

Smithfield Farms mixes agriculture, adventure

BY KEN KNOX, Gettysburg Times Staff Writer

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For Smithfield Farms' Chris Smith, dealing with the public can often be something of a mixed bag.

"It's good and bad, because you have your good customers, the ones who keep on coming back, and those make it all worthwhile, but you also have your people who just don't have any clue about what farmers do," he explains.

"We see them all the time, these city kids who come out to visit the farm and they have no idea because they've only gotten their food from the grocery store. They don't know any better."



Luckily, Smithfield Farms provides Smith and his family with a unique opportunity to pass on information about farming to the public, not only through participation in open-air farmers' markets throughout the county and surrounding region, but also through the popular Fields of Adventure attraction, now in its seventh year of operation.

Located on the farm's Tree Lane property in Aspers, Fields of Adventure provides visitors with a wide range of activities including a seven-acre corn maze, a straw bale obstacle course, a zipline, pumpkin bowling and a pick-your-own-pumpkin patch. It may sound like a great day out, but Smith says there's more to it than just having fun.

"It started out as just another way of diversifying," he says of the attraction's launch in 2010, but it soon became something else entirely.

"We probably educate people quite a bit, more than I probably even realize," Smith explains. "With us direct-selling our meats, we do a lot of educating the customers on where their food comes from, and the corn maze helps with that too, because we grow our own popcorn and make our own kettle corn. We get hundreds of school kids here every fall, and most of them have never seen popcorn on a cob before. And then we'll get the kettle out and show them the process from the plant to the kettle to their mouth, the whole cycle."

It's a cycle Smith says he's watched play out many times since his own education began on the farms he grew up on.

"My grandfather has a farm, and my dad worked on it while I was growing up, and I just enjoyed working with the animals and planting a seed and watching it grow into a plant, just living off the earth," he recalls, noting that, apart from a brief stint working construction, most of his time working has been spent on one farm or another, including the farm his wife, Deb, grew up on: "I worked with my father-in-law and brothers-in-law for five years before Deb and I decided to go out on our own and started raising cattle."

Today, the Smiths oversee a family operation that covers not only the 65 acres on Tree Lane, but also an additional 500 acres of leased land in the area. Although non-GMO hay and grain are the primary products, the Smith family also raises steer and cattle, as well as chickens, turkeys and hogs, which provide the meat served on the homestead property in the Smithfield concession stand, which also carries products from other local growers including sauces from Mechanicsburg-based Torchbearer's company and Claire's Orchard out of Carlisle. The farm hosts many events, including corporate and birthday parties, while future plans for the site include turning the concession stand into a roadside country store fully stocked with the farm's produce, as well as additional events and activities at Fields of Adventure.

"We're not big-scale by any means, but we're growing each year," Smith says, noting the farm is very much a family affair. "I wouldn't be where I am today without my wife, and our kids are very involved in the corn maze. There's nothing here they don't try to help with."

Smith credits the Fields of Adventure attraction with keeping the kids engaged in the family business.

"It gives them something fun to help out on besides taking care of their animals," he says. "They get to showcase their animals when their classmates come out with the school tours, and they'll take them through the corn maze and show them what's it all about here. They take a lot of pride in it, the same as Deb and I do."

Smith says it's also gratifying to see his children play a part in the same cycle he's been part of since his own days growing up on a farm.

"I grew up watching my dad and grandfather do this, and now we get to do it and teach other what we do and how we do it, and hopefully one day the kids will take this over and they'll keep on doing it. They have ideas all the time, so a lot of their input goes into what we do. We're not going to force them to come back, but it's here for them if they want to."

With the Fields of Adventure season now in full swing, Smith says he is especially grateful for his family's involvement, since it will allow him to educate the community from behind the scenes.

"I try to stay out of the limelight," he says. "I don't like being the face of the family business. My wife and kids are better at that than I am. They're the ones on Facebook and stuff, which is just fine by me. I feel more satisfied by seeing the smiles on the kids' faces and parents' faces when they're getting off the wagon and they've picked their own pumpkins. That's my biggest satisfaction: Seeing families being families and knowing that, whoever our food is going to, they're going to know more about it from having visited our farm and having a great time while they were here."