

# Finding a True Leader

Callie Birdsell is recognized with the 2003 Outstanding Leadership Award.

Story & photos by *Corinne Blender*

**H**er professional mannerisms and commanding eloquence are strong symbols of Callie Birdsell's leadership. This Sparta, N.C., Angus junior didn't become a leader by chance or by her appearance, however.

"Sometimes it's hard for people to look past the exterior of another person. They see the kid with the glasses, the kid who's not wearing the expensive clothing," Birdsell says. "That really bothered me, because growing up I was the kid who wore the glasses and the kid who didn't wear the expensive clothing.

"When it came time for me to step into a leadership role, it was always my goal that everyone be included — no matter what their economic status, no matter what their background," she continues. "Your leadership potential and the person you are aren't based on what you are. It's based on who you are inside."

Her commitment to finding her leadership potential was rewarded when she was given the Outstanding Leadership Award at the 2003 National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) in Louisville, Ky. She also will be honored during the American Angus Association Annual Banquet in Louisville Nov. 17.

Birdsell says that it was always her goal to target the kids who didn't fit in, or the kids who were not talked to as much. "The kids who are involved in everything usually stay involved," she adds. "I am not saying to ignore them. But it's the kids who aren't included as much who can bring new ideas and a new flavor to an organization."

## Her own flavor

"Obstacles for Callie have become possibilities," says Jane Ebert, Sparta, N.C., Angus friend and mentor. "This young lady doesn't stumble at the fear of failure; she pursues challenges that develop her leadership skills and potentials."

Callie has approached her leadership



► "Callie Birdsell jumps in and takes care of any job that needs doing," says April Bowman, NCJAA advisor. "A lot of the juniors are unaware of how much responsibility Callie carries for the association and all the many hats that she wears." Brandon Walker (right) presents the Outstanding Leadership Award to Birdsell at the 2003 National Junior Angus Show to honor her for her leadership.

roles by serving others. Whether it was doing what she could for members of organizations such as the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA), the North Carolina Junior Angus Association (NCJAA) or the National FFA organization, she saw opportunities for what she could do for others, not what others could do for her.

"I am a big believer in servant leadership," Birdsell says, adding she takes pride in the title of servant leader. "You are not put in a leadership position for people to follow you. You have been given the privilege of that leadership position. What servant leadership is about involves what you can do for the members."

She says, for example, if an Angus junior doesn't know how to blow out his heifer, show him how to do it, don't just tell him how.

FFA has been a large part of Birdsell's life. It is through her work as a state officer that she says she developed many of her leadership skills. Her mother, Jane Gardner, was also her FFA advisor, so leadership has always been a big part of her life.

Joshua Bledsoe, North Carolina state FFA coordinator, has seen Callie develop into a strong leader during the last three years.

"Callie came from a newly chartered FFA chapter in Ashe County, N.C. As a charter member, she helped to begin a series of successes at her local chapter. When she entered college, she continued to help out with FFA activities. During her sophomore year in college, she was elected as a state FFA vice president for the North Carolina FFA Association. During her year of service, I worked directly with Callie as she served over 13,000 FFA members across North Carolina," Bledsoe says.



► “Callie is a go-getter,” Bowman says. “She is willing to volunteer for a variety of jobs and isn’t afraid to speak in front of a group of people.”



► Being a leader for Birdsell (left) means taking on responsibilities. She represented North Carolina as a voting delegate at the 2003 NJAS.

“She took a personal interest in the lives of members, and they recognized her sincere love for FFA and for agriculture,” he continues. “She always shared her experiences of growing up on a farm and continuing to help out back home. During her year of service, Callie grew tremendously and developed her potential for premier leadership.”

### A leader for Angus

Angus cattle became a large part of Birdsell’s life around the mid-1990s. Bill and Jane Ebert paid her junior membership dues her first year, she recalls. Soon, Callie combined her love for 4-H and FFA with Angus cattle, taking out her first loan to buy some heifers to begin a project.

Callie offers a lot of credit to those who have helped her, but it’s not about getting everything handed to her on a silver platter. “They haven’t really held my hand; they’ve opened the door and let me step through it,” she says of the help from the Eberts and many other friends.

