

THE MIDAS TOUCH

Spotlighting the achievements of the 2023 NJAA Gold Award recipients.

by Elizabeth Rosson, editorial intern

In the world of the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA), where tradition and excellence intertwine, there is an accolade that echoes the aura of the fabled Midas touch. The Gold Award is the highest level of recognition within the NJAA.

While this year's 23 recipients may not possess the mythical ability to turn everything they touch to gold, they are high achievers, leaving a mark on the junior community.

Established in 1980 by the American Angus Association in conjunction with the 1980-81 National Junior Angus Board (NJAB), the Gold Award program provides a platform for aspiring Angus breeders to shine on a national stage and be celebrated for their dedication, excellence and commitment to promoting the Angus breed.

To be eligible for consideration, these members must be in their final year of eligibility and have already received the Bronze and Silver Awards prior to Jan. 1 of the current year. Juniors earn points through Association activities, contests and showmanship participation along with additional points rewarded through use of genetic testing and/or Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®).

For their efforts to accumulate a total of 3,000 points, Gold Award recipients receive a gold-casted pin and local, regional and national recognition through the Association.

JONWYN AYRES



"Simply put, my life has always revolved around Angus cattle," says Jonwyn Ayers, Medford, Ore. local.

Ayres actively supports her

family's agricultural production through pasture scans, online cattle marketing and advocacy for the industry.

The daughter of Tom and Cara Ayers says her upbringing in the industry shaped her outlook on life. She believes herself to be more hardworking and determined because of the 12 years she spent in the NJAA. She participated in local, state, regional and national shows and showmanship contests.

At the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS), Ayres participated in the public speaking, career development, extemporaneous speaking, graphic design, team fitting, team sales and livestock judging contests, and the Auxiliary-sponsored All-American Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Cook-off. This past year, she placed in the top five showmen at the National Junior Angus Showmanship Contest.

The current Black Hawk College agriculture student hopes to obtain a law degree to serve as an agricultural attorney. She plans to concentrate her work on labeling laws, land

disputes and environmental policies for animal agriculture.

"I want to be secure in my career and lifestyle enough to have the capacity to support what truly propelled me into who I am — junior livestock programs," Ayres says.

LYNAE BOWMAN



The daughter of April Bowman of Germanton, N.C., Lynae Bowman had a deeply involved journey as an NJAA member.

"Participating in activities and shows with the National Junior Angus Association has provided me with many unique opportunities and contacts that I would not have had otherwise," Bowman says. "I met my college roommate at my first Leaders Engaged in Angus Development (LEAD) Conference and have made many other connections, friends and even my neighbors through Angus events."

Bowman is a rising senior at Oklahoma State University (OSU) pursuing an animal science degree.

She showed her cattle at all levels and was the first-place finisher in the skill-a-thon and stockman's contests at the NJAS.

She served her state association as vice president in 2020 and president in 2022 of the North Carolina Junior Angus Association (NCJAA).

"I have developed skills like communication, photography and writing through Angus competitions; and soft skills such as responsibility, hard work, leadership, time management and many more," Bowman says.

With the knowledge gained showing cattle throughout her upbringing, she plans to secure a job related to custom feed sales.

EMILY BROOKS



When 7-year-old Emily Brooks first asked her parents, Jeff and Shelley Brooks, "When am I going to start showing cows?" she had no idea the

influence the show ring would have on her life. The Prophetstown, Ill., native says she is incredibly grateful for her experiences as an NJAA member and how they developed her into the person she is today.

During the start of her show career, Brooks began to break out of her shell and pursue leadership within the organization. She served as director, show secretary, treasurer, voting delegate and Angus queen within the Illinois Junior Angus Association (IJAA).

Brooks was also a 2022 LEAD conference attendee and participated in a variety of contests at the national level. As an older member, she is excited to help foster younger members grow.

Currently enrolled at the University of Illinois studying agricultural economics, Brooks plans to continue to make waves in the industry.

"I would not be who I am today without living a life involved in the

Illinois Junior Angus Association (IJAA) and National Junior Angus Association," Brooks says. "I transitioned from being a shy little girl to an independent woman passionate about the industry that influenced who I am as a person, and that industry is the agricultural industry."

