don't give up your rights by default," he said. "There are people out there who want to pass laws that are harmful to agriculture. Many have had no opportunity to talk with farmers, but they want to talk."

While most people seem open to different perspectives there are a few who continually send crank letters and calls. On his desk, Miller has a stack of postcards written in the same script but signed with various names. On one, the person wrote of having seen Miller on television. "You look overfed but thanks to you, I'm eating dog food," the person wrote.

It disturbs Miller that the elderly now need to pay higher taxes from recent tax assessment.

Rebuilding of the court house began before Miller took office, now he's the one who is "stuck" with the bills and property reassessment that was planned before he took office. Even though it isn't his fault, he gets blamed.

But Miller isn't complaining. He said, "People don't want to hear excuses and I don't blame them."

A plaque with the words, "What would Jesus do?" hangs behind his desk.

It's a reminder to Miller and to others to do what's right — not for political gain — but because it's the right thing to do.

"Every occupation has its good and bad," Miller said. Farming and politics are no exception. It is these two occupations from which Miller derives much satisfaction.

"This is America. No matter how or where you were born, there is no limit to what you can be," Miller said.

4H HAPPENINGS

York County Hosts Meats Identification And Judging Contest

York County was host to the annual York County 4-H Meats Identification and Judging Contest recently.

The contest was held at Godfrey Brothers Meats on Loganville.

Acting as officials were Dr. William Henning from Penn State University and the Penn State Meats Judging Team.

4-H'ers from York, Adams, and Fulton counties participated on the contest with results as follows:

First place Junior Team from Fulton County.

First and second place senior teams from York County. Team members: Cindy Dehoff, Shanna Daugherty, Jennifer Altobelli and Jodi Dutrey and Tammy Dise, Amy Dise, Mindy Albright and Drew Bankert. Top individual was Cindy Dehoff of Glen Rock.

York County 4-H Beef Club Holds Show

The York County 4-H Beef Club held its 4-H Fair Beef Show at the York Fairgrounds on July 2.

The judge was Fred Weaver from Lancaster. Twent-three

members participated with results as follows:

Champion Angus heifer — Suzanne Bishard, Bishards Queen Dolly (York). **Reserve** — Jason Baer, EvJon Barbara (Glenville).

Champion Shorthorn — Jodi Dutrey, HVF Flossy (Dallastown).

Champion Simmental — Raymond Stough, FHO Super Time (Spring Grove). **Reserve** — Raymond Stough, KJ Coalette.

Supreme Champion — Suzanne Bishard, Angus Champion. **Champion Bred and Owned** — Suzanne Bishard, Angus Champion.

SHOWMANSHIP CLASSES

Champion Senior — Jason Baer. **Champion Intermediate** — Bobbi Myers (Thomasville). **Champion Junior** — Tammi Grubb (Hanover). **Champion Novice** — C.J. Hoke (Glenville).

STEER CLASSES

Champion Lightweight — Tammi Grubb. **Reserve** — Jodi Dutrey.

Champion Medium Weight — Elizabeth Bishard. **Reserve** — Jennifer Altobelli (Dover).

Champion Heavyweight — Shawn Waltmyer (Airville). **Reserve** — Suzanne Bishard.

Grand Champion Steer — Shawn Waltmyer. **Reserve Champion Steer** — Elizabeth Bishard.

York County Hosts 4-H Livestock Judging Contest

York County was host to the annual 4-H Livestock Judging Contest held recently at South Branch Farms in York. Sixty-six

4-H'ers from seven counties participated in the event, which tests members knowledge of livestock. The contest is a full day where members place classes of beef, sheep, and swine as well as answering questions and giving oral reasons.

York County's junior team placed fourth. Team members were Heather Moyer, Hanover; Alisha Eberly, Dallastown, and Jennifer Flinchbaugh, York. Heather and Alisha placed in the top 10 individually.

In the senior division, York placed first with team members Adam Sellers, Thomasville; Kelly Dutrey, Dallastown; and Matt Trostle, Red Lion. Overall high individual was Adam with Kelly and Matt in the top 10.

