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# Random Choices Lead to Decades-Long Teaching Career

## Berkheiser Reflects on Ag Education

**CHARLENE M. SHUPP ESPENSHADE**  
Special Sections Editor

LEBANON, Pa. — Hanging on the walls of the Cedar Crest agriculture classroom are testimonials to Harold Berkheiser's ag education career.

The walls are filled with photos of state contest winners, American degree inductees and other award distinctions. His office is brimming with files filled with student project records, lesson plans and chapter information.

For 35 years, Harold Berkheiser has been a standard fixture in the school's agriculture department, teaching kids about farming, career choices and in some cases, life.

As he looks back, he said it was "random things" at crossroads in his life that led him to agriculture education. As he prepares to retire, Berkheiser reflects on his career, how teaching has evolved and the kids who have walked into his classroom.

Berkheiser grew up on a farm in Summit Station, Schuylkill County, Pa. His parents had sold the dairy during his childhood, and although the family still raised livestock and crops, Berkheiser knew the farm could not generate a sustainable income.

So in high school, he signed onto the college prep track. Discovering that he did not like learning languages, led him to drop his German class and take an agriculture class.

Back then, agriculture classes could replace language as a graduation requirement.

For college, he decided to study agriculture education at Penn State because he had friends following the same path. And ultimately, Berkheiser was hired by Cedar Crest to run its agriculture program.

A couple of years into teaching, he knew he had found his calling.

Teaching agriculture education in a public high school is an unusual blend of classroom education and real-world application through FFA-supervised agricultural experiences (SAEs) or contests.

"Our goal is to get the kids to be ag literate

and learn about different parts of agriculture," he said.

Berkheiser's days can start well before the first ring of the morning bell or run well into the evening coaching teams, reviewing FFA project progress or spending weekends chaperoning students at FFA events.

This is in addition to the regular classroom duties of lesson plans, test correcting and homework checking.

Although he is officially an agriculture program of one, Berkheiser said support from Darren Grumbine, a technology education teacher, and Jen Balmer, the young farmers adviser, provide support to the program.

The Cedar Crest FFA Chapter is a "Three Star" chapter, the highest distinction issued by the national organization.

The evolution of the student body at Cedar Crest can be seen through the growth of the school complex. Berkheiser's agriculture classrooms are in the middle of the school complex surrounded by several expansions.

On a tour of the ag rooms, Berkheiser steps outside and talks about how the greenhouses were moved to make way for one expansion. And other wings now surround the courtyard.

The student population has also changed.

"The dynamics have changed a lot," Berkheiser said of the kids, referring to their backgrounds and interests today compared with his early years.

When Berkheiser started teaching, 90 percent of the students in his class were male. Most also came from farms or worked on farms.

Today, nearly three-quarters of his students are female and most do not have a tie to agriculture. They are also busier, as they take advantage of all extra-curricular activities available today.

Started as a male-only organization, the FFA integrated in 1969 to include females in its membership.

Student projects have also evolved. Originally, most student projects were enterprise-



Photos by Destiny Rodriguez, Cedar Crest High School  
Harold Berkheiser watches sophomore Nick Wenger as he adjusts the speed on a small gas engine.



Harold Berkheiser and juniors Kayla Kneasel and Sherry Moore check on the lilies growing in the school's greenhouse.

More **BERKHEISER**, page A26

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