KATHRYN COLEMAN



For Kathryn Coleman of Modesto, Calif., its hard to imagine the end of her NJAA journey is quickly approaching. As the recently retired NJAB member looks back on her time within the organization, she has a soft spot in her heart for the connections made and personal growth that occurred.

Coleman is grateful for her parents, Tim and Kara Coleman, for supporting her throughout her show career. During her time in the ring, she learned about her competitive drive to win. But more importantly, she learned how to take wins and losses and turn them into learning experiences. Over time, the NJAA became more than just showing cattle for Coleman.

"The NJAA was a learning platform to make contacts and friends around this country," she explains. "I found that my friendships with other NJAA members were, without question, unconditional and mutually respected."

Coleman is set to graduate from OSU with a major in agricultural communications and an animal science minor. In the coming years, she plans to attend graduate school with a focus on marketing. Ultimately, Coleman wants to

continue raising Angus cattle marketable for the show ring or commercial cattlemen.

"I believe that it is important to give back to this incredible industry by trying to elevate our genetics and assist in spreading the knowledge," Coleman says, "I'm looking forward to the future and plan on being a continued source of information for the NJAA membership."

TREY CONLEY



Trey Conley, Clarksdale, Mo., has been a force in the show ring throughout his NJAA tenure. The 2016 NJAS show proved to be a huge

year for the showman. Conley exhibited the grand champion mature owned cow-calf pair, grand champion mature bred and owned (B&O) cow-calf pair, and reserve winter bull calf champion.

"Although most of the glory came from the show ring, the greater assets I have acquired are intricate facets that have made my transition from boyhood to manhood a seamless transition," Conley says. "My participation in NJAA has given me the ability to be self-motivated, and face challenges that may appear insurmountable."

He says the responsibility of raising livestock established the organizational skills, dedication and consistency he has today.

Bill and Donna Conley's son also was deeply involved outside of the show ring. He held the secretary and director leadership positions with the Missouri Junior Angus Association, and is a two-time attendee of LEAD Conference.

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Conley also participated in a variety of national contests including livestock judging, photography, team fitting and team sales.

The Kansas State University (K-State) food science student plans to stay true to the family legacy and raise Angus cattle. He hopes to continue to encourage younger members to get involved.

JACK DAMERON



“Throughout my junior career, I’ve been able to create lifelong friendships and relationships that I will carry with me for the rest of my life,” says Jack Dameron, a fourth-generation Angus breeder.

He spent the last 10 summers showing cattle across the country. Dameron’s involvement in the NJAA paved the way for an impressive résumé, including serving in leadership roles within the IJAA and the NJAA. This dedication to the Association led to securing a seat on the NJAB in 2022, a term which he will complete in 2024.

Not only has the Towanda, Ill., native excelled in leadership, but he also honed his skills in the ring, achieving first place in the 2022 team fitting contest at NJAS.

“The National Junior Angus Association and its various activities and contests have allowed me to learn many valuable traits, while allowing me to grow as an individual and open up many life-changing opportunities,” he says.

The son of Jeffrey and Jennifer Dameron is currently a rising junior

at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (U of I) studying animal science. He hopes to pursue further education in the human medicine field after obtaining his undergrad degree.

MORGAN HUTCHINS



Morgan Hutchins, Charleston, Ill., fell in love with showing livestock in the third grade. “The 8-year-old little girl that showed her first calf at the North American and got last in class came a long way,” Hutchins reminisces.

In the 13 years following that moment, the daughter of Lora Hutchins spent her summers doing what she loves: showing cattle.

She believes her time in NJAA equipped her with life skills and connections. Not only did the junior association introduce her to her love of the show ring, but it allowed her to become a leader.

Hutchins served two terms as state director of the IJAA and is a four-time attendee of the LEAD conference. She exhibited cattle at the local, state and national levels and participated in the national public speaking contest at the NJAS.

The Lake Land College agricultural studies senior plans to continue building her herd after college, hoping her junior years are just the beginning of her journey.

“I am honored to have been able to be a part of such an amazing association with outstanding people who make up *The Business Breed*,” Hutchins says. “Growing up in the National Junior Angus Association

has been the best possible experience anyone could have offered me.”

