

Winebark Leaves Extension Job To Alter Path Of Troubled Teens

New Year Brings Big Transition For Winebarks

LOU ANN GOOD

Lancaster Farming Staff
LEBANON (Lebanon Co.) —

Many people chart a new course of action on New Year's Day, but few make the dramatic changes that Ken and Janet Winebark and their children will undertake this year.

Winebark is Lebanon County's livestock agent, who is known for his dedication to helping 4-H'ers raise successful livestock projects. On January 13, Winebark is giving up that career to be a full-time youth minister — without a guaranteed income.

Winebark said that his decision to switch career tracks actually began three years ago.

A Lay Witness Weekend at the couple's church challenged Winebark to think about what he really was accomplishing in life and where his primary focus lay.

His attention was drawn to two teen boys, the only teen-agers attending his church at that time.

"Would they drop out of going to church just like the other kids did during his teen years?"

church asked him to go bowling with them, Winebark consented.

From the time he rolled that first bowling ball down the alley, Winebark recognized that there was a connectedness between him and the teen-agers.

Meanwhile, his wife sensed that she and Ken should work as a couple by starting a youth group.

"How do you start a youth group with only two kids?" Ken countered.

Reluctantly he agreed to block out a month of Wednesday nights to hold a youth meeting.

"I didn't think the program would fly. Then I could say, I tried, but it didn't work," Winebark said.

Despite Winebark's skepticism, the first night, nine kids attended. The second night, attendance was in the 20s, then the 30s.

"It just soared from there," said Ken, who is still a bit flabbergasted by teens who come "to talk about God."

He said, "The amazing thing is that these teenagers are almost all senior-high-age boys who are

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He remembered his wife's concern for the children who attended Rejoice Club, which she directed for ages from four years to fifth grade. She often expressed concern that the children loved the club until fifth grade, when unexplainedly they stopped attending. She pleaded with her husband to get involved, but, he was too busy, he told her.

During that Lay Witness weekend, Winebark sensed an inner urging to become involved in the lives of those two teen-agers who continued to faithfully attend church services.

Inwardly, he argued that he was too busy. After all, his job required two to three evenings away from his wife and two children; he didn't need another night away doing something with other people's kids.

But when the two teens at

unchurched."

The Winebarks sense that the growth and the relationships that have developed between the youth and he and his wife is bigger than human explanations.

In fact, they credit it to a series of miracles — with God being the instigator.

Their love for the teen-agers and for God bubbles over in their enthusiasm to tell about "ways that they saw God do again and again."

For example, the Winebarks thought the youth meeting should be held in a gym, but their church had no gym and no money to rent one. After several inquiries, they were given the use of a free gym at the Richland Fire Hall.

"But it was upstairs — small and dark — and it echoed like crazy," Janet said.

With the help of that first gathering of teens, the Winebarks made



The New Year brings big changes to Ken and Janet Winebark with children Janine, 10, and Brandon, 8. Ken will leave his job as Lebanon County extension agent to devote full-time to helping alter the lives of teen-agers.

some renovations to the gym.

Even in that, they credit God for small miracles.

For when they went to buy a basketball hoop, the owner insisted on giving it and a scoreboard to them. They also put up a volleyball net. Another man who works for a snack company donates weekly snacks for the gathering.

The original agenda for the youth program was to play basketball and volleyball for about one hour, have a snack, and then a discussion on such topics as what the Bible has to say about anger, parents, friendships, sex, and God

guiding people today.

The Winebarks expected that the kids would be more interested in the social aspect rather than the spiritual content of the meetings.

"Instead, the discussion time is the big drawing card," Ken said. "The kids are eager to learn about God and eager to pray about problems."

"Three years ago, the thought of working with teen-age boys would have 'totally scared me,' Janet said.

"But I knew that it was important that Ken and I work together in this. So many kids don't see parents working together. They need to see stable marriages," she said.

To her surprise when she started working with teen-agers, she felt such love and closeness to the teen-agers that she can easily converse with them.

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The teens are encouraged to read the Bible. The Winebarks use the "Youth Bible," written in easy-to-understand language for today's teen-agers.

"We don't push Bibles, but if someone asks for one, we give him or her one," Winebark said. So far, they have given away 75 Bibles.

The Richland gym was made to accommodate only 20 people. When 58 teens started showing up for the meetings, the Winebarks knew changes had to be made.

Despite Ken's search for bigger facilities, he was unable to reach an agreement with any group because gyms were always rented out to sports league groups.

The gymnasium owners were not interested in donating a gym to a group without funds and with questionable characters.

Then the Richland Fire Hall gave the Winebarks one week's notice that they would need to vacate the building.

"That Wednesday night, the teens prayed about finding a meeting place," Janet said. "They were so full of faith and confidence that God would provide. You could really feel God working, and that night 25 of the teens gave their life to Christ."

God did provide a gym — just like the kids expected. The Myerstown Church of the Brethren offered their full-sized new gymnasium. The gym had been fully scheduled to meet the demands of league games, but when the board heard of the Winebarks' work with local youth, they sensed that the "it was God working and that the gym

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Ken and Janet Winebark believe the inspiration and guidance they find in the Bible is what teen-agers need in their own lives.

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