

# Bitler Well-Qualified To Deliver Ag's Perspective To Media

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**FLEETWOOD (Berks Co.)** — The media often gets a bad rap when it comes to reporting on agricultural-related subjects.

Oftimes outlandish claims are not meant to construe the facts. Instead, the statements can be attributed to misunderstanding.

In an effort to better communicate agriculture's message, Mid-Atlantic Dairy Association has recently appointed 15 dairy farmers to fill ag spokesperson roles in designated areas.

Phoebe Bitler is one of the recently appointed ag spokespersons, whose job is to bridge the gap between farm and city perspectives.

She isn't merely a talking head, but has garnered a harvest of knowledge from growing up on a family farm, farming in partnership with her husband, and working in numerous ag-related organizations.

She is a former Berks County dairy princess, a home economist for Penn State extension, Pennsylvania Young Farmer's National Ag Spokesperson, and much more.

As the youngest of five siblings, Phoebe said during her growing up years, she often accompanied her parents to dairy cooperative leadership meetings and to National Holstein Conventions, where her dad served as a delegate.

"I think that influenced me more than anything to farm and to promote the industry," she said of the various opportunities she has taken advantage of as an adult.

"I considered taking ag sciences in college, but not many females enrolled in that course when I entered," Bitler said. Instead, she was graduated as a home economics major at Del Val College. Subjects studied there continue to intrigue her and have influenced many of her activities such as teaching crafts.

Through 4-H activities, Phoebe met her husband-to-be David Bitler, who grew up on a dairy farm there. After the couple married in 1977, they farmed two years in Southern Lancaster County. Phoebe took her 17 4-H cows and the couple purchased her husband's dad's herd to farm on shares with another farmer.

"It was a good way to get started in farming without having a lot invested in machinery and other overhead," she said.

In 1979, the couple purchased Bitler's childhood farm in partnership with her brother and his wife. The partnership continued until 1986, when health issues forced her brother to sell out. Phoebe and her husband traded



**Ag spokesperson Phoebe Bitler farms full time, helps her herb garden flourish, and participates in many ag-related organizations.**



**Phoebe Bitler consults with her husband Dave, who oversees the herd's breeding program, and son Jesse, who repairs the farm's equipment and has his own tractor to do custom farming.**

some equipment for her brother's share of cattle.

"Milk and genetics make the income," Phoebe said of the decision to keep the herd intact and sell some of the equipment.

"I like milking cows that are clean and look attractive," she said of her twice daily responsibility. The farm employs several part-time workers to help milk about 105 cows and farm about 400 acres. About 182 acres are part of the Vista Grande farm.

David oversees the breeding program. The Bitler name has become synonymous with good breeding stock.

Phoebe said that 94 percent of their bulls are sold for breeding to other farms.

"We don't worry so much about genetics and numbers. We look at production and longevity. It helps to keep a cow a long time," she said of financial advantages.

David also serves as an agent or as "matchmaker" between buyers and sellers for herds. He has a set fee per head, which enables his clients to know exact costs before contracting his services.

Phoebe helps out with the required digital photography, posting Website information and faxing paperwork with clients.

Son Jesse is 19 years old. His interest lies heavily with the

equipment end rather than in milking. He recently returned from participating in national competition for diesel technology, where his team placed 12 in national competition. Last year, Jesse was a member of the FFA team that placed third in national competition for tractor restoration.

His mechanical prowess is a huge benefit on the farm for repairing equipment. He also repairs equipment for other farmers. He also purchased equipment to develop a custom farming business and custom raises heifers and also some to sell.

Two years ago the Bitlers faced a choice. Did they want to expand or remain a small family farm?

After crunching numbers and taking an in-depth look at possi-

ble outcomes, the Bitlers chose to remain small but do some barn remodeling. In 1999, the Bitlers sold 100 head of heifers — the prime of their herd ranging between two to five years of age — and 14 dairy bulls.

This herd reduction enabled them to move the remaining 39 cows to one side of the barn while all-new steel beams and posts were installed. They removed the concrete floors, increased the length of stalls on one side of the barn, and installed a new water system and water beds for cow comfort. The stalls were reduced three inches in width to prevent the cows from turning sideways. This change gained space for two new stalls. When half the barn was finished, the herd was moved into the new part so that the next phase of renovation could be completed.

This method enabled them to continue milking the herd during the complete renovation phase.

This change enables tractor and trailers to back in the barn and unload grain with ease.

"We are content not to be big. We haven't regretted it," Phoebe said. "Expanding would have required a whole new employee management program, which I did not want to be saddled with. I do not enjoy managing employees," she said.

Dwindling milk prices this past year have also confirmed their decision not to expand.

"Last year was the tightest (financial) year we ever had in farming. It has caused us to diversify more," Phoebe said.

She thinks it is important for children to have diversified opportunities that they alone are responsible for, which is why Jesse is pursuing the custom farming route.

One of the extracurricular activities Phoebe oversees is farm tours. She plans yearly excursions of 7-8 days.

This year she has planned a farm-focused trip to New England from Sept. 28-Oct. 4. The bus capacity for 49 people was quickly filled. Many of the participants accompany the Bitlers annually. She attempts to keep off the beaten path of tourist traps and find fascinating places to visit, not necessarily dairy but farm related with a mix of culture activities.

"Farm people don't know how to take a vacation," Bitler said of their notorious work ethic. They like to participate in these bus tours because the participants share similar interests. Not all the participants are farmers, but generally have a farm background. Participants range in ages. Some take their whole family.

The trips require some extensive scouting out ahead of time. Phoebe and her husband like to visit the planned spot a year in advance at the same time as the tour so they can judge traffic, weather, and other things. These are working vacations as they sleuth out prospective leads and discard those which they believe will lack appeal to their clients.

It's an opportunity for the Bitlers to travel, but it is no vacation managing a busload of people and the logistics required.

Bitler also serves on the Berks County Conservancy board, is an

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**As the ag spokesperson, Phoebe Bitler helps bridge the gap between farm and city. Recently a Philadelphia television station interviewed her on biosecurity issues and the steps dairy farmers take to keep farms safe and secure.**