Her first Angus, from which she built the foundation of her herd, came from Montana. Her father, Ed, brought the heifer to the family farm. Since then, working with cattle has provided a strong father-daughter bond. From there Birdsell continued to build her herd by selling calves and reinvesting show proceeds. She and her family currently manage about 30 Angus cows and another 30 Shorthorn, Maine Anjou and crossbred cows, as well as 50 commercial ewes.

“She has operated on a shoestring budget her entire life, but her faith and hard work

have given her an exceptional win-for-life attitude,” Ebert says.

While Birdsell says her family may not have had a lot of “goodies,” they had all the essentials. Birdsell, along with her brother, Travis, and sister, Megan, had Angus in their lives, and that provided them with much more than money could buy.

“I know I wasn’t as fortunate as some people when I was a kid, but there are a lot of people out there who are less fortunate than I am, which is why I feel so strongly about the Special Olympic Show that we do,” Birdsell says.

The Special Olympic Show, to which she



► Being an Angus junior member has offered Birdsell many opportunities to let her leadership abilities shine.

donates her time, stemmed from a young man’s passion for showing. Mikey is challenged with Down’s syndrome but always wanted to show cattle like his nieces did.

One year at the state fair, Mikey was allowed to bring a heifer into the ring to show in a class of his own. From that point on, the NCJAA got involved by providing animals and assistance to more than 25 special-needs contestants who are now able to participate in showing livestock.

“The most rewarding thing for us is that the boy that it originally started for, Mikey, had always wanted to win a belt buckle because his nieces had won belt buckles at some of the jackpot shows,” Birdsell says. With the help of different contributors, a buckle was purchased, and a Western store in Raleigh donated a belt. “So this year we were able to present Mikey with a belt and a belt buckle.”

Birdsell’s joy in helping provide special moments for others is often second nature. “She is respected by adult groups and organizations, is sought for advice on providing educational and leadership opportunities for fellow junior members, and respects the quality of life for the disabled youth whom she has encouraged and involved in life skill activities,” Ebert says.

### Facing her own challenges

Being a leader isn’t always the easiest task, Birdsell says, adding she is often challenged by trying to match the person she is to the person others think she is.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 40

## Finding a True Leader CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39

"I know that when I was a state FFA vice president, whenever you put on that blue jacket and you went out and met those members it was hard to think, 'Would I be the same person ... if I were not wearing this blue coat?'" she says.

"The biggest challenge is to live up to the expectations that you set for other people. Are you the person that you expect other people to be," Birdsell continues. "And if you can be that person, then it is a lot easier for the people who are following you to go by your example."

### Sharing a love for ag

Perhaps Birdsell's most passionate leadership role is spreading her love and appreciation for agriculture, no matter if that communication vehicle is through FFA or showing Angus cattle.

Ebert has known Birdsell for 10 years and says it is her belief that Birdsell will meet her goal of becoming North Carolina's commissioner of agriculture. Regarding Ebert's first introduction to Birdsell, she says, "I knew immediately she knew how to turn

her hands to any task. It wasn't a choice — it was a way of life."

Growing up in agriculture has certainly played a major role in who Birdsell has become. She sees great value in growing up with farm values and wants to make certain that ag leadership continues to stem from those values.

"Keeping true to the virtues of agriculture, to the value of the farm families," she says is vital to being a leader for the ag community. "Leadership in agriculture requires applying those leadership skills to everyday life. A lot of times those are overlooked. ... I think if a lot of leaders in our national agricultural programs were more focused on the basics of agriculture and the producers — if more focus was put on the servant leadership in those positions — I think it would be a lot better for the producer and the consumer."

While Birdsell is stern in her beliefs of being a servant leader, there's always a sense of eloquence, a sense of sincerity, in every action she takes.

"I try to give others an opportunity when

there otherwise might not be an opportunity. If you provide somebody with an opportunity, if you give them the chance to do something, they are more likely to feel included in the organization. This is when members start to involve themselves and ask you if they can do more," Birdsell says. "I am not saying push them into something that they are not willing to do. But when they want the opportunity, when they seek it out and when they ask to help, then by all means let them run with it. Those are the people who are going to be running your organization. So if you try to do everything yourself, what kind of hands are you leaving it in?"



**Editor's Note:** Birdsell will be recognized for winning the 2003 Outstanding Leadership Award at the Annual Meeting of the American Angus Association Nov. 17 during Angus activities at the North American International Livestock Exposition (NAILE). She will be awarded a bronze eagle to commemorate the event.