



Ardounie Farms is a three-generation family farm. From left are Carol and Donald Duncan Sr. with Mazie the dog, Loretta, and DJ with children Jessica, 7, and Luke, 5.

Dairy Farm Family Designs, Grows Corn Maze To Promote Milk

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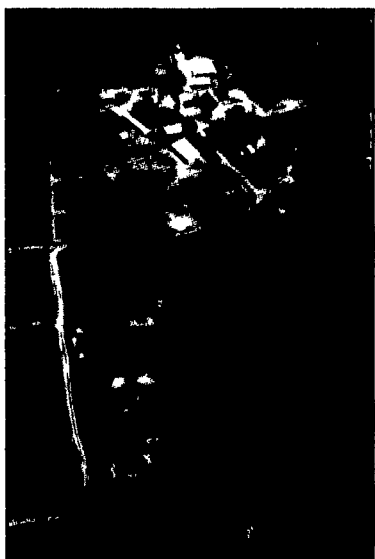
ROBESONIA (Berks Co.) — Loretta Duncan doesn't rely on professionals and satellites when it comes to designing a corn maze. Instead she resorts to graph paper and pencil to produce a maze that covers eight acres and has more than two miles of twists and turns.

Loretta has a few secrets — which she won't divulge — and lots of experience drawing mazes.

"I grew up doodling, drawing mazes, and challenging people to find their way through them," Loretta said.

In those days, she had no idea that maze drawing would eventually lead into an income-producing livelihood.

She and her husband DJ (short for Donald Junior) operate a 137-acre dairy farm in Robesonia. They have a son Luke, 5, and their daughter Jessica, 7, is the Berks County Dairy Li'l Miss, so it seemed natural to use the corn maze to promote dairy products. Thus, the message viewed from the sky reads "3-A-Day Real Seal."



Maze visitors not only get to solve the challenge of the maze but also enjoy a 30-minute hay ride of the dairy farm and surrounding rural area. The ride stops at the calf pens for people who want to pet a calf. If guests are lucky, they may get to see a calf birth.

The 3-A-Day design refers to the recent national dairy promotional blitz that reminds everyone that three servings of dairy products are necessary every day in order to maintain healthy bones and teeth and to avoid osteoporosis.

Many visitors in the past years have tackled the maze, which opens Labor Day weekend through October and the first weekend in November.

"The maze is a family operation and we want to keep it that way. We want to keep everything low-key," DJ said. "Whoever shows up, shows up."

School groups, Scouts, families, and more show up to solve the challenge of the maze. Their choices aren't merely hit-and-miss decisions when faced with choices to turn right, left, or continue straight ahead. Instead, visitors on arrival choose one of three worksheets with multiple-choice questions and answers. On paper, a question is designed for each turn. Answers designate left, right, or straight ahead, depending on the choices selected.

A person may wander around the maze for hours, but for the person who chooses the right path, the maze can be conquered in about 30 minutes. Of course, if someone gets desperate, he can cheat and follow a hand rope to exit the maze.

"But they are only cheating themselves," DJ said, "if they exit the maze early."

That's because the maze has some amazing features: a rain room where guests are misted with water blown by a fan — a refreshing cool-off on a hot day.

DJ said that he dreams up new ideas to add to the maze when sitting on his tractor.

The maze isn't the only thing groups get for the price of admission. Included is a 30-minute hayride tour of the farm and rural roads surrounding the farm, which includes a drive through the calf barn and time out to pet the calves.

Ice Cream Day is scheduled for Sept. 14, when the Berks County Dairy Princess and her court — which includes the Duncan's daughter — serve ice cream to maze visitors.

In the month of October, activ-

ities include pick-your-own pumpkin from the Duncan's one-acre pumpkin patch, pumpkin painting, and a pumpkin slingshot game. Seven-year-old Jessica operates her own tent where she offers face painting and oversees the pumpkin painting.

A bonfire is available for visitors, but small campfires will also be built by special request for groups. Soccer clubs and church groups often choose to have a private campfire.

"We don't serve food, but guests are welcome to bring their own, and even roast hot dogs over the fire," DJ said.

The maze is open to 10 p.m. on what the Duncans call flashlight nights, which means weather that is conducive to being outside. Special events are planned throughout the season, which include Trick or Treat night, Grandparents Day, and other events.

