



Bright Ideas in Dairy Promotion

Earlene the Milking Queen sits quietly in her stall at the Thumb Octagon Barn in Gagetown. She requires neither feed nor water, yet can produce gallons of milk that can be harvested by eager visitors to the barn. Earlene, along with her human volunteers, teach young and old alike about dairy farming and dairy products.

Earlene is the handiwork of MMPA Member Debbie Kubacki of Sebewaing and her husband Tim's late uncle Earl Schadd.

"I needed a cow to milk for Project RED that would not kick—for liability purposes" Debbie explains. "So I contacted my husband Tim's Uncle Earl, a retired engineer and asked him if he would work with me to fabricate a life-size milking cow."

Earl agreed, fashioning a wooden body then using his engineering skills to create a plastic udder contraption that could hold real milk with teats that would milk similarly to a cow. Debbie says he spent many hours to ensure Earlene's udder would not be a "leaker."

"Uncle Earl's only request was that Earlene's first test run would be at the family reunion to make sure all the "bugs" were worked out," Debbie says.

Once Earlene made her debut at Huron County's Project RED, word of her success spread throughout the dairy community. Soon she was scheduled to appear at Ag Expo, Breakfast on the Farm, parades, fairs, Ag in the Classroom and other Project RED events throughout the state. When she's not traveling, Earlene

serves as part of the dairy educational exhibit at the Thumb Octagon Barn.

Due to Earlene's popularity Debbie put in a request to Uncle Earl for two more Earlenes. Sadly, Uncle Earl passed away while in the process of making Earlene's sisters, but Debbie says plans are ongoing to ensure the cows get finished. Her hope is to have them housed in various areas around the state to make easy access for others wishing to use Earlene for their dairy promotions.

Earlene is just one of several dairy promotion ideas masterminded by Debbie that have received statewide notoriety. Two of her other ideas, Ruby Mae, a different type of wooden teaching cow, and the Pint for Pint Blood Drive program have also spread throughout the state.

For her promotion efforts, Debbie was presented with the 2010 Excellence in Dairy Promotion Award. The award annually recognizes one Michigan dairy farm family member for outstanding dedication to dairy product promotion. The award is sponsored by the Dairy Diplomats of Michigan, a volunteer group of dairy farmers devoted to promoting the health benefits and taste appeal of dairy products through local community service and events.

"Debbie is a very committed and enthusiastic advocate for all things dairy," says Staci Garcia, director of industry and public communications with United Dairy Industry of Michigan. "She cares about her community and loves to share dairy product

information and recipes to help people live healthier lives.”

Ruby Mae Cow was Debbie’s first wooden cow idea. Ruby Mae is a teaching cow with doors located on various parts of her body. Children can open a door and pull out a rope as long as a cow’s intestine, another has a scrubber that feels like a cow’s tongue, another has byproducts made from cow’s hooves, and so on.

Ruby Mae caught on so well that Debbie provided her design to the Michigan Farm Bureau and a template for her is available through them. She also inspired the creation of teaching animals in other species. The Ruby Mae program earned Debbie a national Farm Bureau award.

Debbie’s Pint for Pint Blood Drive program is another promotion effort she spearheaded which has been picked up across the state, as it allows for a lot of variation in its delivery. Debbie’s version of Pint for Pint gives anyone who makes an effort to donate blood a pint of Country Fresh ice cream, to celebrate July as National Ice Cream Month.

As a lifelong dairy farmer and dairy communicator, Debbie has passionately promoted milk and dairy products for more than 20 years at the local, state and national levels. In addition to her projects detailed above, she is also a member of the MMPA Dairy Communicator Committee and the Huron County Dairy Diplomats, she has organized the local Pint for Pint Blood Drive, the Apples for Teachers program, Co-Chaired Project RED for 13 years, and served on Huron County’s Farm Bureau Board and other leadership committees. She’s been involved in numerous community organizations, school promotions, fairs and sampling events. She has also sponsored an FFA Memorial Scholarship in her father’s memory for the past 24 years.

Debbie was in her early 20s when her father passed away. Although it was one of the worst years for farming in their community having just experienced a flood that damaged much of their crops, Debbie and her mother chose to continue dairy and cash crop farming. The pair banded together to milk the cows and harvest the crops, receiving support from some fellow farmers, while many others told the ladies to just sell the farm.

One of the farmers who supported Debbie during the rough years after her father died was fellow MMPA member Bryce Kundinger. He encouraged her to continue farming and helped her when she had questions.

“In the early spring Bryce called to make sure I had my fertilizer and seed ordered, he came down to spend a whole day helping me set up the planter and teaching me how to plant,” Debbie says. “He would call almost every day and ask how everything was and if I had any problems. He was like another brother who truly cared that our farm and my mom and I succeeded.”

Bryce also nominated Debbie for the Excellence in Dairy Promotion Award last fall, taking time out from a busy sugar beet harvest to detail Debbie’s promotion efforts over the years.

“You can only imagine the immense flooding of emotions I felt when I found out Bryce had nominated me for this award,” Debbie says. “After all these years he’s still reaffirming those words he said to me so many years ago—You can do it! It is like I have come full circle, and have been incredibly blessed.”

Today, Debbie farms with her husband, Tim, on Kubacki Farms, where they own a dairy and cash crop Centennial Farm. In addition to the crops they grow for feed such as alfalfa, corn and soybeans, they also raise sugar beets, wheat and dry beans.

“I believe as dairy farmers we are forging a lifetime legacy that will affect future generations, but by no means do I do this in the singular,” Debbie says about her promotion efforts and the award. “I feel honored to be chosen for this award but feel that it truly takes strong relationships, building teamwork, ongoing programs, constant creativity and changing and tweaking of ideas to keep the flow of dairy promotion constant.”



Debbie Kubacki, with her husband Tim, holding the 2010 Excellence in Dairy Promotion Award which was presented to her in February.