

Applying Genetics

Kelli Retallick, AGI's director of genetic service, can't get enough of the Angus breed.

Story & photo by Sheryl Smith-Rodgers

"I live and breathe cattle," says Kelli Retallick, director of genetic service for Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI). "I grew up on a registered Angus operation in Glen Haven, Wisconsin, so it's the only lifestyle I've ever known."

Growing up, Retallick participated in 4-H, FFA and the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA). She served on the National Junior Angus Board (NJAB) for two years. She also served two terms as president of the Wisconsin Junior Angus Association, won an American Angus Auxiliary Scholarship in 2010, and was a finalist for 2010 Miss American Angus.

After high school, Retallick enrolled in the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she studied animal sciences.

"I was a junior when I served on the board of the National Junior Angus Association," she says. "That was really a great experience. I got a true appreciation for people who work at the Association office."

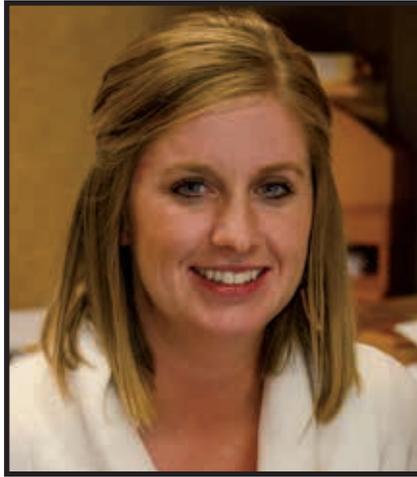
Finding her niche

At college, one course in particular appealed to Retallick.

"My animal breeding and genetics class came easy to me," she says. "It was relatable to me because of what we did at home, and I could apply it."

"There's a lot more to breeding than most people realize," she continues. "They just don't know how much time and effort it takes to get that steak in the meat counter at the grocery store. I wanted to help producers to produce that steak at a premium price."

Toward that goal, Retallick earned her bachelor's degree in 2013 and then her master's degree in animal breeding and genetics from Kansas State University (K-State) in 2015.



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For her thesis, she researched methods for cattle producers to better select for feed efficiency. At the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Annual Convention in 2015, Retallick presented her work on a shorter-intake test that would retain its accuracy while saving producers as much as \$27 per head per week when testing for feed efficiency.

Making it pay

In January 2015, Retallick joined the American Gelbvieh Association (AGA) as data services specialist. A year later, she accepted the position of director of member programs.

During her time with AGA, she worked closely with the breed improvement staff to enhance member services and programs. She was instrumental in developing AGA's Smart Select Service, which allows commercial cattle producers

to collect and report data to make better breeding and selection decisions.

Her involvement in the beef industry caught the attention of a former animal genetics professor she knew from K-State.

Coming home to Angus

"Dan (Moser) contacted me about the job as director of genetic service with AGI," she says. "I started in March 2016. It's been so much fun! I travel a lot and interact with people and help them understand how to use and apply AGI tools."

"I give group talks, too, at presale events, conferences and other group settings," she continues. "In the office, I'm on the phone for a good portion of the day. I answer questions like, 'Why do my EPDs change?,' and I explain that it has to do with expected progeny differences and how they work with the DNA tests and other data points coming into the evaluation."

Retallick works with Association entities to enhance development of predictable supply chains, using the available technologies and networks. She's responsible for coordinating genetic education and outreach programs tailored to Angus breeders and commercial producers.

"I really want to stress that members can call me any time with questions," she says. "It helps so much if they can better understand the outcome of EPDs, because with better genes, you can make a better product and more profit." 

Editor's Note: Sheryl Smith-Rodgers is a freelance writer and photographer from Blanco, Texas.