

# Lower Milford woman turns a barn into a business



Stephanie Stevens of Lower Milford Township plans to open soon a 15-acre events complex on a 270-acre farm along Limeport Pike. We take a tour of Bell Gate Farms, which dates to the 18th century and has undergone extensive renovations. (ADDISON GEORGE / SPECIAL TO THE MORNING CALL)



By **Anthony Salamone . Contact Reporter**  
Of The Morning Call

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**L**OWER MILFORD TOWNSHIP — Stephanie Stevens relishes a challenge.

Like when she overheard people at the 2013 funeral for her mother, Joanne Stevens, say there was no way Stevens could keep her family's sprawling, nearly 260-acre property in Lower Milford Township.

"And my baby started kicking," recalled Stevens, who was 41/2 months pregnant at the time. "I started looking around me and I thought, 'Wait a second, I've been an event producer for most of my life, creating never-before-done events, and I've just been handed a venue. I'm gonna make this happen.'"

Three years after her epiphany, Stevens is about to open one of the Lehigh Valley's newest events destinations in a rustic, renovated barn. Bell Gate Farm will hold its first event Oct. 8 — a surprise birthday party. Stevens said the business can hold weddings, conferences, special events and more for up to 200 people.

It helped that Stevens, 40, worked at events production for several companies, including Mother New York, a New York-based advertising agency. A 1998 Muhlenberg College graduate who majored in communications, Stevens has arranged special occasions for blue-chip companies, including Johnson & Johnson and **Microsoft**. She said her first event was a concert in Chicago to launch American Express' Blue credit card that drew 70,000 people and a concert with the singer Sting and actor Gary Sinise.

After her mother's death, Stevens, who was living in metropolitan New York, inherited the farm, which sits off Limeport Pike. She decided in 2013 to move to Lower Milford.

"I realized where my heart was," Stevens said, "and it was here."

Workers handling interior renovations moved feverishly during a recent tour of the barn with Stevens, general contractor Joe Landrigan of Sage Design Inc. of Upper Macungie Township, and foreman Dan Hyra. The din from sawing and hammering almost drowned out Stevens' voice.

Work included replacement or installation of the ceiling and sidewall wood, construction of a 75,000-square-foot deck, and the installation of wiring and plumbing. Three 50-foot silos adjacent to the barn eventually will be lighted, Stevens said.

All told, Stevens estimated she spent more than \$1 million on the renovations.

"One of the greatest parts of our venue is that it's state-of-the-art in terms of light, sound, decor and landscaping," Stevens said. "So you basically have here a vendor-less venue, where everything can be done here for you. We are organizing with multiple vendors. It's one-stop shopping."

The barn will have a floor-to-ceiling window and a deck that looks out on the property with scenic views, and a grand entrance. Amenities include a commercial kitchen and restrooms. Stevens said she has signed Rodale Catering and Events in Emmaus as the exclusive food provider. Kospia Farms in Alburtis is handling the landscaping to compliment the barn restoration, she said.

While the construction will add new features to the Pennsylvania Dutch-style barn such as restrooms, its architectural integrity will remain intact, she said. . Once complete, the barn will be able to accommodate about 200 guests, she said.

Agricultural economic development similar to Stevens' project appears to have support in the Lehigh Valley.

A Lehigh Valley Planning Commission survey this year of residents in the East Penn and a portion of the Southern Lehigh school districts, where Bell Gate Farm is located, found that nearly 9 of 10 respondents backed farm-supportive operations, including agritourism activities.

Add to the mix longstanding locations such as Bethlehem's Burnside Plantation and the Glasbern Country Inn in Weisenberg Township, and rustic, country-look weddings are becoming trendy, says DebiRice, owner of Fun-Nominal Events, a Bethlehem events and social media marketing company.

"There's a market for both," said Rice, speaking about traditional church and reception-hall weddings and the barn-themed nuptials. "But there's definitely a niche for the country setting in the barn with a beautiful field."

The potential disquieting effect of holding large-scale events in areas with limited road access and parking has alarmed some people and communities, where ordinances permitting such entertainment uses in buildings need to play catch up with would-be event operators.

"I think people generally get concerned with the amount of traffic," said Alene Shafnisky, Lower Milford's planning administrator and zoning officer. "But when you have a plan that's well put together, it makes people a lot more accepting."

Stevens said she reached out to neighbors early in the process to gain their support before approaching Lower Milford officials last fall. Shafnisky said Stevens complied with all township requirements.

"Unless there are serious logistical issues, such as parking or excessive lighting at a venue, most people and community leaders prefer to see adaptive reuse of barns and other historic structures," Shafnisky said. The key thing for barn owners: Communicate restoration plans with the community before proceeding, she said.

When Stevens' father, Lehigh County attorney Richard Stevens, who died in 2007, purchased Bell Gate, he knew development would encroach on the rural life in Lower Milford. "So it was important to him that what once was one of the largest farms in Pennsylvania stayed as large as it could possibly be," Stevens said.

Stevens also wants to be able to support herself and her 3-year-old daughter, Parker Jo Jo, on the farm's 15 acres of developed land. The rest of the property, she said, will be permanently preserved for farming.

Stevens admitted she never tackled such a major renovation project, but she said her experience in events production convinced her she could pursue it.

"This is the home I grew up in," said Stevens. "I want to continue on with my parents' legacy of giving back to the community."

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BELL GATE FARM

•**Address:** 7081 Bell Gate Road, Lower Milford Township

•**What it is:** a restored barn and outlying buildings that can accommodate weddings, conferences and other special events.

•**How did Bell Gate get its name?** There used to be bells hanging on both sides of Bell Gate Road, according to Evelyn "Grammy" Yost, Stephanie Stevens' neighbor and longtime caretaker.

•**For more information:** [bellgatefarm.com](http://bellgatefarm.com); 610-967-1411. See updates on the restoration at <https://www.facebook.com/bellgatefarmevents/>

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