

Heart, Soul and Grit: Three Components of Leaders in the Beef Industry

This year's BLI class found a renewed sense of purpose.

by Megan Silveira, assistant editor

There are a lot of hats Ashley Bruner has come to wear. “Mom” and “cattlegirl” are most familiar, but she’s recently taken on the roles of beef advocate and retail saleswoman. The North Dakota Angus breeder and her family united with a local seedstock company to start Dakota Angus, a retail beef company.

Three years ago, the Wendel family approached the Bruners with the idea of taking advantage of the volatility present in the cattle market.

It was an opportunity to give customers another path to quality beef and created potential to benefit both of the families’ seedstock herds, Bruner explains.

“We sell anything from a one-pound package of ground beef to a whole animal,” she adds.

Today, Bruner says she is pleased with the company’s growth: Dakota Angus partnered with Certified Angus Beef (CAB) and built a broad customer base. Their beef makes its way to schools and nursing homes, and even serves as a vessel for fundraisers hosted by several nonprofit organizations.

With such an expansive résumé in *The Business Breed*, Bruner’s no stranger to the ins and outs of the American Angus Association. She heard of the Beef Leaders Institute (BLI) in the past, watching videos on



The 2023 Beef Leaders Institute was designed to provide attendees with insight to all segments of the beef industry in hopes of creating stronger, more effective leaders for the Angus breed and beef industry.

social media and reading articles in the *Angus Journal* — but 2023 felt like the year to attend.

“I kind of cover start to finish,” she explains of her industry knowledge, “yet I definitely have weak points.”

Trevor Hinkle has a similar story.

His father was a part of the first BLI hosted by the Association. Between stories told around the dinner table at Hinkle’s Prime Cut Angus in Nevada, Mo., when he was growing up to the Facebook posts he sees today, Hinkle felt like he knew

what he was signing up for when he filled out his application.

The cattlegirl has plenty of experience with the day-to-day work of a seedstock operation and has even been through a packing plant before, but he was drawn to the opportunity to visit Saint Joseph, Mo., and Wooster, Ohio.

“At the Association, you’ve talked to some different people and you kind of get a grasp of what’s going on, but you don’t have time to sit up there all day and see everybody face

to face. We've done some things with Certified Angus Beef over the years, but have never really been to their place and seen everything that they are up to," he explains.

When she submitted her application, Bruner says she, too, was eager to become more well-rounded as a member of the Association.

"I really think it's an honor to have been selected for this year's class of BLI," she adds. "I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to become that much more invested in the brand and the organization. This is our organization. We are it, and it is us."

Bruner and Hinkle were among the 22 Angus producers between the ages of 25-45 gathered June 12-16 for the 2023 BLI experience.

Beyond the pasture

Anyone in the beef industry knows the pride that comes with the Angus family. For most BLI participants, getting to shake the hands of the individuals who process DNA samples or create their sale books is a small highlight to a jam-packed week.

Matias Fuentes, however, had a particularly unique sense of

appreciation as he toured the Missouri office. The general manager of the Uruguayan Angus Breeders Society traveled a long way to be one of three international attendees who joined the BLI class for the first time.

"Excited" and "grateful" are two words Fuentes uses. Though he comes from a country with an impressive farming and ranching infrastructure, he says he's always looking to incorporate new strategies from other breed associations.

"For us, it meant a great opportunity to socialize with the American Angus Association and learn how all programs work," he explains. "It also gave us the opportunity to meet new people and bring some new ideas for our Angus Breeders Society."

Bruner found herself shocked by the new relationships she immediately formed as well. She says she had no idea the love she has for the industry was mirrored in each staff member at the Association.

"They might not be out working with cattle every day, but they still share their heart and soul with what we are doing with the cattle every day," Bruner says. "I really think that's what makes a difference and sets our organization apart. The dedication is shared throughout — start to finish and behind the scenes."

Though Hinkle says he knows what

it takes to raise a quality Angus bull, industry awareness can slightly taper off once the animal leaves his operation.

"You don't really see what happens to that beef after it's weaned," Hinkle explains.

Are calves backgrounded? Fed through? What about the steps needed to get a good steak from the plant to the grocery store?

"It's just a really interesting process to see what happens after it gets to the packer and leaves the packer," he adds, "how there's value made along the whole chain, and how many people are really working to do that."

