

# Learning THE Ropes

A unique North Dakota mentoring program is helping high school students learn firsthand about beef industry careers.

by *Kindra Gordon*

**W**hat do you want to be when you grow up?" That's a question students ponder — and often struggle with — from early on in high school. Without exposure to different career paths, it can be a difficult decision to make.

By participating in a seven-month mentoring program hosted by the North Dakota Stockmen's Association (NDSA), some high school students are getting a hands-on view of careers in the beef industry. The program is conducted annually by NDSA and is sponsored in part by Farm Credit Services of Mandan. High school students must apply for the program and, if chosen, are then matched with industry leaders in the fields of their choice.

"The Mentoring Program is designed to encourage young people to get involved in the beef industry and to expose them to the vast job opportunities available in it, on and off the ranch," says NDSA Member Services Director Tracey Koester, who coordinates the program.

The program is flexible for teams to develop a mentoring experience that meets their goals. They set their own schedules and agendas, meeting a minimum of four times during the mentoring period, from February through September. Eight students were selected for this year's program and were paired with mentors in career areas such as

ag education, artificial insemination (AI)/embryo transfer (ET), ranch supply/retail, and veterinary medicine.

## Student perspectives

Heather Wells from Carson, N.D., is a high school junior who is interested in attending school for

veterinary medicine someday. After learning about the mentoring program through her local FFA advisor, she applied for the program and was excited to be paired with local veterinarian Annette Haas, who has exposed Wells to the workload and real-life examples of being a veterinarian.

Wells, who grew up on a commercial Angus operation and has been an active showman in 4-H and FFA since she was 9 years old, says she has always enjoyed animals and thought becoming a veterinarian would be a good career.

Through shadowing her mentor, she now knows more about what such a career path entails.

"It's been a good experience to show me what I'll be getting into as a veterinarian," Wells says. "My mentor has also given me good advice on classes to take in high school and college and good clubs to be involved with that would help prepare me for my future career."

Elizabeth Caron, a high school senior



► Heather Wells would like to be a veterinarian. She heard about the mentoring program from her FFA advisor.

from Scranton, N.D., is also in the mentoring program and was paired with Annette Steffan, who operates her own AI and ET business. This is an area Caron wanted to learn more about because her family has a feedlot and heifer development program that uses AI extensively.

Caron is actively involved with her family's Angus-based commercial herd and owns six of her own cows as an FFA program. She learned how to AI two years ago and assists with the heifer development operation, but she wanted to learn more about AI and ET. Therefore, she applied for the mentoring program.

After a few sessions with her mentor, Caron says, "I've learned a lot in the short time I've been with her." Upon graduating from high school, Caron plans to study animal science in college and would like to return to the family farm and have her own AI business.

### A real-world view

Veterinarian Ceylon Feiring, from Stanley, N.D., agreed to serve as a mentor for the program this year because she believes it provides students with a realistic view of the careers they want to pursue. "This is a good way of educating others about what vets do," says Feiring, who has been in the field nine years. In addition to running her own veterinary clinic, Feiring and husband, Doug, own and operate Feiring's Angus Ranch, a 400-head purebred herd, and they host an annual production sale in February.

Feiring also believes the mentoring program provides an important line of communication between young people and industry professionals.

"The mentoring relationship is a good way to keep in touch with young people," she says.

"Even after they graduate and go on to college, we can be a source of information for them — someone in the field they can call and get advice from. It's nice to have that relationship."

Dave Dockter, an AI and embryo technician with Select Sires Inc., has served as a mentor for the past two years. He, too, says he got involved because he enjoys the enthusiasm of young people and their willingness to learn.

"This is another experience where they can learn about real life, and they get a realistic view," he says. For instance, his protégé last year decided maybe the early mornings and life on the road of an AI technician weren't for her.

And that is part of the experience, too. "Learning that a particular career is not for you can be just as valuable as deciding that the career is for you,"

Koester says. "Anything that helps students make more educated decisions about their career choices is a benefit."

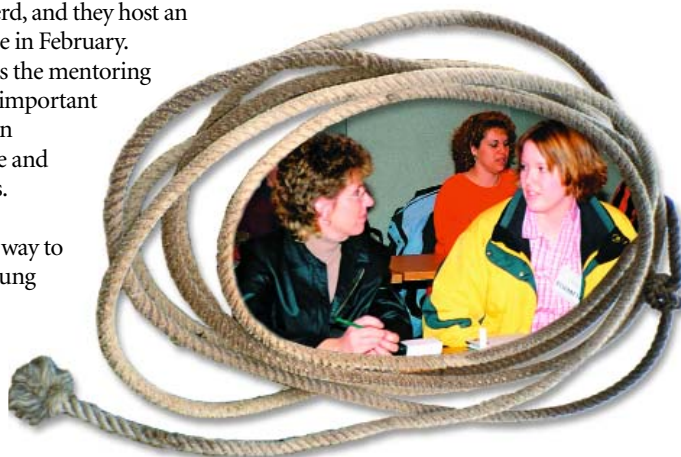
Wells admits it can be an eye-opening venture. "Dr. Haas has told me aspects of the job that may be challenging, so I'm aware ... and to make sure I really want to do this someday."

For now, Wells plans to pursue her goal of becoming a veterinarian. She plans to work occasionally with Haas at the Elgin Veterinary Clinic until she graduates from high school. She then plans to pursue her animal science degree at North Dakota State University (NDSU) before going on to veterinary school.

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► Elizabeth Caron hopes her mentoring experience will benefit her family's heifer development operation.



► The mentoring program is flexible to meet participants' goals. Here, Annette Steffan visits with Caron.