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Intern program fuels her desire to become large animal vet

By **SHERRY BUNTING**
Special for Farmshine

BELLEFONTE, Pa.—Leann Gatesman didn't grow up on a dairy farm. Her family's small farm in Lucinda, Clarion County, Pa. is home to some beef cattle, and she had worked four years on a nearby 200-cow dairy farm before heading to college.

Since she was five years old, she knew she wanted to be a veterinarian. But it was working on the dairy farm that cemented the vision of this Penn State University sophomore to pursue the rigorous education to become a large animal vet. And it was Leann's experience this summer in the PDMP internship program—working for Murmac Farms in Bellefonte, Centre County—that gave her the wealth of hands-on experiences that will benefit her in the pursuit of her dream.

Fueling dreams, informing plans, and providing career choice experiences for young people, like Leann, who are regaining their collective enthusiasm for careers in dairying, allied industry, and production veterinary medicine, is important to the long-term viability of Pennsylvania's dairy farm families.

This is just one reason PDMP offers the internship program, which has been a longstanding benefit to the students and dairies who participate.

Leann recalls as a member of the Penn State Dairy Science Club, hearing PDMP member Dan Ulmer when he came to speak to the group about the program.

"To apply, I contacted Chad Dechow, (Penn State Assistant Professor and undergraduate advisor), and he gave me a list of three dairy farms to interview with," Leann reflects. "This dairy offered me the learning opportunities I was looking for because it is a larger dairy, and so the experiences are different from the home farm and the neighboring dairy I had worked for."

Leann's PDMP internship this summer has been not only exciting, but also a valued learning experience. "Being here for the herd checks and getting to see such a wide range of things, seeing processes that I had barely heard of before..." she said. "Plus the daily animal care, and working closely with the Hispanic employees, learning the importance of communication, seeing how Brian (Craig) interacts with everyone, there's just so many highlights to what I've learned."

In addition to the work with the animals, the internship experience has taught her a lot about management and people skills. "The Craigs have been so great to work for. Brian doesn't ask anyone to do anything he hasn't done himself," said Leann. "Seeing that kind of leadership is also a real plus."

One thing that really impressed her when she interviewed for the internship is when she was asked what she wanted to gain out of it.

"They wanted to know what am I interested in doing?" she said. "The internship was an opportunity to mold my own summer experience, and the big thing is I have a project and a weekly report to PDMP."

For her project, Leann set up a mycoplasma testing program at the farm, testing all fresh cows for the presence of mycoplasma by culturing the milk. "We haven't found any," she said. "But the experience was good for me, and now I get to present my findings."

"Every step of the way, I get more enthused about what I'm doing," she added. "To get younger people involved in the industry like this, we get to see more and learn more. The knowledge I'm getting through this experience brings everything together."

Other 2008 interns on PDMP member farms include Becky Heisey and Elizabeth Smith, who were also interns in 2007 along with Shaina Martin. Nate Heim and Jason Pontillo participated in 2006.

Internship was a stepping stone

HARRISBURG, Pa.—The Professional Dairy Managers of Pennsylvania internship program provided several opportunities for Penn State University student, Nate Heim of Harrisburg. Heim is entering his senior year with a Dairy Science Major with a business option and Agribusiness Minor.

The summer following his freshman year, Heim applied for the PDMP intern program and spent his weeks off of college working on a 500-cow dairy in southeastern PA: Duane and Marilyn Hershey's Ar-Joy Farm, in Cochranville, Chester County.

Heim stepped into the dairy operation and embraced the hands-on labor, experience, and education that were provided to him on a daily basis.

During his months with the Hersheys, Heim worked closely with the herd's Ovsync program, specialized in overall herd health, and spent his last weeks training a Hispanic herdsman.

Not being raised on a dairy farm, Heim wanted the summers during his college years to have a "wide range of experiences within the industry."

Starting his experience with the PDMP intern program gave Heim a "solid stepping stone to participate in future programs throughout the industry."

The summer after his sophomore year, Heim worked in the dairy nutrition department of Cargill Nutrition, which gave him a “large contact base with different people and unique dairy operations across the state.”

This summer, his final summer before graduation, Heim worked for the PA Center of Dairy Excellence (CDE). There, he focused much of his attention on the Open House Forums and Dairy Advocacy and Resource Team (DART) meetings provided by CDE and the Pennsylvania Task Force.

There were six DART meetings across the state, educating producers on upcoming energy opportunities, dairy issues, and overview of CDE.

Heim accomplished his goal set as a freshman to use his summers in “three totally different venues.”

The PDMP farm experience gave him a hands-on understanding and increased his classroom knowledge; the nutritional field broadened his contact base within the industry, and working for CDE gave him skills within the circle of government and agribusinesses.

As he looks back over the three different experiences, Heim knows that after graduation he will be pursuing a job working on a large dairy.

Until then, Heim has one more year of classroom studies and Dairy Science Club activities. Heim spent years on Penn State’s Dairy Judging Team and works closely with the Nittany Lion Fall Classic. He is serving as sale chairman this year, his senior year and the 25th anniversary of the sale.

Chad Dechow, Penn State University Assistant Professor of dairy cattle genetics and undergraduate advisor, appreciates the “distinct dairy industry perspective that students gain” during their time as PDMP interns.

Dechow says students “have a much clearer understanding of both the day-to-day farm operations and the longer term objectives of the progressive dairy businesses.”

Many students will begin thinking about internships during the end of their fall semester.