

'Distinguish Yourself' Becomes Natalie's Motto

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reality that life has a beginning and an end.

Dr. Welch, who witnessed family tragedy as a farm boy, and Connie, his wife, wanted their children raised on a farm.

"I always wanted my kids to grow up and see painful situations. I wanted them to learn responsibility," commented Dr. Welch. "In farming, they got to see both birth and death. They got an appreciation for life and developed a work ethic by taking care of the animals."

Today, because her parents began the process in her childhood, Natalie owns 12 head of animals including a Leadman daughter: Rainbow-C Leadman Jerin-ET, projected on August 31 this year at 305 days, 27,416 pounds of milk, 678 pounds of fat and 849 pounds of protein, which is "pretty impressive" for a first calf heifer, according to her dad.

Each of their kids, at an early age, was given one dairy animal and one steer to raise. Their parents supplied the feed. Next year at sale time, the money received was reinvested in another animal and the balance deposited in a savings account. The kids learned that the foundation for their future was being laid.

The 180-acre farm these days no longer supports an active dairy because of the clinic and family activities. About six years ago, the dairy herd was dispersed because both parents worked at the White Oak Veterinary Clinic and Natalie's siblings were off to college.

Until she decides to sell them, Natalie's milk cows are lodged with other area dairymen.

Some 80 heifers are pastured in the farm's rotational grazing paddocks — custom care animals, and heifers belonging to the Welch kids.

Embryo transfer work is also done today at the farm.

As she was growing up, little did the knowledgeable dairy princess realize how many dairy facts and figures were being absorbed into her mind.

"What she learned about animal disease, occupation of the farmer and veterinary work on the farm, probably prepared Natalie to be a better dairy princess," observed her dad. "The dairy bowl technical part taught Natalie to be more conversant," said her 4-H leader.

Mother Connie is a formidable coach of dairy bowl teams, although at first she only helped the 4-H'ers with their sewing and beef projects. A year later, in 1983, she began leading the Junior Holstein Dairy Bowl Team and eventually the 4-H Dairy Bowl Team, as well.

She guesses that she's trained 60 to 80 quizzers in her career as a dairy bowl leader. She's seen two 4-H teams and one Junior Holstein team make it to the nationals. "We've come close (to national victory)," she said.

The petite and industrious mother of four plus several foster children said that she grabbed her dairy facts when she could. It was an ongoing challenge.

"Part of it is just working with it daily," she said, "taking notes at (official) quizzes and reading magazines. That's how we prepared, I put all these things in question and answer form."

This extra-curricular activity has occupied the last 12 years of Natalie's mother's life and now, with her last child in college, it seems natural that thoughts of grandmothing are beginning to

intrude, the house being empty and all.

"When my children start having grandchildren, then I'll have to get involved with them," she said.

The foundation beneath the princess was also constructed with the blocks of spirituality laid by her parents.

Her mother, who teaches Sunday School, helps with the youth group and leads a Bible study for high school and college-aged girls, says, "We've tried to teach them and guide them spiritually so they would have faith in God and help for their major decisions in life."

The family belongs to the Heritage Baptist Church in Somerset.

Natalie says she is glad for the experiences in public speaking that came from being the state dairy princess. She developed poise and confidence in social situations that could easily have overwhelmed any young adult, especially when knowledge of the issue was crucial to success.

"I know what people are listening to and paying attention to," she said. Still, her favorites are children.

"Little kids are great," she said. "They will say whatever is on their minds. They are honest and funny, but really interested, and you see how serious your influence is," she said.

Her treks and appearances throughout the state found Natalie, who anticipates a career in research, talking with farmers everywhere, dairy cooperatives and other agricultural organizations. Sometimes, her presence was requested outside Pennsylvania, New York, for instance, or the middle states of Maryland or Virginia.

Other appearances for the princess were the celebration of bottling the 200 millionth gallon of milk at the Weis Market in Sunbury, Ag Progress Days, the state Farm Show, the Philadelphia Phillies home game honoring dairy, Farm-City Day in Tioga County, the Fayette County Health Fair, the dairy princess training seminar, the All-American Dairy



The Welch family includes, from left, Matthew, parents Davis and Connie, Natalie, and Heather. Jennifer is missing from the picture.

Show in Harrisburg, events in her native Somerset County and then, the National Holstein Convention in Pittsburgh last June. It was "Real" whipped cream slathered over her "dairy good" year.

It was at the grass roots level, however, that Natalie gained a greater awareness of how little people really understand the importance of dairy to their daily living. Unfortunately, too much ignorance still exists in the schools themselves, she discovered.

She said that while some schools do emphasize nutrition in their curriculum, others don't and some teachers have virtually no knowledge about the relationship of dairy products to good health.

Nor have they heard of the "Real" seal that designates commercial dairy products as being honest-to-goodness pure.

Putting her best foot forward as the Pennsylvania State Dairy Princess capped a personal victory for the 18-year-old graduate of the Berlin-Brothersvalley High

School.

Her older siblings, Natalie always thought, were very accomplished at what they did and she admired them. She saw eldest sister Jennifer, who is now an engineer with a degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as the "brains" of the Welch outfit; and brother, Matt, who took two years at Penn State and is now managing a heifer operation in

Chester County, as the one with the irrepressible sense of humor; and sister, Heather, a Bob Jones University student, as the outstanding athlete of the bunch.

And even though she will continue to do so, Natalie Dawn Welch knows she has set her mind to gain something and succeeded. That unique accomplishment will never be stolen because its value is locked inside her.

"Distinguish Yourself."



During a tour promoting milk, Natalie Welch met Jim Fregosl, head coach with the Philadelphia Phillies.



Jennifer Welch is the oldest of the three sisters.

