

GRADUATE AG RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT



Melissa Leiden Welsh

“On a farm you learn everything by doing.”

— Melissa Leiden Welsh, Ph.D. candidate, Youth Development and Agricultural Education

THE STUDENT: Farming is part of Melissa Welsh’s heritage on both sides of her family. She grew up on a small beef and potato farm in the Appalachian Mountains of west central Pennsylvania. After earning an undergraduate degree in family and consumer sciences education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Welsh taught for 12 years in two rural school districts close to home. Teaching suited her: “I don’t like doing the same thing all day long,” she explains. “With FCS, I might teach nutrition one hour, then child development, financial education, interior design — all the things that I grew up with.” Along the way she earned a master’s degree in youth and family education from Penn State, and, while presenting at a conference, met Neil Knobloch, Associate Professor – Extension Education. Knobloch suggested that Welsh continue studying the concepts she developed for her presentation under his supervision at Purdue. She began her doctoral work in fall 2011.

THE RESEARCH: “In my research at Purdue, I teach young scientists how to teach,” Welsh says. Among her research interests are personal epistemology, motivation, experiential learning, career technical education and teacher preparation. She especially enjoys the international diversity of her students: “I’m working with young plant scientists from all over the world. Hearing about their backgrounds and the learning experiences they had with their families — it’s very cool to see what motivates them to learn.” Welsh hopes findings from her research will help graduate programs prepare young scientists for outreach education opportunities.

SHARED INTERESTS: Being an older graduate student influences the way she and Knobloch relate, Welsh says. “We both have teaching experience and ag backgrounds ... so we’re both practical; we think big and then we bring it down to reality.” Welsh plans to graduate this year and begin an Extension position with The University of Maryland that involves adult and youth education in January.

4-H: “My involvement with 4-H made me interested in teaching people,” Welsh says. “4-H was my social outlet and the thing we did as a family.” Now her ongoing involvement in collegiate 4-H is helping her connect to undergraduates as she works toward becoming a college teacher.

FARM INTERESTS: The flat Indiana farmstead that Welsh and her husband rent is hugely different from her mother’s homestead in Pennsylvania, which they bought after Welsh’s maternal grandmother passed away. Still, the rental allows them to meet local farmers and participate in their community. Welsh and her two brothers also started their own farming corporation in 2000 (Leidenlandandcattle.com), for which she handles international business. While her brothers are machinery-oriented, Welsh sees her broader role as advocating for agriculture. “I don’t know that women get enough respect for the application knowledge we have,” she says. “A lot of communication happens on farms because of the females.”