

Angus Stakes

by Shauna Rose Hermel, editor



Providing a proving ground for young adults

Other cultures have rights of passage through which boys and girls clearly make the transition to adulthood. On the other side of the world, a boy from a local tribe walks into a tent, undergoes circumcision and walks out of the tent a man. That event provides the distinction of whether the individual is considered a child or an adult.

For youth here in the United States, the passage into adulthood is far less clear, but no less painful.

From the time they are babies, children try to imitate adults. We adults spend those early years telling them not to grow up too fast. They try all the harder to prove they're big enough to do whatever we're doing, be that setting the table, baling hay or forming personal relationships.

Somewhere along the age continuum adults do expect youth to "grow up and act their age." But at what point is a young person expected to know how to drive a tractor, back a gooseneck or distinguish a full belly from a bloated one?

The instructions often go from "stay out of the way and don't break anything" to "quit being lazy and pitch in and help."

Recognizing a young person's readiness to do the work is only one step. When is the child adult enough to make decisions that affect the farm financially? I suppose we've all heard the story of the son who finally gets control of the farm at age 70.

As co-chairmen of the adult board governing our church's youth group, Todd and I are constantly faced with finding a middle ground. At times, there appears to be an uncloseable gap between the wants of our young people and the wants of the adults who assist with their activities.

Our high-school-age youth are eager to plan new and exciting activities. They want to take on more of the responsibility themselves, and they're confident in their ability to do so.

On the other hand, our adults are fearful of the youth's commitment to follow through to ensure a project's success — especially considering the number of activities at home and at school that compete

for their time and attention. The adults drag their feet at adding more chaperoning activities to their already busy schedules and are sometimes too quick to do it themselves rather than take the time to oversee a youth.

Sound familiar? Families try to find that middle ground every day.

Somewhere between "stay out of the way" and "pitch in and help" there needs to be a "here's how it's done" and a "you try."

Youth will grow up — one way or another and with adult supervision or without. If we don't provide the proving ground, they'll find one somewhere else, and we may not have a say in who is setting the rules or what the rites of passage are.

The nightly news is full of the results: gang warfare, vandalism, teenage pregnancy, teenage smoking, drugs, alcohol.

There's no doubt I cost Mom and Dad money when I was a child. I spilled feed. I dropped medicine bottles. I got in the way. They had to interrupt chores to guarantee my safety. I forgot to tie the gate. I forgot to shut the door to the granary.

And every year older I get, the more I appreciate the time they devoted to teaching me, explaining the nuances of animal husbandry. My folks could spend hours looking at cows (still do). The obvious child's question: "What are you looking for?" Fortunately, I got answers. And eventually I could find it nearly as quickly as they could.

I got to try to do things — and fail at them — when I was a child so I'd have them mastered by the time I was an adult and expected to know how to do them. The National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) certainly provided many of the learning opportunities.

NJAA is a wonderful platform for teaching youth and providing opportunities for young people to prove they are ready for responsibility. From selecting and caring for a show heifer to filling out Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) to conducting themselves responsibly at an event, learning opportunities abound.

The Junior Activities Department provides many teaching aids in the form of how-to brochures and structured events where youth can test their aptitude and hone their skills.

But the usefulness of that structure, its benefit to young individuals, is determined by the youth and the adults supervising them. Parents determine the level of responsibility given to a young person for a livestock project. Who in your family is going to clip the cattle for the county fair? Who is going to fill out the entry form for the National Junior Angus Show?

When I was a junior, it was an eye-opener for me to serve as a delegate to the NJAA annual meeting and to interview the candidates for the NJAA Board of Directors. There was a wide range in the maturity of those interviewing. When my interview table asked each candidate questions about issues in agriculture, some provided well-thought-out viewpoints. Others appeared never to have thought about it.

The difference wasn't intelligence. It wasn't age. It wasn't gender. The difference was the self-confidence to present "an adult-level idea." The difference was that some had talked about these things with someone before. Maybe it was a teacher or a parent. Maybe it was a coach or an advisor.

It's not surprising that some of those mature-thinking candidates are standouts in the Angus industry today. They got a jumpstart in the Angus business because they started thinking about it earlier in life.

We're all busy. But raising children is the most important job we'll ever have. And investing in their future — whether that's paying a registration fee for a leadership conference, paying for the mistakes of inexperience or taking the time to discuss an idea — is the most important investment we'll ever make.

The energy of youth is astounding. It's up to us as adults to help young people channel that energy toward activities that will help them become young men and women.

A handwritten signature in cursive that reads "Shauna".

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