

Dairy Promotion Demands Sacrifice But Worth It, Says Melissa Bicksler

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BERNVILLE (Berks Co.) —
"Do you live in a castle?"
"Are you rich?"

These are a few of the questions that Melissa Bicksler answers during classroom presentations as the Pennsylvania Alternate Dairy Princess and as the former Berks County Dairy Princess.

Far weighty questions are asked when she promotes milk to consumers during supermarket and mall promotions.

Skeptical of the fat content, some consumers are downright nasty when offered cheese and milk punch. But Missy remains the "smiling princess" who is knowledgeable about low and non-fat dairy products and the importance of including them in a healthful diet.

The impertinence of some consumers doesn't faze Missy. She likes working with the public so much that she has changed her career path since becoming a dairy princess.

Previously she wanted to become a veterinarian because she liked giving shots and pills to the

cows. But her reign showed her that working with people is much more suited to her temperament. Now she plans to become a nurse in order to give shots to people instead of animals.

"I won't be able to corner a person like I do when giving shots to a cow, but dealing with the public teaches me to take life as it comes," Missy said.

The 18-year-old will graduate from Tulpehocken High School this week, and will enter Reading Hospital School of Nursing in the fall.

That doesn't mean she plans to give up her ties to farming. She owns 17 of the 60-cow herd owned by her parents, Thomas and Cathy Bicksler.

"I expect to stay in farming," she said.

Balancing a dual career won't be entirely new to Missy. This past year, she has had plenty of experience balancing school, dairy princess, farm, FFA, and 4-H responsibilities.

"I milk almost every night. It makes life challenging, but it teaches me to manage my time," she said.



Pennsylvania State Alternate Dairy Princess Melissa Bicksler plans to show this calf at fair and farm show competitions this year.

Missy is president of the ELCO 4-H dairy club and is a member of the Lebanon County Junior Holstein Club. For the last three years, she has been a team member of the Dairy Bowl and the dairy judging team, which requires lots of additional reading to keep abreast on dairy issues. A 4-H member for 10 years, Missy's dairy judging team won state competition last year.

Although she was vice president of FFA and received the Keystone Degree, Missy found that dairy princess activities sometimes needed to take precedence over FFA and 4-H events. But, she believes that her involvement in 4-H and FFA helped her do a better job as princess.

For example, public speaking in FFA resulted in her placing first in county and fourth in regional com-



Missy or "Missy" as she prefers to be called compiled a scrapbook of the many events where she participated in dairy promotion throughout the year. She said that despite being too busy for a social life and giving up field hockey, the sacrifices were well worth it.

petitions. And, participating in Dairy Bowl made her even more knowledgeable about the dairy industry.

There are only 400 students at Tulpehocken High School.

"We have the biggest land mass but one of the smallest in student numbers," she said.

Missy, who knows every student in the school, believes a small school has its advantages. "We have a higher teacher-student ratio."

Although she was a member of the school's field hockey team for five years, Missy gave it up to devote more time toward dairy princess duties. Despite her field hockey team qualifying for state playoffs, Missy said that giving it up for being a dairy princess was worth it.

"I loved every minute of being a dairy princess. I learned how to communicate with people and how the dairy industry really works."

Missy's reign also affects her parents' schedules. Her mother often drives her to activities, while her father does all the work in the barn.

Another time-consuming job for the Bicksler family happened

since Missy was crowned as state alternate in September. Her family moved from a Myerstown farm to a Berks County one. They are renting about 90 acres but own their own cows and replacements. They built a new 70-head tie stall barn on the property with closed ventilation fans. Rotational grazing is not used but the cows are put out for half a day.

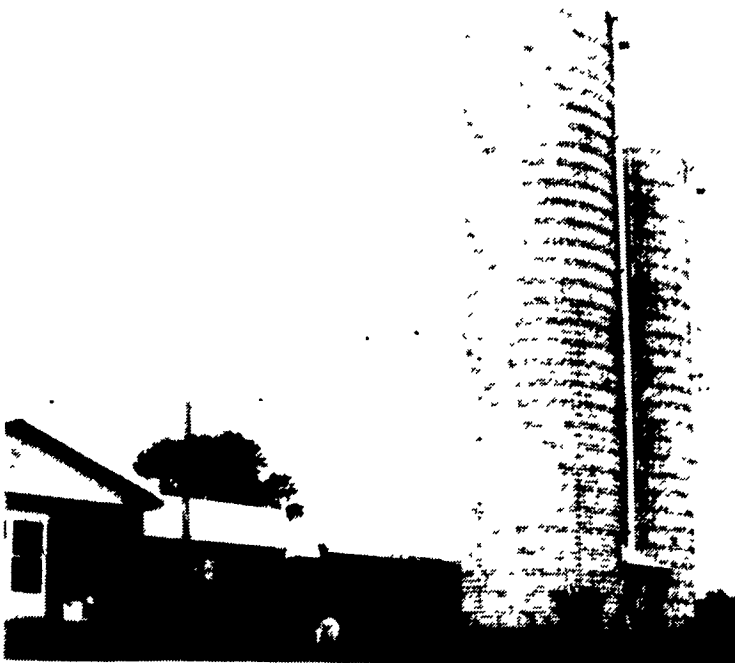
The Bickslers believe that it is important to pay close attention to the cows, because the herd changes from day to day. They feed grains individually because some cows need more or less than the average one.

"Consumers don't understand all the behind-the-scenes work of caring for a dairy herd. They think all you need is a cow that gives milk," Missy said.

She tries to help the public understand the hard work that goes into producing high quality milk.

It's been a busy year for Melissa who crowned her Berks County successor in May and will give up her state alternate crown in September at the state pageant.

She said, "I have had no social life. I'm away almost every weekend. But it's been worth it."



The Bickslers recently erected this 70-head tie stall barn with closed ventilation fans.



Dogs, cows, and cats get equal attention on the Bicksler farm according to Cathy Bicksler, left, with husband Thomas and daughter Melissa.