

Finding His Place

Former NJAA member takes his experience to the next level with travel to Thailand as a 40 Chances Global Fellow.

by Linda Robbins, assistant editor



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHANDLER MULVANEY

Chandler Mulvaney, Opelika, Ala., is a senior at Auburn University and a former member of the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA). He credits his involvement with the NJAA as the foundation for his passion to promote and serve the beef industry and the agriculture community. Mulvaney traveled to Thailand in December 2015 as a member of the Agriculture Future of America (AFA) 40 Chances Global Fellows program.

Mulvaney says he is the fourth generation in his family to raise cattle. Both his mother and father, who met at Michigan State University 35 years ago, had raised cattle with their families. Mulvaney began his 12-year involvement with 4-H showing cattle when he was 7 years old. He fondly remembers his first Maine-Anjou female named Molly, and her bull calf, Chip. He says he started showing Angus in 2006 when he was 13, but had been a member of the American Angus Association for quite some time before that.

Whether he took first or last place in the showing wasn't as important as the actual learning experience, Mulvaney explains, though showing the state champion Angus steer was always a little more fun. A local Angus breeder reached out to Mulvaney when he was 13, took him under his wing and helped provide multiple Angus steers and heifers to be shown at state and regional levels. From that point on, Mulvaney was able to exhibit his Angus steers along with his female projects in a manner that made apparent the responsibility and hard work he invested in his cattle each day.

He attended several National Junior Angus Shows (NJAS), he says, but rarely in a row. The Mulvaney family would rotate junior nationals between different respective breed associations until later in his show career. He says he competed in team sales and public speaking at NJAS, with prepared public speaking being his favorite.

"I enjoyed going just to participate in contests and to be with my friends," Mulvaney adds. "My favorite NJAS was in Perry, Georgia, in 2009, because it was at a local fairgrounds where I'd shown in several regional shows. I believe I took third place that year [in prepared public speaking] in my division," he says.

"It's a pivotal time for middle schoolers and high schoolers, and I see those experiences [at NJAS] as the foundation for the connections I have with friends and key producers I stay in touch with today," he says. "I knew then I wanted to represent beef producers in a favorable light and to speak on their behalf."

At this point he's done showing, Mulvaney



► Chandler Mulvaney, former NJAA member, served as a National Beef Ambassador and as one of nine student leaders from across the country representing Agriculture Future of America on the Student Advisory Team.

remarks, but he is mentoring several young people on the benefits of showing cattle, and they are now showing some of his cattle genetics. It's a way of keeping a connection to the cattle industry, as well as an experience he wants to make available to his own children, if he has them, someday.

The next level

Wanting to represent the beef industry as a whole prompted Mulvaney to compete late in 2012 to be a member of the 2013 National Beef Ambassador team. He says the beef ambassador candidates were judged in the areas of consumer promotion, classroom presentation, media interview technique and

issues response at the event that year in Sacramento, Calif.

Sponsored by the National Beef Checkoff Program and the American National CattleWomen, the youth ambassadors speak to industry issues and misconceptions, and educate their peers and meal-time decision makers about beef nutrition, cattle care, safety and more during consumer events, in the classroom and online.

Mulvaney says securing a position on the National Beef Ambassador team gave him another level of experience, but he wanted a further opportunity to serve the interests of all of agriculture. At about the same time he competed to become a National Beef Ambassador, he applied to be a member of the incoming class in the AFA Leaders Conference. Shortly after, he was awarded one of the AFA National Leader and Academic Scholarships to attend the annual AFA Leaders Conference hosted in Kansas City, Mo., as a Track 1 delegate in November 2012.

Currently, Mulvaney serves as one of nine student leaders from across the country representing AFA on the Student Advisory Team.

