

Farmer feature – www.dairyspot.com

Name: Deborah Benner
Family: Husband Arlin Benner
Location: Mt. Joy, Lancaster County, Pa.
Dairy Operation: Yippee! Farms

Dairy Operation: Eight years ago, life changed dramatically for Deborah Benner, who was working as a television, print and stage actress based in New York City. While performing on stage in “Noah” at the Sight and Sound theater in Lancaster, Benner rented a house locally with no intention of staying longer than the duration of the six-month show. After a chance meeting with her landlady’s nephew, Arlin Benner, her plan to leave Lancaster County changed. Deborah and Arlin were married three months later.

For two years after their marriage, Deborah continued her acting career while Arlin operated the 150-cow dairy that he had purchased from his father seven years earlier. She claims their lives paralleled the 1960’s television sitcom, “Green Acres,” where the New York City wife comes to live on a farm.

The learning curve for farm life was great for Deborah, who grew up in an affluent family of doctors and surgeons in suburban Texas. “I learned quickly that when you got rain or a heifer calf, that those were good things!” Deborah explained. “I would always say ‘Yippee!’ which is how we chose the name for the farm.”

Being of strong Christian faith, the Benners chose to include the Bible verse Malachi 4:2 on their farm sign. “But to you who fear my name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in its wings. You will go out, and leap like calves from the stall.” “That’s what farming’s all about,” Deborah said.

Expanding the Farm Operation: When the opportunity arose for the Benners to rent the neighboring farm, Deborah decided to forgo her acting career to help Arlin expand their dairy business. They began milking 285 cows at the second farm. Two years after that the Benners leased another farm, adjacent to the two they were already operating, and began milking 200 cows there. They are now milking nearly 650 Holstein cows on the three dairies and are currently in the process of renting a fourth farm.

Because land is at such a premium in Lancaster County, and therefore very expensive, there is less financial risk to operate three separate dairies than to purchase the land to build one large dairy.

As soon as Deborah began working on the farm full-time, she started raising all the calves. The calves are housed in hutches, or pens -90 in all- and are fed twice daily. When they are about 8 weeks old, the calves are moved to other barns on the farm.

Deborah manages the 18 employees of Yippee! Farms. They hire mostly Hispanic workers to do the milking, which is done three times a day on each farm. Deborah, who speaks Spanish fluently, is able to teach milking procedures to the workers.

Arlin is the “field man,” spending most of his time planting, raising and harvesting the crops on 700 acres. The Benners grow all their own forages and corn on their farm. They purchase supplemental minerals as needed to round out the feeding rations for their cows. Corn silage and haylage is harvested in the fall and then stored in 40 feet by 200 feet horizontal trench silos. The cows are fed this feed all winter and spring.

A major attraction of the farm is the Rocky Acre Bed and Breakfast owned and operated by Arlin’s parents. It boasts a “country-style experience” in the 10-bedroom farm house built in the early 1800s. Guests enjoy tours of the dairy, and as a reminder of their visit, they can purchase Yippee! Farms and Rocky Acre merchandise.

The need for dairy promotion is important. When Deborah and Arlin were first married, she took over the farm’s financial recordkeeping. She was unclear about the dairy checkoff, the 15-cent per hundredweight (hundred pounds of milk) deduction taken from each milk check.

“Don’t we have a say in where this goes? It’s my money,” Deborah thought at the time. She soon learned how checkoff funds are used to promote milk locally and nationally to increase the demand for dairy products.

Having worked for an advertising firm in Texas, Deborah appreciates the need for promotion. She wanted to offer input on how the dairy farmer’s hard-earned dollars were being spent, so she nominated herself for the National Dairy Promotion and Research Board monitored by USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service.

The 36-member board, comprised of dairy farmers from around the country, determines how milk advertising dollars are spent. Deborah was elected for a three-year term and is now entering her third year on the board.

Deborah is also involved in the agricultural community on a local level. She is a member of the Agriculture Committee for the Lancaster County Chamber of Commerce and the Lancaster County Farm Bureau board of directors.

Although being a dairy farmer is not quite how Deborah Benner envisioned earning her income, she’s proud of her accomplishments. She enjoys working hard with her husband and learns more about the dairy industry each day. Lancaster County is not exactly Manhattan, but she figures if she can make it there, she can make it anywhere!