SYDNEY JOHNSON



As an active member of NJAA, Sydney Johnson Orlando, Okla., has dedicated countless hours to the show ring, but her involvement extends far beyond that.

During her junior tenure, she embraced the NJAS photography and livestock judging contests and Cook-off.

Johnson nurtured her leadership abilities, assuming roles such as director, vice president and secretary of the Oklahoma Junior Angus Association in a span of five years. The LEAD Conference proved dynamic in her junior career, pushing her beyond her comfort zone and enabling her to forge lifelong connections.

Mark Johnson’s daughter has achieved considerable success in the show ring. Notably, at the 2021 NJAS in 2021, she showcased the reserve grand champion B&O female.

Looking ahead, Johnson intends to apply the knowledge and skills she acquired during her NJAA membership towards starting her own livestock photography business.

“I know that I will utilize the knowledge and skills I have gained during my time as an NJAA member for the rest of my life,” Johnson says. “The cattle industry has shaped me in ways I cannot fully comprehend, and I owe a great deal of it to the NJAA.”

ELLIE KIDWELL



Hailing from Walhonding, Ohio, Ellie Kidwell reflects on her involvement in junior Angus activities by

emphasizing the important role her membership has played in her youth.

“Although I didn’t get started with junior Angus activities until a later age, I can say with certainty my experience was just as impactful and memorable as anyone else’s,” the former Miss American Angus says.

Kidwell’s time in NJAA extended beyond the show ring, as she also served as state president of the Ohio Junior Angus Association. In 2022, she actively participated in various contests at NJAS, including the Cook-off, quiz bowl, and the skill-a-thon and livestock judging contests.

“From a shy junior to Miss American Angus, the time I have spent with my Angus family has given me connections and confidence in an industry that I will always love,” Kidwell adds.

The daughter of Kelly Kidwell graduated from K-State in May. She plans to pursue a master’s in bovine reproductive physiology to research early embryonic loss in cattle. Despite uncertainties about her post-education location, Kidwell remains committed to raising Angus cattle.

“I hope to continue growing my herd with a focus on a balance between genetic and phenotypic traits,” she explains

ANNA KING



Anna King, Cobleskill, N.Y., has been a member of the NJAA for 10 years. King showcased her leadership skills

both inside and outside the show ring, serving as the president of her home state’s junior association in both 2021 and 2022.

By actively participating in conferences such as Raising the Bar, LEAD and the Angus Convention and pursuing a position on the NJAB, King says she has been afforded remarkable opportunities to connect and forge relationships with like-minded individuals.

“I was able to grow as a person with the different opportunities that the National Junior Angus Association presented to me,” Andrew King’s daughter adds.

Her involvement in the junior association has enabled her to establish meaningful connections and expanded her industry knowledge and fostered personal growth along the way.

She credits her exposure to guest speakers at various conferences and shows as a provider of valuable insights into the diverse career opportunities available in the agricultural industry.

Having recently graduated with a bachelor of technology in agricultural business management in May, King hopes to attend graduate school in either agribusiness or communications.

LEXI KNAPP



“My time with the NJAA has been nothing short of life-changing,” Lexi Knapp, a native of Bloomfield, Iowa, says.

As a 12-year participant, this year marks a bittersweet milestone for Knapp, signaling the end of her journey as an NJAA member.

“All those years of early mornings and late nights spent working hair, practicing showmanship and blasting music with my siblings will always be my favorite and the thing I will miss the most,” she reminisces.

Throughout her journey as a junior, the daughter of Brian and Karla Knapp has actively engaged in various roles and achieved notable milestones.

She attended the LEAD Conference, held the title of Miss Iowa Angus, served as an Iowa Junior Angus Association state officer, and was awarded a national scholarship by the American Angus Auxiliary. She has also participated in NJAS events such as the Cook-off and career development contest.

The relationships established and experiences gained during her tenure as an NJAA member will prove invaluable as Knapp embarks on her future endeavors. She is a senior at Iowa State University pursuing a major in agricultural studies, with aspirations of making her mark as a marketing professional within the industry.