AFA's focus is to create partnerships that identify, encourage and support outstanding college men and women preparing for careers in agriculture and the food industry. AFA was founded in 1996 in Kansas City by R. Crosby Kemper Jr. and other agribusiness leaders. AFA offers leadership and career development training and academic scholarships for college students pursuing a career in agriculture and food-related fields. Mulvaney says AFA assists students in

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► Nineteen AFA 40 Chances Global Fellows are shown at the airport ready to begin their journey to Thailand.

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developing the personal and professional skills necessary for lifelong success.

“The program helps you figure out where your skill levels are, where you want to go and how you’re going to get there,” he says.

Partners and chances

Mulvaney says AFA partners with a variety of rural communities, corporations, foundations, colleges and universities, and with individuals who support academic,

leadership and career development. He explains that the 40 Chances Global Fellows program is an endowment and a partnership between AFA and the Howard G. Buffett Foundation that was designed to give the 40 selected students a fully funded four-year experience in the AFA Leaders Conference, while providing them with unique leadership development opportunities along the way.

Buffett announced the endowment after accepting the AFA Leader in Agriculture

Award in November 2012. Mulvaney explains that part of the inspiration for the 40 Chances program came from a book written by Howard G., a farmer in Illinois and Nebraska, plus a humanitarian, businessman, politician and photographer, and his son, Howard W., about the Foundation’s efforts to end world hunger and persistent poverty.

Of course, the Buffett name is well-known because of Howard’s father, financier Warren Buffett, “the Oracle of Omaha,” who

A once-in-a-lifetime experience

“Live for the land, not off the land” is the most memorable quote Chandler Mulvaney, Opelika, Ala., heard during the two-and-a-half-week trip to Thailand with his Agriculture Future of America (AFA) 40 Chances Global Fellows. His group traveled 28 hours on the first day to reach Chiang Mai, the former capital city, where they spent Dec. 26 through New Year’s Day.

Mulvaney explains that the city of 400,000 residents still has an evident connection to agriculture and the ways of the land. The group was able to explore Chiang Mai University and its top-ranking research programs and to travel to the outskirts of the Chiang Mai province, where they were able to view ancient temples and agricultural projects.

“The beauty and magnificent views were constantly surrounding you and making you feel at peace despite being halfway around the world,” Mulvaney says. “Prior to traveling to Thailand, I had heard that the Thai people were the happiest, most joyous and smiling people in the world. I would have to say that is true. The people made all the difference.”

After Chiang Mai, the group traveled north to the Fang province,

where they were approximately 10 miles from Myanmar. The group explored the First Royal Project established by the king in 1969, using royal funds as a method to combat the growth of opium and drug trading by creating incentivized farming through growing crops such as fruits and vegetables that brought greater returns at the market than the products used to create drugs.

The group then traveled further south, staying for two days and one night at Pun Pun Organic Farm. The farm has been in existence for 13 years and is managed by a community of families who make their living from the land and work day in and day out to define themselves as subsistence farmers. Mulvaney says this provided the AFA group an added perspective on how some independent farmers are remaining successful by relying on their constant care of the land to provide the nutrition and necessary calories they need for their families, rather than the large-scale production and use of technology seen in the United States.

After returning to Chiang Mai, the group visited various tea companies and government-run facilities in the city that manage and facilitate the production on the Royal Projects throughout



► **Above:** Jordan Bonham (left) and Mulvaney taking a ride on an elephant, the national animal of Thailand.

► **Left:** As far as the eye can see, more than 1,000 acres of various agricultural vegetables and fruits are being produced in the northern Chiang province.

famously announced that he would not leave the bulk of his estate to his three children, but would contribute money to fund a foundation after asking each of them what they would do if they had the money to try to make the world better for others.

Howard G.'s foundation was originally created in 2006 with funds donated by both his parents. Howard G. first tried to save endangered cheetahs in Africa, but found that his initial good intentions were less than

fully successful, and he refocused his foundation in 2010 with a mission to improve the standard of living and quality of life for the world's most impoverished and marginalized populations.

