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From Farm House To White House

Dairy cows and a strong work ethic paved Deb Eschmeyer's way to Washington, D.C.

BY CLAIRE VATH

To say it's been quite the year for Debra "Deb" Eschmeyer is a bit of an understatement. In January, First Lady Michelle Obama appointed the 35-year-old executive director of the Let's Move! campaign and senior policy adviser for nutrition. And while Eschmeyer's new gig involves preaching the tenets of a healthy lifestyle to children across America, she's rehearsed for the role her entire life, both in the grassroots campaign she founded and as a farmer herself. **HUMBLE ROOTS.** New Knoxville, Ohio, lies smack dab in America's heartland. In this postage stamp-sized village, with a population of less than 1,000, Deb gleaned her first lessons in developing a strong work ethic. "Dad started with 120 acres in the 1960s and is up to about 2,000 acres," says Deb, whose parents—now in

their 70s—continue to operate the dairy alongside two of her older brothers.

The barrage of farm chores suits a large family, and Deb, the youngest of seven children, pitched in raking hay, baling straw, milking, cleaning out free stalls and rumbly about the property on a tractor "before there were air-conditioned cabs," she says. But, "you learn what's hard work and the value of what you can create from that."

Another perk of hailing from a small place: You see a lot of the same faces. And when Deb's childhood pal, Jeff, finally asked her out on a date in the high school cafeteria—the front lines of Deb's future work—she accepted. "I've known him since kindergarten," she laughs. "We just celebrated the 20th anniversary of our first date."

GAINING EXPERIENCE. She traded in the farm for college, and, upon graduation, Deb gained momentum and know-how by working for several policy organizations before landing the title of director of outreach and communications for the National Farm to School Network in 2007. Under her tenure, Deb created One Tray, a campaign connecting local agriculture to federal nutrition programs. ▶

Deb Eschmeyer leads the Let's Move! campaign, a national program that seeks to end childhood obesity and improve kids' health and well-being.

It was satisfying, hands-on work listening to food service staff, farmers, teachers, parents and students. “They told us what they needed to help support a healthy school food environment,” Deb says. Those conversations led her, along with five other food policy experts, to form the grassroots organization FoodCorps. The aim: provide access needed for schoolchildren to make healthy choices. The formula: visiting farms, growing gardens, cooking and gaining access to those healthy foods on their lunch trays. “Kids need to have a full education around food and nutrition literacy,” Deb explains. “And some of the best educators are farmers.”

THE PULL OF THE FARM. While dreaming up FoodCorps—and because she missed farm life—in 2008, Deb and Jeff mortgaged a portion of Jeff’s grandmother’s farm. “After learning more about our food system and reflecting on the importance of vibrant, rural communities,” Deb says, “we decided to try our hand at farming.” Five generations of Jeff’s family were tied to this dirt, and the pull was strong.

“There’s something about growing up with agriculture,” Deb muses. “We were hungry for being outside, working and looking at land—that blank palette of what you can create.”

Deb and Jeff called their operation Harvest Sun Farm, offering certified organic fruits, vegetables and flowers, through subscription CSA (community-supported



Michelle Obama

PHOTO: CHUCK KENNEDY

agriculture) boxes and farmers’ markets. “We really wanted to focus on stewardship,” Deb explains. This farm, their labor of love, also served as an open-air classroom—a place for the Eschmeyers to practice Deb’s principles and teach children.

THE ROAD TO D.C. And then the White House called. “I had very fittingly just finished running,” Deb says. Michelle Obama thought she was the perfect fit to lead the Let’s Move! campaign. “I’ve been working in food, health and agriculture space for more than a decade, building public and private partnerships, working on the macro food policy level while intimately working on the micro reactivity of the moment running a

farm with my husband,” Deb says.

With Jeff, she made her way to D.C., trading in their sunlight-infused acreage for the hustle and bustle of the White House’s East Wing. In a city where politics rule, Deb’s cheeriness and Midwestern work ethic are valued; her knowledge of food policy, masterful; and her agriculture know-how, refreshing. “I feel really fortunate this is an issue that’s bipartisan,” she says. “It doesn’t matter which political stripe you come from. Everyone can agree that schoolchildren need access to healthier meals.

“The national lunch program feeds about 30 million kids daily, creating a \$10 billion to \$14 billion market for farmers,” Deb says. “When you get back into schools and community, farmers are at the core of that community.”

And when her term ends, Deb and Jeff will return to their own community, tending the fields, which, at the moment, are cared for by family members. But for right now, when the stress of Washington, D.C., gets to her, she notes, “We have a pretty stunning vegetable garden at the White House.” ●

To read more on the Let’s Move! campaign and Eschmeyer, visit www.letsmove.gov.



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