

Keystone

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David Folk uses a tiny paintbrush to put a butterfly egg on a host plant.



Folk's Butterfly Farm

By Darrin Youker

There's no barn at Folk's Butterfly Farm, and certainly no crop to harvest.

But in the basement of the Columbia County home where Kristie Folk grew up, there's a room as polished as any laboratory.

Here, Kristie and her father David breed butterflies.

To be sure, not many recent college graduates spend their evenings harvesting butterfly eggs, or prepping live butterflies for cross-country travel. But for Kristie, a recent Penn State graduate, she's had a few surprises starting her own small business.

It started innocently enough. Kristie needed a project for FFA in high school. Her father had suggested she raise butterflies after David met a butterfly breeder in nearby Hazelton.

Her experiment did not get off to a great start.

"They all died," she said. "I was devastated."

Undeterred, Kristie decided to make a go of it the following year. By the end of the breeding season, Kristie had raised more than 600 butterflies and made \$1,400 selling them to be released at events such as weddings and memorial services.

She hasn't looked back since.

"It's crazy to think that six years ago, I was just working on a high school project," she said.

Exposure

After that first successful year, Kristie began to expand her business. Appearances at schools, fairs and other events piqued people's interest in butterflies. But it was her appearance at the 2012 Pennsylvania Farm Show that brought her the biggest exposure.

Kristie brought a flight house to the Farm Show, where visitors could walk through and feed butterflies. Even with a \$2 charge at the door, the event was a huge success.

By the time the eight-day Farm Show was finished, Kristie and her family had been featured on a dozen television broadcasts and as many newspaper interviews.

"It is unreal how much this has grown," she said. "I never planned that this would turn into a business."

Because it was an FFA project that helped launch the business, Kristie decided to donate a portion of her proceeds from the show to various FFA chapters across the state. Plus, FFA students from across Pennsylvania volunteered to work at the display in return for a donation to their chapter.

Folk's Butterfly Farm is already slated to return to the Farm Show this January.

"It was a popular, family-type exhibit," said Patrick Kerwin, executive director of the Farm Show. "It is sort of a unique experience."

Hands-On

In the backyard of Kristie's home is a "flight house."

The airy, screened gazebo is similar to ones that travel to schools and fairs. Inside, misters keep Monarch and painted lady butterflies hydrated. Hummingbird feeders containing blue Gatorade keep them fed. Plants provide butterflies a respite, and a place to lay their eggs.

Depending on the day, visitors could be greeted with a flurry of activity inside as the Monarchs and painted lady butterflies flit about from plant to plant. On warm sunny days, they spend their time aloft, brightened by the warm air. An overcast day keeps them sedated. But, even on cloudy days, a drink of Gatorade will perk them up.

Visitors to the flight house are given a Q-tip soaked in Gatorade to feed the butterflies. For whatever reason, the butterflies prefer the blue variety more than any other kind, said David Folk, Kristie's dad.

"They are very picky eaters," he said.

Using their proboscis, shaped much like an elephant's trunk, the butterflies drink up the fluid soaked on the Q-tip.

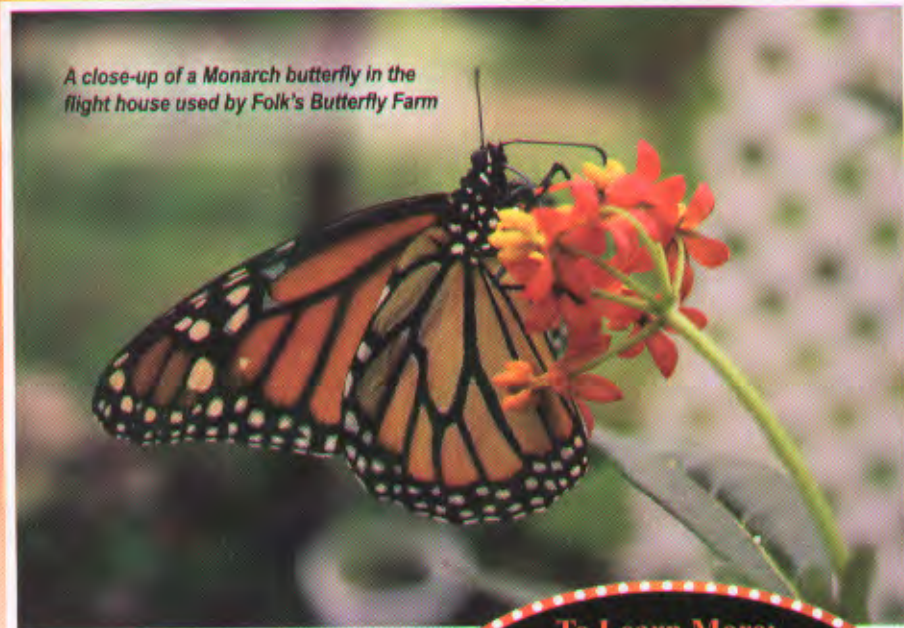
And as visitors are busy feeding butterflies, Kristie or her father will give an overview of the life-cycle of butterflies, show them how to identify males and females (male Monarchs have two spots glands on their wings) and explain that Monarchs migrate to Mexico.