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KYLI KRAFT



Kyli Kraft, Fort Collins, Colo., didn't initially realize the weight NJAA would carry in her future when first starting out.

"It wasn't until I became actively involved in the National Junior Angus Association that I was able to see all the breed association had to offer," she says.

Kraft, alongside her parents, Jason and Cheri Kraft, traveled across the country during her junior career to exhibit cattle at the local, state and regional levels. Apart from her experience in the show ring, Kraft also competed in creative writing and career development competitions at the NJAS, allowing her to expand her horizons even further.

She held the position of vice-chairman of the Colorado Junior Angus Association for two consecutive years at the state level, showcasing her leadership skills.

Throughout her involvement, Kraft had the opportunity to meet young producers from across the nation, deepening her understanding of the cattle production chain.

As Kraft's engagement within the industry continues, her passion for agriculture and its community only grows stronger. She plans to pursue a career within the agribusiness field.

"Agriculture has had a dramatic impact on my life, and the American Angus Association magnified the character built, skills learned and the importance of relationships

instilled in me during my upbringing," she says.

STUART LASTOVICA



Since the age of 3, when Stuart Lastovica first accompanied his older sister to the NJAS in Denver, he has been immersed in the world of

showing and the Angus community. Years later, the native of Salado, Texas, reflects on his NJAA journey, acknowledging the invaluable knowledge, relationships and personal development skills he acquired along the way.

Throughout the duration of his membership, he has been able to show on multiple levels and was the recipient of scholarships from both the Texas Junior Angus Association (TJAA) and NJAA.

While raising his own cattle, Lastovica has leaned into genomic profile testing to develop efficient and genetically successful offspring. He credits his background and the NJAA for advancing his knowledge in herd health, breeding practices and cattle management.

The son of Steven Lastovica plans to return to grow and develop his family's operation after graduating from Texas A&M University with a degree in animal science and an agribusiness minor. He plans to also obtain his real estate license to add another faucet to the family business.

"I will be forever grateful for the NJAA and how it enhanced my life; my goal is to someday pass this on to my next generation as well," Lastovica says.

JULIETTE MEAD



As the realization sinks in that her junior years within the American Angus Association are ending, Juliette Mead, Barnett, Mo., is overwhelmed

with gratitude for the profound sense of belonging she has found.

For her, it has been a transformative journey, shaping her into the person she is today. From all corners of the country, she has encountered fellow passionate individuals who share her unwavering love for the Angus breed.

The show ring honed her skills and instilled in her the values of responsibility, reliability and the unparalleled rewards that stem from hard work. Every opportunity presented by the association served as a lesson and encouraged personal growth, Mead says.

Looking ahead, the daughter of Alan Mead plans to continue to contribute to her family's cow-calf operation, leveraging advanced association technologies to enhance their cattle herd. Committed to producing exceptional animals for show and production, she eagerly anticipates forging new connections, serving customers and actively engaging in junior programs to give back to the organization that has shaped her journey.

Mead says she's embracing the next chapter with enthusiasm. She is set to graduate from Central Methodist University next year with a bachelor's degree in nursing.

KYRA MEYER



Throughout her tenure as a junior member in the NJAA, Kyra Meyer has experienced tremendous personal growth and developed a

deep passion for advocacy within the association. The daughter of Brandon Meyer says her participation in leadership conferences such as LEAD and Raising the Bar has expanded her leadership skills and broadened her knowledge of the cattle industry.

The Blue Hill, Neb., native attributes her success to the connections and networking opportunities she has gained, which have opened doors for her current job and various business ventures.

“As my time as a junior comes to a close, I could not think of a more rewarding association to be a part of other than the NJAA,” Meyer says. “This association has grown me into the person I am today.”

She is set to graduate from K-State with a degree in agricultural communication and journalism, accompanied by a minor in agricultural sales. Meyer aspires to either pursue a career path in marketing or as an animal health sales representative, leveraging her love for travel and meeting new people in the agricultural industry.

“I will never forget the impact that those families and older kids left on me,” Meyer said. “They were great role models who sparked my love for this association, and ultimately led to my passion for advocacy.”