Although the corn maze adds more work to the Duncans' already busy schedule, it also offers them a chance to relate to the non-farming community.

Loretta said, "Dairying is a nonstop job. Milking doesn't stop for anything — not holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, illnesses — nothing. Often while I'm mowing on the farm, I catch a sight of pickups pulling boats or jet skis toward nearby Blue marsh Lake. It isn't really envy I feel because I chose farming as my way of life, but it makes me more aware that our lifestyle doesn't lend itself to having the time for many leisure activities. Seeing those boats is a reminder of that. Our life is dairying except from Labor Day to the beginning of November."

Running both businesses is a real challenge for the Duncans, which is incorporated with DJ's dad Donald Duncan Sr., who is semi-retired. He and his wife, Carol, live in the farmhouse. The younger generation have a smaller home on the property.

The younger generation do most of the hands-on work connected with the dairy, beef, and crop operation.

Donald Sr. helps with the spraying and fieldwork on the 350 acres they farm. He has long been associated with milk promotion. He serves on the board of Select Sire Power, Select Sires,



On September 14, guests can enjoy Ice Cream Day with the Berks County Dairy Princess Pam Werley, Li'l Dairy Miss Jessica Duncan, and other court members. Ice cream day is one of the special events planned at Duncan's Corn Maze, Robesonia.

Mid-Atlantic Dairy Promotion, and Pennsylvania Dairy Princess Program Services.

Although Donald moved to the farm with his parents when he was 12 years old, it wasn't a working farm. His dad was a salesman from New York who wanted to semi-retire on the farm. After Donald studied animal husbandry and agronomy at Penn State and served several years in the Army, he returned to the family farm to turn it into a working operation.

"We bought cows from Wisconsin because they had the best ones," Donald Sr. said. We started with 25 animals. In 1954, he made many improvements such as adding a freestall barn, a milking parlor, and increased the herd size.

"We were the first in Berks County to get a system that took the milk from cow to milk tank to milk truck," Donald Sr. said.

Additional barns and an updated milking parlor were added later. The herd size was increased to 100 head in 1978-1980. When DJ and his dad incorporated, they added calf and heifer pens.

The Duncan's named their farm Ardounie Farms, which is derived from the Scottish family name for "Dunkie."

"Our goal is to milk 150," DJ said.

Milking of the 120-cow herd is done by a Mexican family, who the Duncans have employed nine years.

"The Mexicans are really conscientious, and are good at detecting mastitis and other herd health problems. It works out really well," DJ said. "They have two kids about the same ages as ours, so they often play together and we help each other with babysitting."

Carol is bilingual, which is an asset in communicating with the hired help.

DJ feeds the cows and oversees the breeding. Loretta does the recordkeeping and calf management.

"We keep waiting for brighter days to come, but they didn't come yet," the elder Duncan

said.

"Last year's drought and the drop in milk prices is devastating financially," DJ said.

The younger Duncans thought up the idea of the corn maze to supplement the dairy farm income. They also raise one acre of pumpkins.

The amount of maze visitors is dependent on the weather. If it rains during the day, people often stay away, but the maze dries out fast, according to DJ.

Every year, the Duncans update the maze operation. The first year, they pumped water from the creek and used a generator for electricity. Today they have a water line and electricity running to the corn maze located about half-a-mile from their house and barns. A refrigerator and camper is on-site for family members. Numerous white tents hold activities. The rain room is used as long as the weather permits, but when it turns cold, the rain room becomes a strobe light room.

The maze is well-lit at night. Another tent is filled with shelled corn about six inches deep, for kids to play in just like a sandbox. In fact, sandbox toys are included. "Kids love it," DJ said.

Bands play occasionally in the music tent.

"Our maze may not be as intricate as some that are professionally designed, but I think it's more family friendly," DJ said. "It isn't as commercial, and has lots of activities for the family in addition to the maze."

The corn maze is located on the Robesonia-Bernville Road, one mile from Rt. 422, or six miles from Rt. 183.

The maze is open every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday in September through October, and Nov. 1-2, from 1 p.m.-8 p.m. Admission is \$6 for 6 years old and older, and \$2 for 5 years and younger.

Special group rates are also available.

For more information, call (610) 693-8056 or check out the Website, www.duncanscornmaze.com.



Children like climbing through the black hole, which is a large water pipe. Sometimes DJ rolls it from side to side to give the children inside a bit more excitement.