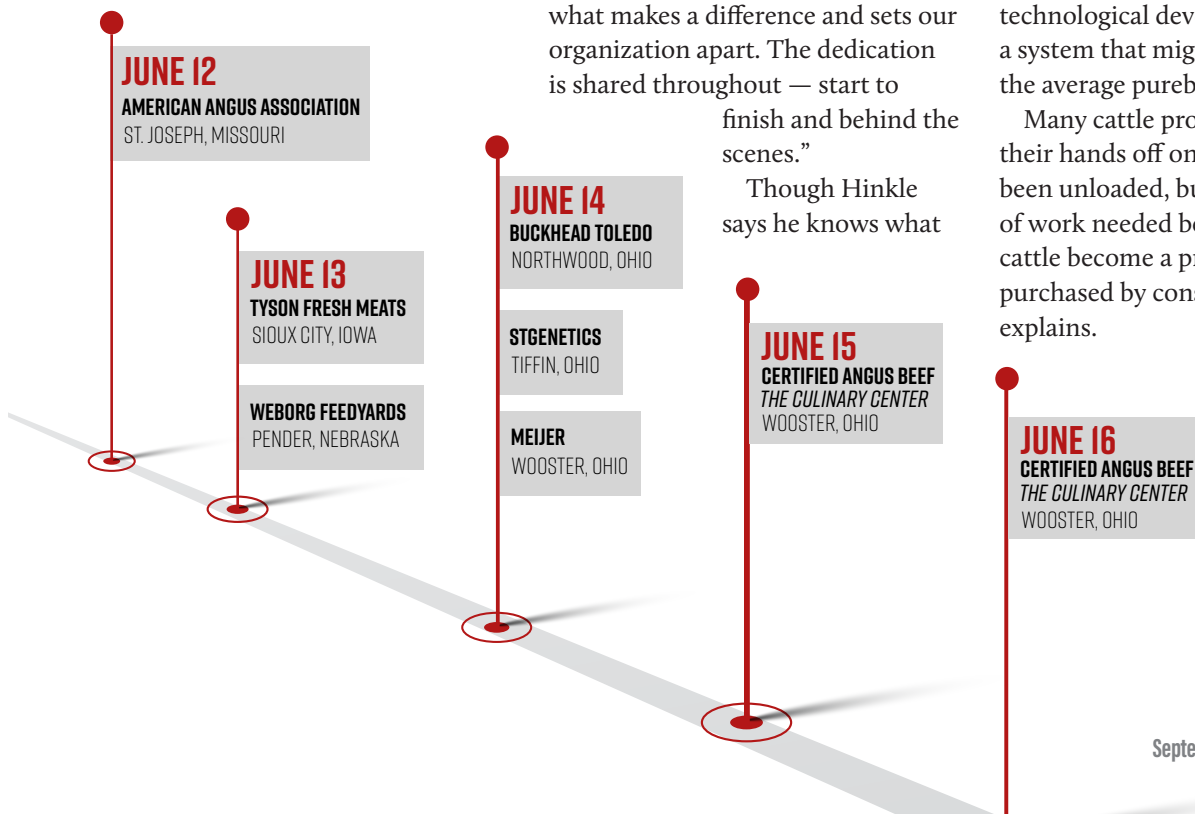
Tyson Fresh Meats, Weborg Feedyards and Buckhead Toledo were some standout stops for the 2023 BLI class.

"I've been to our local butchers before and the place that does our processing, but that quite obviously doesn't compare to the largest beef packing plants in the world," Bruner says with a laugh.

In minutes cattle go from being stunned on the kill floor to hanging as a carcass ready to be processed. It's a refined system that's been perfected over the years thanks to research and technological developments; but it's a system that might be unfamiliar to the average purebred cattle breeder.

Many cattle producers dust their hands off once the trailer has been unloaded, but there's a lot of work needed before those live cattle become a product ready to be purchased by consumers, Bruner explains.

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Hinkle competed in meat judging in high school, but says he was still blown away by how much can come from one carcass.

“I like seeing how they break down those different cuts, and get so many different products out of pretty much the same cut just with the length of bone that they leave in,” he explains. “I just had no idea that they really had that many products that they could [break] that down into for people.”

Though the added benefit of that meat coming from black-headed cattle isn't new to Hinkle or Bruner, Angus premiums are quite a bit different than what Fuentes is used to.

“The biggest difference is how the meat chain works,” he explains. “The ranchers receive money when they sell good, quality beef. Moreover, not only do packers recognize good quality, but consumers also do.”

The management of the CAB brand was also surprising to Fuentes. He says he is impressed by the way the Angus breed has positioned themselves in the marketplace.

Time in Wooster really brought the trip full circle for Bruner. She visited CAB headquarters prior to BLI, but the combination of getting hands on with a carcass and chatting with the CAB chefs really took her experience to a new level.

“I didn't realize before as a producer really what Certified Angus Beef did for us,” she says. “We see CAB on the menu, we see CAB in the grocery store; but truly Certified Angus Beef is our Number 1 cheerleader as producers. They're there to continually sell our product in the marketplace.”

It's a mission carried out by bringing chefs, retailers and other guests to the culinary center. Bruner says it's not just sirloin and T-bone

talk, either. The center dives deep into animal welfare, sustainability and cutability in their conversations.

As he boards his plane back home to Uruguay, Fuentes goes with a new sense of appreciation and pride. He says he's glad to have the opportunity to be a part of BLI, but also walks away knowing the Uruguayan Angus Breeders Society is moving in the right direction.

“We believe we are on the same path,” Fuentes explains. They might have fewer members and a smaller budget, but “We share a similar view of how to work in the whole chain.”

Bruner came to BLI with some hands-on knowledge of many of the sectors of the production cycle. However, she says she's returning to her North Dakota operation with more information to share with family, business partners, customers and peers.

“I learned a million and one things,” she says.

In Bruner's mind, it's an exciting time to be involved in the cattle industry. As consumer demand grows and producers continue pushing for efficient cattle, BLI was the perfect opportunity for her to refine her skills as a spokesperson for farmers



and ranchers across the country.

Bruner says there's heart, soul and grit that goes into every cut of beef.

That's a message worth sharing. **A**