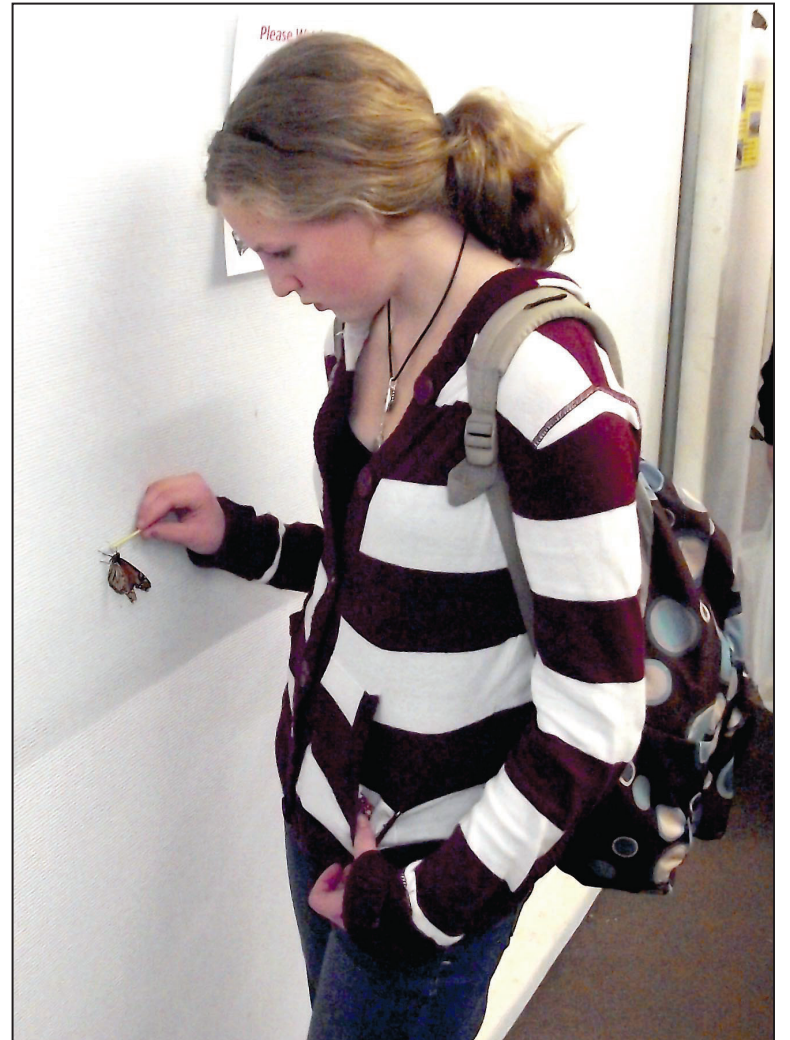


# Tiny Beauties: The Gossamer Business of Butterflies



Kristie Folk, left, explains her butterfly techniques to an inquisitive young visitor at the Pennsylvania Farm Show. Folk's Butterfly Farm, which began as Kristie's FFA project, is now a full-fledged farm business.



A teen carefully feeds Gatorade on a cotton swab to a butterfly. Photos by Anne Harnish

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HARRISBURG, Pa. — The word “livestock” does not usually conjure up the ethereal image of a butterfly, but for FFA member Kristie Folk, raising butterflies has become a farm business and a way of life over the past seven years.

Folk had no idea that her FFA project raising butterflies would, or could, grow to the point it has.

“I never imagined I’d be paying for college tuition and my wedding with a butterfly business,” said the enthusiastic college student, who plans to be married in September. But, she said, what started as an FFA project kept expanding. Once she was out of high school, she needed help to continue her butterfly farm and it became a full-fledged business at her family home in Nescopeck, Pa.

It all started while Folk was a sophomore in high school, when her dad suggested that she raise butterflies for her FFA project. That first year, Folk said her butterfly project “flopped” and the caterpillars died. Upon her investigation, she talked to some butterfly experts and found out that the temperatures had been too cold because she had started the project in the month of October.

So she decided to try again a few months later in the warmer temperatures of spring, and was successful in raising 600 butterflies. The project took off from there, as Folk soaked up all the information and expertise she could about the insects.