ASHLYN MOOL



Ashlyn Mool, daughter of David Mool, has been an active member of the NJAA throughout her tenure. The, Lexington, Ill.,

native has been a force in the show ring, showing livestock at local, regional and national levels.

“The relationships that I have created already have significantly made a powerful and positive effect on my life,” she says.

While serving as the IJAA state president, Mool’s junior career reached yet another milestone when she received 2023 Junior Herdsman of the Year in Grand Island, Neb., this past July.

Outside of the ring, she has participated in the Cook-off and quiz bowl contest at the NJAS.

“The Angus breed is to thank for a large part of who I am today, and I want the world to know just how great this industry is,” she adds.

Mool will enter her final year of college at Iowa State University, soon to secure her bachelor’s degree in agribusiness.

She hopes to raise her future children within the Angus community, engaging in showmanship and carrying on the legacy of excellence. She also plans to one day become a state advisor, to guide and support future generations of Angus enthusiasts.

NICOLE NICHOLS



Nicole Nichols, Chambers, Neb., is no stranger to show ring success. But she credits her time in the NJAA as more than merely awards and accolades.

“I went from being a shy, insecure kid to a confident young woman; and I can thank being involved in the junior association,” Nichols says.

Her involvement within the organization has led her to all regions of the United States. Stepping out of her comfort zone, she enthusiastically took part in various events like the Cook-off and quiz bowl contest at the NJAS, as well as the LEAD conference.

With her own cattle, Nichols has embraced the power of genomic testing and utilized the AHIR® program to drive her herd’s progress. By leveraging this technology, she has gained valuable insights into the genetic potential of her animals.

After graduating from K-State with an animal science degree, the daughter of David Nichols plans to consider going to law school, but ultimately envisions herself staying involved in the agriculture world.

Her commitment to the industry is unwavering, and Nichols sees herself making a lasting reputation, either through advocating for farmers and ranchers as a legal professional or by continuing to nurture her own cattle business.

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JORDI OLIVER



“As I look back and reflect on my time in the NJAA, there are countless memories and moments that have changed who I am and helped develop

my passions and hopes for the future,” says Jordi Oliver, daughter of Michele Oliver.

After her first NJAS in 2017, she walked away with a new appreciation for the cattle industry and the opportunities ahead.

The Buncombe, Ill., local has been active at the state level, competing in the ring and serving as the Illinois Angus Queen. On a national level, Oliver has made her mark in the public speaking, team sales and auctioneering contests.

While she cherished her cattle and the moments shared with her family, her passion for showmanship stood out. Connecting with her heifers and showcasing her skills in the show ring not only brought Oliver joy, but also instilled time management skills and work ethic.

As a first-generation cattle breeder, she established her own herd during her NJAA tenure. This pursuit has created in her a strong connection and appreciation with the industry. Currently at Lake Land College, Oliver plans to transfer to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign to obtain a degree in agricultural communications and animal science.

She intends to join the Air Force

ROTC program, aiming to serve as an officer in the United States Air Force upon graduation. Following her military service, Oliver envisions returning to the agricultural industry, intending to contribute her skills and knowledge in a marketing or sales role.

CUTTER POHLMAN



“As a sixth-generation rancher and fourth-generation Angus breeder, my participation in the American Angus Association has

opened my eyes to many new opportunities,” says Cutter Pohlman, Hereford, Texas.

His life has been fueled by *The Business Breed* since the very beginning. At the age of 1, Pohlman was given his first Angus heifer. The following year, he experienced his first NJAS. The son of Scott Pohlman served in multitude of officer positions on the Texas Junior Angus Association (TJAA) and held a seat on the NJAB.

He has been involved in every sector the NJAA membership has to offer. From Raising the Bar Conferences to Angus Conventions, he was in the action. Pohlman also participated in more than eight different contests at the national level.

The NJAA has also invested in his future. He says receiving scholarships like the Talon Youth Educational Learning Program Endowment Fund Scholarship allowed him to thrive on campus at Texas Tech University and dive into meat science studies during his undergraduate studies.