Plus, Kristie tries to pass on some of the joy she gets from raising butterflies.

"My goal is I want people to experience the wonder of butterflies," she said.



Monarch chrysalis hang in an indoor grow area at the butterfly farm. Caterpillars will emerge from here as full-grown butterflies



A close-up of a Monarch butterfly in the flight house used by Folk's Butterfly Farm

While shows and exhibits are the visible aspect to Kristie's business, much of her work happens at home and in her greenhouse.

In the basement laboratory, Kristie and her father take eggs that were harvested from the flight house, or their breeding home, and transplant them onto host plants.

Throughout their life cycle butterflies need four things to survive—shelter, food, water and a host plant. Monarchs use milkweed as their host plants, while the eastern black swallowtail loves dill and parsley.

Using a paint brush and magnifying glass, David will put a tiny egg on a host plant.

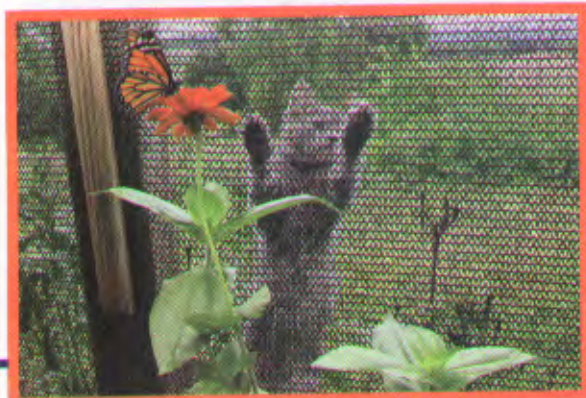
Once those eggs have hatched, the caterpillars are either sent out to the greenhouse, or a chrysalis room inside the basement laboratory.

Much like the breeding room, the greenhouse and chrysalis rooms rely on host plants to help the butterfly complete its lifecycle. So, it's not uncommon for David to travel to neighboring farms to pick milkweed or stinging nettle.

Butterflies raised in the greenhouse are often destined for releases at weddings and memorial services.

"All the butterflies in the greenhouse are spoken for," she said.

Over time, Kristie has obtained licenses from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to ship butterflies to most states east of the Rocky Mountains.



The butterflies at Folk's Butterfly Farm have attracted a lot of attention at high-profile events like the Pennsylvania Farm Show. The flight house at Kristie Folk's home, however, also provides plenty of entertainment and frustration for her other animals.

To Learn More:
 Folk's Butterfly Farm will be at the Pennsylvania Farm Show, which runs Jan. 5-12 in Harrisburg. For more information about Kristie Folk, and her business, visit: www.folksbutterflyfarm.com

And just how does a butterfly get shipped across the country? In an envelope, of course.

During their busy season, Kristie and her father will spend their evenings folding envelopes into the shapes of triangles.

Well-fed butterflies are placed in the envelopes and shipped overnight to their destination. As long as the recipients are gentle, and grab the envelopes by a corner, the butterflies should fly out when the paper is ripped open, Kristie said.

"As long as people get what they want, we are happy," she said.

This past fall, Kristie has started a new job in Western Pennsylvania, working for a school district as an agriculture educator. Of course, butterflies will be an important part of her curriculum.

She is also setting up a satellite location so she can continue on with the business, coordinating orders with her father in Columbia County.

Over the summer, Kristie and her fiancé Eugene Good got married. Not surprisingly, the guests were given a packet of butterflies to release at the ceremony.

It was a fitting tribute for a woman whose life is now all about butterflies.