

Meet Pennsylvania's Outstanding Young Farmers Under 30

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LEBANON (Lebanon Co.) —

Many people undergo a career metamorphosis between teen and adult years. Sometimes the change is expected and sometimes surprising.

Perhaps no one was more stunned by Ammon Peiffer Jr.'s change than he, himself. Ammon and his wife Brenda recently were named Pennsylvania's Outstanding Young Farmers Under 30.

When I was in high school, I didn't have any intention of staying on the farm," Ammon said. "If I'd have known, I probably would have paid more attention in FFA."

For a few years after high school graduation, Ammon operated a custom combining business.

"For some reason I got interested in milking. It just kind of grew on me," Ammon said. Growing up on his parents' Lebanon County farm, milking had seemed too time restraining, and he didn't feel any affinity for the cows.

That has changed. Now Ammon is always searching for ways to improve cow health and production.

He and his wife have made so many improvements that they were selected Regional Seven Outstanding Young Farmers Under 30.

As regional winners, the Peiffers knew they were automatically entered in the state competition.

"But we didn't expect to be selected," Brenda said. "When filling out the application, we were amazed ourselves at how much we had accomplished."

Surprised because change often seems slow when one has big dreams and limited resources.

The couple married in 1997 and Ammon took over farming

responsibilities because his dad had lung problems. Ownership of the 65-acre farm continues to belong to his dad, who is able to help a bit with cropwork.

Brenda, although not from a dairy farm, had some ties to farming in neighboring Berks County. Her dad helped on his family's farm and drives a milk truck. As a high schooler, Brenda had no interest in farming. She earned a bachelor's degree with the intent of working toward a master's in physical therapy.

"But while I was in school (Beaver College), I began to appreciate what I took for granted growing up. I valued my upbringing and decided that a farm is the best place to raise a family," Brenda said.

Brenda chose to help her husband full time on the farm rather than pursue a master's degree. The couple are expecting their first child in June.

The couple milk 60 Holsteins. The Peiffers dream is to "stand all the cows" and have everything on one farm.

"We stand 40 and switch cows," Brenda said.

That inconvenience has not hindered a spurt in milk production. When Ammon took over, the herd averaged 18,300 pounds of milk. Now DHIA records show a rolling herd average of 22,913 pounds.

"We don't use BST and we milk only twice daily," Ammon said.

He attributes the two-year spurt to buying a used mixer to feed total mixed rations.

Cow comfort, no doubt, also contributes to the increase. Mattresses were installed in the stalls in 1997, and last year, fans were installed for tunnel ventilation.

The farm had no calf facilities and the Peiffers used calf hutches in the beginning.

"Because we were breeding better calves, we wanted a better

place to raise them," Ammon said.

They searched the advantages and disadvantages of several different facilities and settled on erecting a 30X65-foot greenhouse with ridge venting and side curtains.

"We didn't want to put in a permanent structure since we don't plan on staying here," Ammon said.

The couple are delighted with the greenhouse, which houses 25 calves and can easily be expanded by adding five-foot sections.

Condensation and stuffiness can easily be controlled with proper ventilation.

"Since we are feeding better, paying more attention to details, and have the greenhouse, the calves have been really growing nicely. We haven't lost any calves," Brenda said.

About 65 percent of the Holsteins are registered. The goal is to attain 100 percent registration.

"If you're going to have cows, why not have them registered? You can market them better," Ammon said.

Although the couple is concentrating on improving cow genetics, they said, it is still too early to reap those results.

The work is time consuming because not only do the cows need to be switched for milking, but the operation is spread over three farms requiring 1½ hours daily running back and forth for feeding dry cows and 50 replacements. They rent an additional 200 acres.

Brenda oversees the record-keeping and developed a spreadsheet for the operation. She said computer training is one example of where her college studies translated into usefulness on the farm.

"I'd be lost if it wasn't for Brenda," Ammon said of maintaining computer records.

The couple ships milk to Land 'O Lakes.

Although Ammon grew up showing cattle in 4-H and FFA competitions, Brenda did not. She had helped her cousins and was fascinated with the skill required. Now she shows some of the herd at Lebanon and Schuylkill fairs. Last season, they showed the grand champion cow at Schuylkill, a 4-year-old cow they had purchased as a heifer to use as a foundation cow for their herd. The cow went on to be named supreme champion.

After the cow did so well, the Peiffers started using her for flushing to the same bull that had sired one of their champion calves.

Although only four eggs were flushed, it resulted in four pregnancies, which they expect will improve future herd genetics.

Before the couple married, Ammon named the farm



Since the Peiffers erected the 30X65-foot greenhouse, behind them, to house calves, they have had no calf fatalities. The Peiffers believe that increased cow comfort and TMR rations has boosted herd production from 18,300 to 22,643 in less than two years.

"Boxed in Acres," he said, "because it's boxed in by developments and across the road by Wengert's Dairy."

But visitors see the attractive layout and open space surrounding the brick farmhouse and the white barns. It's only after the Peiffers point out their belief that continuing to farm in this location is not a possibility that one notices large, new homes across the fields.

"This land is far too valuable for development to remain in farming," Ammon said. "It's good ground (limestone soil) for farming, but the price of land is hard for a young couple to afford."

Spiraling milk prices haven't dampened this young couple's enthusiasm.

Ammon said, "In the two years we've been in this, farming has been good to us. You need to put away when times are good to make it through the rough times."

"We're optimistic most days, but somedays we question (the wisdom of farming)," Brenda said.

Last summer's drought resulted in only 10-15 tons corn per acre compared with 25 tons on a good year. Alfalfa haylage was also cut in half.

Fortunately, the Peiffers still had excess forage from 1998 to carry them over.

Corn silage is unloaded into a 18x70-foot concrete stave silo. Ammon adds propionic acid to insure good fermentation. He believes it improves the nutrient

value of drought-stressed corn silage.

The Peiffers read articles and attend Young Farmer programs and educational events such as Ag Progress to keep abreast on farming research.

"I'm not afraid to ask questions. I don't know everything," Ammon said of knowledge that can be gained just by talking with other farmers.

Although it is often difficult to take time away from farm responsibilities, the Peiffers said it is well worth the sacrifice.

Ammon and Brenda, who are 26- and 25-years-old respectively, said they have several friends their age who are also farming.

"There's a handful of us willing to take the risk," he said.

Despite some experts' predictions, the Peiffers believe small family farms will survive. But, they said, it will require beginners such as themselves to move to areas where land is cheaper.

For relaxation, both participate in a volleyball league. Brenda has been taking quilt classes.

The couple said they don't really like being thrust in the limelight as state Outstanding Young Farmers. "We're more low key," Ammon said.

At the same time, by reflecting on the changes that have been made, the process has enabled them to see results.

"It's been really satisfying seeing how things have progressed here. It's hard work but worth it," Brenda said.



Pennsylvania Outstanding Young Farmers — Under 30 are Ammon and Brenda Peiffer Jr. They operate Boxed In Acres, a dairy farm in Lebanon County. The couple are active in the Cedar Crest Young Farmer Chapter, where Ammon is president.



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