

Push for Change

Arkansas advisor honored for her contributions to the state's junior program and its considerable improvements.

by Crystal Albers

Eight years ago, Carla Vaught saw her state's junior Angus association trying to stay afloat and decided to throw the young juniors a line. With unwavering dedication and a keen ability to connect with youth, the junior advisor breathed life into the Arkansas Junior Angus Association (AJAA), helping the group undergo an impressive transformation within the last few years — a transformation that has been putting more and more Arkansas juniors in the national spotlight.

Now in her last year as one of three AJAA advisors, Vaught is being honored by the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA), which named her Advisor of the Year at the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) July 12-17 in Kansas City, Mo.

Volunteer at heart

Vaught's ability to lead youth was founded in her childhood, spent growing up

on a livestock operation in southwest Arkansas near Horatio. The oldest of four children, she helped feed and care for the family's commercial herd, hogs and poultry while showing Charolais and Simmental cattle. Becoming a county Extension agent in 1986 seemed to fit Vaught naturally, and she enjoyed working with kids interested in agriculture and showing cattle.

By the early 1990s, her brother became more involved in showing Angus, and Vaught was busy introducing a young 4-Her, Katie Cravens of Van Buren, Ark., to the show scene. As Vaught's relationship with Angus grew, so did the state's junior membership. There was an influx of younger juniors, ready to show and desperately willing to get more involved. But the numbers were almost too much for the small-scale association.

"When the program started growing, we weren't really set up to handle such a rapid

growth," Vaught recalls. "It caused a lot of miscommunication and people feeling like they didn't know what was going on. Of course, that leads to bad feelings and people

who are involved but don't know how to be more effective."

Parents and other organization leaders began discussing possible ways to fix

the junior group's communication gaps to allow everyone to be involved. That's where Vaught stepped in, offering to volunteer her time as an advisor.

"That's what I do as an Extension agent anyway, help groups organize and work to develop leadership," she says.

Vaught wasted no time rounding up junior members and parents to get the association back on track.

Out with the old

Fixing the AJAA's growing problem required an unconventional approach, Vaught says. At the 1999 NJAS, she met with juniors and parents to disband the AJAA.

"In order to simplify the adoption of new bylaws and move forward, we just disbanded and started over with all new bylaws," she explains. "We decided it was easier than trying to rewrite and fix the ones we had. We just stopped it at that point and started over."

Vaught helped push for change, building an improved association from scratch and forming a bylaw committee composed of juniors and parents alike.

"It seemed like it took us forever to get them adopted, but they're very specific bylaws that help outline where we're going and what our duties are and how to get there. So far, it's really helped," she says.

The change wasn't met with total enthusiasm, however. Shirley Williams, Van Buren, Ark., says the decision to rewrite the bylaws proved controversial for some members at the time. "She took the phone calls from the angry parents in stride," she says of Vaught. "Our state association grew dramatically, and the juniors really felt they had ownership in the decisions."

Vaught handled the task of rebuilding the AJAA, and any opposition, with ease, Susan



► Carla Vaught (second from left), AJAA advisor, is named Advisor of the Year. Presenting the award are (from left) Jarrett Martin, NJAA Board member; and Arkansas juniors Haley Rieff, Allyson McGuire and Katie Cravens.

PHOTO BY CORINNE PATTERSON

Taylor, Lavaca, Ark., reported in her letter nominating Vaught for the award. "At that time, the association was changing and growing, a situation that is challenging to most organizations," she wrote. "While updating a group may be exciting and offer new opportunities, changing old habits and years of doing things a certain way can be difficult."

Through uncertain times and a few growing pains, the association has continued its enthusiasm for Angus and its rapid expansion — from a mere 15 members representing the state at the 1994 NJAS, to approximately 40 at the 1999 show. It now boasts more than 80 current junior members. Many Arkansas Angus enthusiasts credit Vaught with the program's success.

"Whenever tough decisions about the direction of the association were discussed, [Vaught] was there to lead us toward a more efficient and progressive program," NJAA Board member Jarrett Martin, Lavaca, Ark., wrote in his recommendation letter.

In with the new

Key to maintaining a more efficient program is the policy of the group's three advisors, to improve AJAA communication lines by involving Angus juniors from throughout the state.

"For a long time, we had most activity focused in the northwest corner of the state," Vaught says. "Since the reorganization, we have reached out and made people from across the state feel welcome. We've been very conscious about making sure we're accessible to groups from all areas of the state, making sure they're informed, making sure they know how to get involved and know who they need to contact."

Decisions at the AJAA are now based upon the good of all junior members, from all areas. "If it's not good for everybody, we're not doing it," she says. "We're not doing special treatment for certain areas. We're involving everybody — little guy, big guy, rich guy, poor guy."

The AJAA hosts its annual meeting in Little Rock, Ark., a centrally located city providing about the same travel time for most of the state's juniors. Field days take place throughout the state, rather than at



PHOTO BY CRYSTAL ALBERS

► Vaught, who has spent the last eight years as one of three advisors for the AJAA, helped the junior association reorganize and develop into one of the leading junior associations, with more than 80 members.

one location, and the group has built up the state's representation at the annual Leaders Engaged in Angus Development (LEAD) Conference.

But Vaught refuses to take all the credit for the AJAA's many successes. She attributes the growth to the cooperation of members, the dedication of previous advisors, and the teamwork shared among the current advisor team, which includes Cindy Long, Lavaca, Ark., and Michelle Rieff, Bentonville, Ark.

"The success of this Arkansas program is due to a lot of really interested, really active parents and kids who are committed to doing things with Angus cattle," she says. "And [the advisor team] works together real well. We look forward to getting together and working on things, as well as with a lot of the other parents.

Everybody is excited about Angus in Arkansas, and that helps a lot."

Williams says Vaught has become a motivating force behind that excitement.

"She has given her time and talents to our state Angus kids, just because she loves working with kids and cattle. She gets the juniors so fired up at the NJAS that they believe that they can do anything, and they do. ... The ability to engage kids the way she does is truly a God-given talent," Williams says.

Plus, she lets juniors think for themselves. "It's all about our ideas. It's not about our advisors' ideas. We come up with ideas, and she loves our input, and that makes her unique," says Haley Rieff, AJAA member, Bentonville, Ark.

Vaught is unique in other ways, too, Rieff points out. She selflessly volunteers without incentive. "She's all about the kids," she says. "She doesn't have children of her own. She's just doing it because she loves to do it, and that's what is important."

So why does Vaught volunteer so many long hours, spending vacation time and holidays on the road to many Angus functions?

Witnessing a shy youth who wouldn't speak develop and win a speaking contest or become president of the group is a source of satisfaction, she says. Watching them develop skills that better position them to be successful adults helps her grow as well, she adds.

As she nears retirement from her eight-year stint as a junior advisor, Vaught prepares to participate in a leadership program for the next generation — an adult program geared toward representing rural people in legislature and educating communities on legislative issues facing the state. However, Vaught will remain involved in the AJAA, only to a lesser extent.

"We've created such a good, strong organization that everybody can just step in and keep it running," she says. "If everybody will do that, these kids are going to take it as far as it can go."



► Arkansas Angus enthusiasts nominated Vaught for the Advisor of the Year because of her continued dedication to the growing junior association.