In 2009, Folk won national recognition for her butterflies as one of four FFA youth se-

lected nationally for a National Star in Agribusiness award. In 2010, she exhibited a butterfly house at the Bloomsburg Fair.

Indeed, her knowledge of butterflies is impressive, as she demonstrated recently at the Folk’s Butterfly Farm exhibition tent her family set up during the recent Pennsylvania Farm Show in Harrisburg in early January. The butterfly house exhibited live butterflies, caterpillars and chrysalis in the Main Hall of the Farm Show Complex, not far from the popular butterfly sculpture. Lines of visitors waited patiently to enjoy the free, unique experience of walking inside the large white tent, aflutter with more than 800 butterflies and outfitted with butterfly-friendly plants, feeding areas and educational displays. Inside, Folk fielded hundreds of questions throughout the week from adults and children about her butterflies. She explained how the tent environment was kept humid to keep the butterflies’ legs from cramping up. She described the butterfly’s life stages.

One unique quality of Folk’s butterfly exhibits is that it allows, and in fact, encourag-

es, close interaction between people and butterflies. Although several other educational butterfly exhibits exist throughout the state, Folk said, they don’t share a similar concept.

“You can’t touch them at most museums,” Folk said, explaining that at many butterfly houses, people are often asked to stay a short distance away from the butterflies, looking but not touching them.

However, visitors to Folk’s butterfly house at the Farm Show exhibit were given cotton swabs dipped in blue Gatorade to feed the butterflies, which seemed to enjoy alighting on visitors within seconds after they entered the tent. The prevalent mood within the exhibit was awe, as visitors gently and carefully fed, held and just stared at the tiny winged butterflies hovering on their fingers, shirts and even heads.

“They like certain colors better than others,” pointed out Folk, as people of all ages exclaimed in delight when the fluttering creatures attached to their clothing.

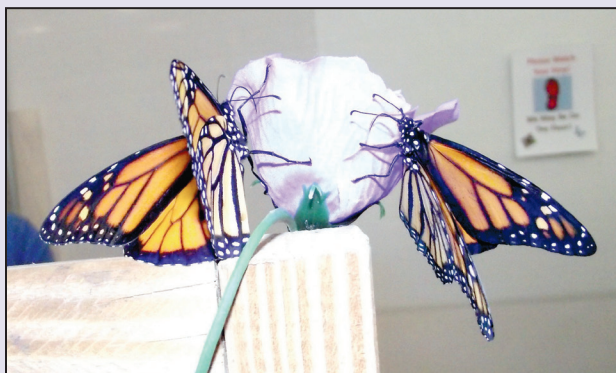
Folk’s enjoyment of teaching and passion for her work is obvious. Inside the Farm

Show tent, as three teenage girls ‘wearing’ several colorful butterflies approached Folk to ask a question, two butterflies suddenly darted to the ground at their feet. Folk used the sudden flight to educate the girls about butterfly behavior, telling them that certain butterflies sometimes will knock other butterflies to the ground mid-flight.

In addition to the Farm Show, Folk’s Butterfly Farm raises butterflies for many purposes, giving educational presentations about butterflies to schools and groups as well as selling them for “releases” at weddings, graduations, parties, memorials, funerals and other special events. Releasing butterflies adds a “magical” effect to events and Folk said customers typically purchase 2 to 6 dozen butterflies for a release, which also allows the native butterflies to repopulate outdoors, one of the goals of her business according to her website.

This past year, Folk said she raised approximately 5,000 butterflies, including Monarchs, Black Swallowtails and Painted Ladies. The butterflies can get diseases, just like any livestock, and Folk must check each one under a microscope to make sure they are clean and disease-free prior to breeding time — a tedious, but necessary job, said Folk of inspecting the insects. And, just as with any livestock, her business is permitted by the USDA.

This young, successful butterfly farmer is a natural teacher who enjoys encouraging the public to appreciate the beauty of her butterflies. The close interactions between her livestock and their admirers will help ensure that the relationship between butterflies in nature and people will be ongoing for a long time.



Two of Kristie Folk’s butterflies sit on a flower at the Farm Show exhibition.



This gentlemen enjoyed interacting with the butterflies.



Folk’s Butterfly Farm’s tent exhibit features watering stations and butterfly-friendly plants as well as caterpillars and chrysalis educational displays.



Kristie, right, talks to Farm Show visitors.