

Dairy Farming By Choice, Not Birth

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LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.)

— A dairy princess who isn't from the farm?

Audra Wood is one of at least four county dairy princesses crowned recently who doesn't live on a farm.

"Requirements have been broadened in recent years. Although a prospective dairy princess does not need to come from a dairy farm, they do need to have some ties to the industry," said Arlene Wilbur, assistant director for Pennsylvania Dairy Princess Promotion Services (PDPPS).

Wilbur recognizes that dairy princesses aren't necessarily competent spokespersons for the industry just because they grew up on a dairy farm.

Capable dairy princesses are those who understand the importance of including dairy products in the diet, someone who can speak easily to the public, someone who has a high regard for dairy farmers, and someone who sincerely wants to promote the dairy industry for the betterment of dairy farmers and for the consumer.

In 1956, the first young woman was chosen as the official representative and spokesperson for all dairy farmers. Forty-two years later, the program has grown and changed. Sponsorship of the program has varied over the years, but in 1983, PDPPS was established in order to provide a more uniform program to serve all areas of Pennsylvania equally.

Although contestants no longer need to come from a dairy farm, the contestant or a parent must be employed in the dairy industry or an agri-business that serves it. She must be single and be between the ages of 16 and 24. She must possess the knowledge, poise, and speaking ability necessary to carry out the duties as a spokesperson for the industry.

Audra is a 17-year-old who fits



Lancaster County Dairy Princess Audra Wood doesn't need to do any milk promoting in the family. She said her 6-year-old brother drinks two quarts of milk daily. Her mother Barbara Wharton likes cooking with dairy products.

those qualifications. She did not grow up on a dairy farm, but she is milking cows.

Because Audra considers herself a real outdoor person who didn't want to work in a restaurant, she jumped at the opportunity to work at Red Knob Farm, where she feeds calves and helps milk the 380-head herd.

Audra confesses that she wasn't much of a milk drinker before she became interested in the dairy princess program.

She said, "Like every other teen, I grabbed a soda before milk."

But when she read nutrition literature, Audra recognized the need to include more dairy products in her diet.

Now her favorite drink is milk flavored with vanilla, hot fudge sauce, or strawberry syrup.

The best, she said, is to add 2 tablespoons orange juice to milk, blend in banana, ice, and a sprinkle of nutmeg.

"I think the most important food group to promote is dairy. And the most important age group to target is my friends," Audra said.

By friends, she means teenagers.

"Our bones aren't finished growing. And I realize how important it is to have enough calcium for strong bones," she said.

It wasn't until the state Farm Show in January that Audra heard about the dairy princess program.

"A woman gave me a booklet about the program. Right away, I knew this was for me," Audra said. As soon as she returned home, Audra told her mom, "I'm going to become a dairy princess."

Of course, she had to prepare a skit, give a speech, and compete in the Lancaster County pageant to achieve the crown.

Audra wasn't disappointed. She said of the promotional responsibilities, "This is so real. It's so down to earth. I'm so proud to be promoting the industry. It's such an honor."

Audra also has other agricultural interests. She is an FFA member and a senior at Solanco High School. She raises two red Duroc hogs for an FFA project. Although a late joiner of the FFA, Audra said that she is trying to make up for lost time by participating in as many projects as possible. Audra is an FFA reporter and enjoys the FFA officer meetings throughout the summer.

Although her main focus at school is FFA involvement, Audra also enjoys participating in mock trials in which schools reenact trials and compete against each other.

This past year, she served as the prosecuting attorney. She had to try out for the position, think up the questions to ask, and come up with opening and closing statements.

Talking comes easily to her. Audra suspects her ease in communication comes from her mom and great grandfather.

Audra lives with her mother, Barbara Wharton, and a six-year-old brother, Robert, near Quarryville.

"He's my sidekick and goes everywhere I go," Audra said of her brother. She's also proud that he drinks two quarts of milk everyday.

A sister Abby, 13, lives in Delaware.

When her dad left the family, it was difficult for Audra to adjust. On the positive side, Audra said the experience has forced her to take on more responsibility because her mom has her own wallpapering and painting business.

"My mother is a hard worker and very responsible. She's very supportive of me, although we don't have a lot of time together," Audra said.

At the Union Presbyterian Church near her home, Audra serves on the pulpit committee and is active in the youth group.

Following graduation, Audra definitely plans on college, probably Penn State. She'd like to travel west to Montana and then settle in the Lancaster County area.

At least three other county dairy princesses have a non-farm background, but have related ties to agriculture. One has a father who is a milk hauler, another's father is a DHIA technician, and another one's dad works for Sire Power.

While the farming bluebloods might fear that dairy promotion is at a disadvantage if it is being represented by those with a non-dairy



Audra confesses that she wasn't much of a milk drinker before she started reading nutrition literature handed out by dairy companies. "Like every other teen, I grabbed a soda before milk," she said. But that's a thing of the past. Now Audra prefers milk drinks and is a firm believer that her age group needs to be convinced of imminent health dangers from not consuming enough calcium in their diet.

background, Wilbur, as coordinator, points out that several board members and employees of dairy associations are not from farms either.

Wilbur said, "I think it's a benefit to the farmer to have those from a non-farming background. We need people out there who support the dairy farmer. The greater the number, the more apt we are to preserve agriculture."

Wilbur said the controversy among the non-farming public is whether or not they should use dairy products.

County dairy princesses receive extensive training on how to address those issues.

"We are not out there promoting just for the sake of promoting. We believe we are reaching consumers with a message that is in their best interests," Wilbur said.

"Why turn anyone away who sincerely sees the benefits of the dairy industry? Why not encourage them to become supporters of the dairy industry?" she asked.

"We need more understanding and more respect for the dairy industry. We need well-informed people about agriculture issues and this (the dairy princess program) is a good avenue (for education)."

"Agriculture is what Lancaster County is made of," Audra said. "It's a heritage I want to continue. My grandparents and great grandparents grew up on the farm."

"I definitely want farming to be part of my future forever and live on a farm," she said.

In the meantime, Audra said that she has a tremendous love for agriculture and plans on doing a "knock 'em out" job in promoting the dairy industry.



As an outdoor person, Audra enjoys maintaining perennial flower beds at her home. Although she isn't from the farm, she has a job milking dairy cows and feeding calves at Red Knob Farm, about five miles from her home.

Homestead Notes