

# WHITESTONE Reaches Out



An Angus operation rolls out the welcome mat for customers, international guests and urbanites alike.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

**L**abel it *hospitality*, *public relations*, an *outreach program*, or just plain *being neighborly*. Whatever you call it, the folks at Whitestone Farm have it down to a fine art. Between cattle workshops, farm tours, international visitors, about 2,000 people pass through the gates of the Aldie, Va., operation in a year's time.

"Mark Duffell and the staff at Whitestone are always willing to stop whatever they are doing and show the cattle and property," says Gary Hornbaker, Loudoun County, Va., Extension agent. "It is a wonderful place to take people."

He should know. He has coordinated both multicounty and state cow-calf management workshops at Whitestone. "We always try to use live cattle in the demonstrations, and the staff at Whitestone bend over backwards," he says. "Mark always says, 'Just tell me what you need, and we'll get it.'"

Hornbaker says that attitude starts with owners George Lemm, Robby and Kitty Robertson, and Tom and Nancy Andracsek, then continues through office manager Maria Marchi and keeps going through to the cattle staff.

## Open gate

Hornbaker says they get a mix of part-time and small-scale producers to professional herdsman at the cattle schools, but he is especially grateful to have an operation the caliber of Whitestone to use both as a source of seedstock and as a role model for newcomers.

"In this area, these are professional people who want to have livestock and want to do things right," he explains. He says Whitestone's world-class genetics, performance testing program and two-year guarantees on bulls give the new producers confidence.

The cattle-oriented outreach programs are just the start. "Because Loudoun County is so close to Washington, D.C., I commonly get requests from international agricultural delegations asking to see farms," Hornbaker says. "Mark and his staff are very, very open to international visitors. We have had delegations from Russia and China."

Their gates are also open to their urban neighbors. Each year the Loudoun Extension service and the office of economic development host spring and fall farm tours. "Twenty farms are open the entire weekend," Hornbaker says.

"There are usually 5,000 to 6,000 people on the tour. Whitestone is one of the highlights."

He says they get a cross section of visitors — many urbanites, but also farm folk who want to see how other producers manage their operations.

There is also the prestigious Hunt Country Stable Tour, a charity event sponsored by Trinity Episcopal Church, near Upperville, Va. Forty-two years old, the tour gives visitors access to the area's exclusive horse operations. In May 2000, Whitestone was the only cattle stop. In 2001, the threat of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) made Duffell call an unwilling halt to Whitestone's participation, but he hopes the operation is included in the 2002 event.

## Good partner, neighbor

So why the open-gate policy? Sure, the cattle visitors are customers and potential customers. But what about the D.C. types?

"It is a great way to educate the public," Duffell states. "Two things have heightened my awareness of just how uninformed the public is about beef — the Young Cattlemen's Conference (YCC) and four days at the Texas A&M Beef 706 class."

During the YCC tour, organized by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), cattle producers from across the country spend a week touring ranches, feedlots, corporate McDonald's, the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, packing plants and

► Above: Owners Robby and Kitty Robertson and manager Mark Duffell (center) believe in sharing Whitestone with as many people as possible.



more. This June, the group, not surprisingly, also visited Whitestone.

The intensive Texas short course was the other wake-up call for Duffell. There, he and the other participants followed cattle as they were taken from the pen to the retail counter.

"Each one of us is not only in the cattle business, we are in the food business," Duffell emphasizes. "I include that in all my talks. If all of us in the cattle business would interact and focus on that, we could make a difference faster."

He says the point hit home during his stint with the YCC. The participants got behind the meat counter at a large grocery store in Maryland and watched consumers as they shopped.

"They'd pick up beef and put it down. They'd go to the chicken counter and pick it up and put it in their cart. Price wasn't the issue. They'd say the same thing over and over — 'I don't know how to prepare it.'"

"We're producing a great product, but until lately we have done a poor job educating consumers," Duffell states.

### Enthusiastic educators

He and the Whitestone staff are doing their part. At every tour, brochures and displays are on hand to help make beef easier for consumers to use. He adds, "We talk about the safety of beef and tell them beef is healthy."

He is also quick to mention the Angus breed's and Whitestone's roles in making beef tender and tasty. "This is a dream come true — we're producing lines of genetics that are truly helping to improve the beef industry," says an enthusiastic Duffell. "The type of genetics we are raising are dispersed through the country."

He adds, "I love what I do. I'm very passionate about Angus."

Duffell's mission is why Betsy Crenshaw, an Angus breeder and committee member of the Hunt Country Stable Tour, made sure Whitestone was on the tour route. "I couldn't pass up the opportunity to have all these people come out," Crenshaw says. "The people that came absolutely loved it."

She says the per capita wealth in the area is such that people can act on their cravings for superior beef after Duffell gives his pitch. According to Extension estimates, the average cost of a house in the area is \$450,000, and the per capita income is \$170,000.

