

a worthy . princess



KATIE BROSAN

coos softly to the reluctant cow and gently coaxes her out of the stall. Not surprisingly, the bovine acquiesces and dutifully follows the girl, like a pal out for a stroll. Brosnan, crowned Dairy Princess of New York State in February, clearly has a way with cows.

Wait. Dairy Princess? The role conjures a dazzling young woman swathed in a billowing white gown, pouring rich, creamy milk from a frosty glass pitcher.

Think again.

text and photos
by abby luby



Brosnan grew up working on her uncle's dairy farm just across the street from her house in Pine Island. The farm has been in the family for six generations. "I've traveled all around the state and met many different farmers," says Brosnan, 18, who wears her passion for local dairy farmers on her sleeve. "They are the most determined people I know."

The New York State Dairy Princess program was started in 1963 to promote the state's dairy industry. The "princesses," mostly from counties with a concentration of dairy farms, are trained as emissaries who tour the state to speak about farm life and dairy products. Teen girls like Brosnan who vie for the title must either live on a dairy farm or be related to a family whose major income is from a farm.

The farm connection is a key requirement, says Melissa Osgood, spokesperson for the American Dairy Association and Dairy Council (ADADC), a non-profit corporation run and funded by dairy farmers. The New York State County Dairy Princess Program is one of many programs the ADADC oversees. "The Dairy Princess Program builds up the poise and skills of young women involved in dairy production," Osgood says. "They are essential to our goal to increase sales of dairy products by generic promotion."

At February's state pageant, Orange County's Dairy Princess Brosnan and 35 other county dairy princesses competed for the state title by showing off their skills in public speaking, knowledge of the dairy industry and personal interviews. Judges also evaluated the contestants on writing, poise and personality. Brosnan won the top post

for one year; Emma Heritage from Saratoga County was named first alternate and Katelyn Walley from Delaware County became second alternate.

The "coronation" was a high point for Brosnan—it's a role she's had her eye on since she was eight years old and a member of the local 4-H Club. When she was older she joined the local Future Farmers of America, a national agricultural organization. Throughout junior high and high school, she was Orange County's promotional "Court Dairy Princess," a kind of "junior ambassador" who works with the county princess.

As glamorous as it may sound, being the state's Dairy Princess is an exhausting job, especially during the warmer months of non-stop state and county fairs. The state dairy princess and the county ambassadors are called on to address a multitude of award breakfasts, juggle milkshake contests and gavel out cheese auctions. They waltz out prize cows in cattle shows and maintain poise during television interviews. "It's amazing to see how they have broken out of their shells" Osgood notes. "Generally, you can tell the kids who took public speaking in college, but you can always pick out a dairy princess a mile away—they are comfortable in their own skin, whether they are talking to 50 kindergartners or 300 dairy producers at a cooperative meeting."

For these very involved young women, there are incentives, of course. Brosnan was awarded a \$1,200 scholarship to represent ADADC at county dairy princess pageants, farm meetings and numerous special events. In

addition, she trains a younger crop of county promoters at seminars and workshops. During the year, dairy princesses receive a small stipend to speak at up to ten different schools, write news articles and press releases. Osgood says in the beginning of each year the princesses are offered a list of goals to choose from. "There is a base requirement of what they need to do, like speaking at two or more farm meetings or producing six radio programs a year—one goal

Acknowledging the serious problems facing the state's dairy industry, Gibbs says the dairy princess' message to buy local dairy products "is more important now than ever." Osgood echoes the sentiment, emphasizing the ever-widening discrepancy between the prices farmers get for milk and their cost of production. "Prices for dairy products have remained the same for the last 30 years—but farmers [now] pay \$2 to \$3 for a gallon of gas and have 2010 expenses. The

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was to speak on every single TV station in Erie and the city of Buffalo. It's an incentive program: The more they do, the more we pay them per event."

According to Osgood, the entire Dairy Princess program costs ADADC about \$50,000 a year. The money is distributed to the county programs and pays for training seminars and support materials. This year there were 36 active programs in the state; each program received about \$1,400.

Brosnan says speaking in public with confidence was one of the most valuable skills she learned in the program. "We had to memorize a five- to eight-minute speech for the pageant. The knowledge of public speaking will serve me my entire life." A freshman at Cornell University, where she is studying animal science, Brosnan says the challenges of college life haven't affected her duties as the state's Dairy Princess. "My teachers understand what it means to be a dairy princess," she says.

A few years ago, Al Gibbs's two teenage daughters were involved in the Dairy Princess program. "There was a 'Down on the Farm Day' here a few years ago that hosted 900 people for three days," says Gibbs, whose family owns Sunset Hill Holsteins in Goshen. "The dairy princesses did an excellent job speaking about local dairy."

prices farmers are getting for their products are, sadly, quite a bit less than what they need to survive." Last year was bad for crops and many farmers lost a huge amount of grain, Osgood says, which only made matters worse. "Fifty years ago, dairy farmers used to market their own products but they got priced out of the business. There are 5,400 dairy farms in New York, but over the past five years we've lost about 1,000 farms. We expect to lose more if we have another bad year." Ironically, milk is New York's leading agricultural product, adding up to one-half of the state's total agricultural revenue.

What about folks in the supermarket who grab a half-gallon of milk on the fly and don't have a clue if it came from a farm the next county over? Enter the state dairy princess, bullhorn to her lips. "You can tell if milk comes from New York State farms," Brosnan says. "Right after the expiration date there should be a '36.' That tells you it's from a New York farm."

Although her reign is up in February 2011, Brosnan is devoted to the dairy farmer for life. "You want to work hard and promote these people because they are all so hard working and they have good qualities. Even if they are losing money, they love it—you can't say this about too many people." ❖