“As I continue to participate in Angus association activities, graduate from college and start a full-time position in the meat industry as an operations management associate for Cargill Protein, I realize that my course of learning may never be complete,” Pohlman says. “I plan to continue advocating for the livestock industry by telling my Angus story and by advocating for my way of life.”

JEREMIAH STEPH



Eleven years of dedication to the Angus breed has landed Jeremiah Steph of Tatum, Texas, a Gold Award. Throughout his tenure he has

been deeply involved in the organization, serving the Texas Junior Angus Association as an officer for four years.

His competitive nature is clear, not only through his experience in the ring, but also in other NJAS competitions. During a span of three years, Steph competed in the quiz bowl, public speaking, team sales and extemporaneous public speaking contests, placing in the top two a total of nine times.

He is grateful to his parents, Chris and Melissa Steph, for believing in him and pushing him out of his comfort zone time and time again.

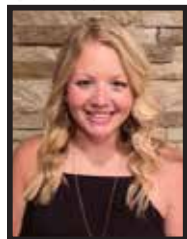
“I don’t think there is another organization in the world that instills its members with as much responsibility, maturity and sense of family as the American Angus Association does for its members,” Steph says.

He wants to start his own herd

and raise his family involved in the organization that gave him so much. The Association has instilled in him a drive to positively influence those around him and fight for what and who he believes in.

Steph is set to graduate from Texas Tech University in May of 2025 with his plant and soil science degree.

MAGY TAYLOR



Macy Taylor from Nashville, Ga., fondly reminisces about showing her first heifer 11 years ago. She recognizes the privilege of traveling thousands

of miles to showcase Angus cattle at various events, including two NJAS, multiple Eastern Regional Shows and several state Angus shows.

One standout experience for Taylor was attending Raising the Bar at Clemson alongside her sister, an event that left an undeniable impression and fueled a desire to further immerse themselves in the Angus community.

“Meeting people from around the country who have the same passion about the industry as you do is indescribable,” she says.

With a vision for the future, Taylor recently applied for an internship with a sales role specializing in developing autogenous vaccines tailored to individual farms.

Leveraging her experience and education, the University of Georgia student aspires to work in the administrative and communications realm of the agriculture industry.

Believing in the importance of promoting and advocating for the industry, particularly within the beef sector, the daughter of Dan Taylor

aims to challenge the prevailing notion that food and related products solely originate from grocery stores.

ALEXIS VANDEBERGHE



Since her first attendance at the NJAS in 2016, Alexis Vandenberghe, Cleveland, N.D., has been captivated by the experience and the opportunity to

meet new people who share her love for the breed. The contests she participated in have developed personal skills and deepened her knowledge of the breed.

While many junior members focus on cattle showing, she and her family have found their niche in raising carcass steers for junior nationals. She has served as an NJAS voting delegate for three years and competed in the photography contest, earning second place in 2021.

“The junior association means more to me than any words could possibly express,” the daughter of Paul Vandenberghe says.

She says she is grateful to the Angus Foundation and the support they have provided to her college career through scholarships. Vandenberghe is set to graduate from North Dakota State University with an animal science major next year.

While she has multiple career possibilities in mind, one thing is certain — she will continue raising Angus cattle and supporting the breed and the association that has played a role in shaping her journey.

KACIE VEJRASKA



“My years as a junior were some of the most memorable times of my life, and I wouldn’t trade them for anything,” says

Kacie Vejraska, Omak, Wash.

The connections made during her time at LEAD conferences stand out to her the most. Friends grew into family for Vejraska, and she says it was those around her who taught her how to be kind, selfless and respectful from an early age.

“They were the people who, if they knew you had a flat tire, they’d stop and help you change it — or in our case, pick our calves up and take them the next two miles to the barn,” Vejraska says.

She made a splash at the state and national level during her junior career. In 2020 she held a state office for the Washington Junior Angus Association and was a voting delegate at the national level. Vejraska participated in multiple contests at NJAS, including livestock judging and the quiz bowl.

For the past two years, she has played collegiate soccer at Central Wyoming College. However, this fall, Katlenia and Todd Vejraska’s daughter will attend K-State in pursuit of an animal science degree. She is eager to continue her education and eventually have a career in the agricultural industry. **AJ**