Crenshaw, Duffell and the tour participants all were disappointed when Whitestone had to withdraw from this year's stable tour, but Duffell says their close proximity to Dulles International Airport (7

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► Fencing cattle from ponds and streams is just one of the environmentally friendly practices employed at Whitestone.



► The world-class genetics at Whitestone are a source of seedstock for the area's new cattle producers.

### Customer service gets top billing

While the owners and staff at Whitestone Farm spend a great deal of time and energy reaching out to their urban neighbors, they don't neglect their customers. Mark Duffell, who has managed the seedstock operation for 15 years, used Galen and Lori Fink's Kansas operation as a blueprint for the Whitestone Influence Feeder Calf and Replacement Heifer Sale.

Started in the fall of 1998, the sale mushroomed. Now, anywhere from 400 to 700 Angus-sired calves are graded, grouped and sold each November at the Front Royal Livestock Market.

"We had a \$15 per hundredweight premium in the first sale over calves sold in the graded sales in the area during a two-month period," Duffell says. "We've pretty much returned premiums for our customers every year in all weight categories."

The Whitestone folks don't stop at simply earning premiums for the consignors. After the first sale, Duffell invited them on a tour of Pennsylvania feedlot country. Forty producers made the three-day trip.

"The last night we had the 300 top feedlot people in Pennsylvania and the head guys at Moyer Packing speak to them," Duffell says. "The interaction between the feedlots, the packers and the commercial cattlemen was wonderful."

But this is Whitestone, so the help doesn't stop there. Whether their customers (and there are 3,000 on the active list) are purebred producers, part-time commercial cattlemen or 4-H kids going to their first shows, the Whitestone crew is there to offer input or to lend a hand. Breeding decisions, nutrition and management all fall under their definition of customer service.

Duffell and his staff also pass their tradition of customer service on via their intern program. "We are very serious about our interns," Duffell emphasizes. "We've been doing it for 12 years, and we get interns from seven different universities."

He says, "When the students leave, they are great ambassadors for Whitestone."





► Mark Duffell, manager of Whitestone Farm, says farm tours are a great way to educate the public.



► The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Young Cattlemen's Conference (YCC) is one of the groups that has visited Whitestone in the past year.

### On the Mark

Whitestone Farm's outreach program continues in downtown Washington, D.C., where Mark Coffman, a business partner of Whitestone owners Robby and Kitty Robertson and George Lemm, opened The Mark four years ago.

"It gives us a chance to interact with customers," says Whitestone manager Mark Duffell.

The restaurant serves the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, of course.

"It helps us," says Robby Robertson. "We can say we are the proud owners, and we serve Angus beef."

Coffman, the managing partner of The Mark, is considering changing the menu to upscale Mexican. Located near the MCI Arena, The Mark has a booming lunchtime trade but doesn't get many patrons at night. Still, it should provide an outlet for CAB and give the Whitestone folks a chance to mingle with their ultimate customers.

miles as the crow flies) and the international visitors on the tour made it a necessity.

"I felt bad about pulling out, but that could have put us out of business," Duffell says.

### Environmental ambassadors

The manager and his crew are also careful to emphasize Whitestone's role in protecting and improving the environment. They point out the fenced-off ponds and creeks, the concrete pads under the feed troughs, which are cleaned regularly to prevent runoff, not to mention their strict prescription fertilizer-management program.

Their efforts have earned the farm the *Angus Journal* Land Stewardship Award and the Chesapeake Bay Clean Water Award.

While their proximity to Washington, D.C., puts their environmental efforts in the spotlight more than most operations, Faith Burns, associate director of environmental affairs for the NCBA, emphasizes, "No matter where they are, producers need to showcase their environmental practices."

She adds, "A lot of folks in the cities and suburbs aren't aware of the environmental practices producers are using and have been using for many years. It is very important that producers let the public know what we're doing that is good."

Whether they are showcasing their environmental practices to senators, explaining their embryo transfer (ET) program to the Russian minister of agriculture, teaching beef quality assurance (BQA) techniques to a part-time cattleman, or talking a borderline vegetarian into eating a thick *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) burger, Whitestone welcomes people. Period.

Hornbaker says their attitude is refreshing in upscale horse country, where the emphasis on privacy and security often results in locked gates and "no trespassing" signs.

"Here's a farm where they'll shake your hand and ask what they can do to help you," he says.

"The welcome mat is always out at Whitestone, whether you are an urbanite just wanting a farm tour or are genuinely interested in Angus cattle," Tom Burke says. The Missouri-based sales manager emphasizes, "You don't have to spend big money, but you can still feel welcome."

"We have always encouraged as much traffic through here as possible," Duffell says. "The owners have been very gracious in allowing me to do this.

"Everyone is welcome."

