

From a Princess to a Professional

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The night was filled with formal dresses, sashes and speeches about dairy cows. This was not your typical pageant; this was the Iowa Dairy Princess State Competition. Lining the stage were the winners of the state's local pageants, ready to compete for the state title. Among them was Bonnie Johnson, the marketing and communications manager at AgCareers.com.

The room quieted as the talent competition began. Out of the bright lights of center stage walked a costumed character. As the audience viewed her homemade black and white costume, a familiar Christmas tune filled the air. Instead of the familiar reindeer version, "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Holstein" filled the room.

"Oh my gosh, it was ridiculous," Johnson said with a laugh. "I was not ready to be state dairy princess."

Johnson may not have been cut out to be the Iowa Dairy Princess – that honor went to one of the other local princesses – but this competition allowed her to combine two parts of her life, agriculture and apparel. These would forever change the path of both her personal and professional lives.

Agriculture was a part of Johnson's life from her childhood. She said she grew up on a farm in northeast Iowa growing soybeans, corn and oats. Her family also raised dairy cattle and chickens.

When it came time for Johnson to attend college, she found her interests leading her past agriculture.

“I did not think of agriculture beyond farming at that point,” Johnson said.

She started her college career as a broadcast journalism major. When Johnson realized this was not for her, she said she took a career placement test. The test revealed she would excel in the fashion and apparel industry. The results made sense; one of her favorite parts of being a dairy princess was making and coordinating her costumes.

With the advice of the test, she changed her major to textiles and clothing. However as her path continued, she found herself taking a larger interest in marketing and business, the areas where she later earned her master’s degree.

When searching for a job after college, Johnson found opportunities to combine her knowledge of marketing and apparel by working for local clothing retailers. After about a decade in the industry, Johnson said she knew she needed a change. Then, she saw a job posting from AgCareers.com advertising for a marketing position.

“I had never heard of AgCareers.com,” Johnson said, “but my husband is an ag engineer, my parents still farm and I grew up in agriculture. I see the need and have the passion for agriculture, so I applied and went in for the interview.”

Her background in agriculture taught her many of the life lessons that carried over to her professional life, especially in her role at AgCareers.com. She said the first lesson she learned from agriculture was learning to stay busy and handle a busy schedule.

“There was always something going on on the farm, we did not just sit around,” Johnson said. “Plus, I was in the country outside a really tiny town. It made you more self-motivated to make your own way and look for things to do.”

Knowing about agriculture plays a large role in her interactions she has with her peers and clients at AgCareers.com.

“When I came to AgCareers.com, a lot of that agricultural knowledge came back in the marketing efforts,” Johnson said. “I knew things like the difference between a hay bale and a straw bale. Little things like that come in handy when creating imaging and drafting emails.”

This general knowledge of the industry also helps Johnson understand the variety of careers available in the industry.

“I think promoting the breadth of opportunities in agriculture is really important,” Johnson said. “I know a lot of farmers, but I also know a lot of people in supporting careers like my sister, who is a veterinarian and does animal pharmaceutical research. I have family members who are seed salespeople, recruiters and accountants.”

Being a dairy princess started as an opportunity to pursue both agriculture and fashion. Looking back, she said it taught her to market herself and the industry, both skills that help her at AgCareers.com. Johnson has come a long way since her pageant days, but thanks to that experience, she can better serve AgCareers.com’s mission to feed the world with talent.

“Food and agriculture are essential,” Johnson said, “and we’re just trying to feed that pipeline of people who want to work in agriculture and connect them with employers to meet their needs.”