40 Chances: Finding Hope in a Hungry World illustrates what both Howards learned through studying the failures and successes of the foundation's and other non-governmental organizational efforts to find self-sustaining ways to address the root

causes of poverty and hunger in different countries. Buffett is also an advocate for conservation efforts such as no-till farming, nutrient management and cover crops.

The 40 chances in the title refers to Howard's contention that farmers have only 40 growing seasons to maximize a crop and, thus, only 40 chances to make the world a better place. The AFA 40 Chances campaign suggests that each person has approximately

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Thailand. Continuing the observation of tea manufacturing and production, the group traveled to Bangkok. In addition to touring larger agricultural companies for insight into the technology being used to manufacture teas, they were able to tour several ancient ruins.

After their last tours, the group used their time to collaborate on their project/presentation to most effectively show what they had learned through their experiences. Mulvaney says the group was often asked by the farmers what information they could give to improve the operations they saw during their tours of the various agricultural companies, farms and private operations. He says this was a great challenge to the group to think about how they would manage and run that particular operation, which led to more in-depth thinking while organizing their presentation.

The group then traveled to Washington, D.C., where the 19 students presented to and answered questions from a panel that included USDA Deputy Secretary Krysta Harden, Karen Duca from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and representatives from Cargill, Bunge and other agricultural agencies

and businesses that had provided the resources to make the international experiences possible.

The AFA 40 Chances groups were given approximately 15-30 minutes to present surface-level information based on their firsthand observations of the agricultural projects and farming operations in the countries they visited, and to provide their recommendations.

Overall, Mulvaney says he feels blessed with the 14-plus days he and the group were immersed in Thai culture, and that he felt comfortable, at peace and at home in Thailand.

"The Thai people have an immense respect for their fellow citizens and the land, and it shows in the amount of care they are willing to invest in a simple lot of crops or in a thousand acres," Mulvaney asserts. "This experience allowed me to grow and learn more about our world than I could have ever imagined."



► In addition to seeing many agricultural operations, the AFA group also visited some cultural sites while in Thailand. Pictured is the reclining Buddha at the ancient Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon temple in Ayutthaya.



► Mulvaney stands among the 3,000 acres in northern Thailand used for citrus production. He is standing in front of an orange tree at Thanathorn Orange Orchards, the largest orange producer in Thailand.

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40 chances — or 40 years — to make a positive impact on the world.

Mulvaney says everyone in the AFA Track 1 experience in 2012 had the opportunity to apply for the 40 Chances program, and he thinks just about all of the 160-170 students in their first year did so. Each delegate filled out an application, wrote answers to essay questions concerning their goals for hunger studies around the globe, and completed individual interviews. The 40 students were chosen based on their desire and potential to impact global food security, according to the AFA 40 Chances Fellows web page.

Mulvaney says the idea for the group was to have four years of continuous improvement based on the four primary levels of the AFA program, with the added opportunities provided by the 40 Chances experience. Track 1 stresses self-assessment, Track 2 focuses on communication, Track 3 provides a road map for managing and adapting to change, and Track 4 emphasizes lifelong learning while providing a capstone international experience for those in the 40 Chances program.

Personal journey

Mulvaney says they were first tasked with reading the book, and one of his favorite projects that has encompassed all of the AFA levels was developing a 40 Chances portfolio with a résumé, their original 40 Chances application, essays for scholarship programs, a LinkedIn profile and more. It ended up totaling about 35 pages in an electronic format, he says.

He explained that once a semester, each fellow would have a one-on-one phone call with one of the AFA program directors who would give him or her tips on improving the portfolio, perhaps suggesting a change to the LinkedIn profile, suggesting areas where he or she could expand their involvement, and guiding him or her through some self-reflection on the evolution of their career path and personal and professional goals.

Once the portfolio was completed, Mulvaney says, along with some other requirements that included a service-related or 40 Chances-specific project, they could apply to travel in their fourth year of the program, in what is considered the capstone experience. The fellows completed another application process to go to one of the four countries available: Thailand, Bolivia, the Netherlands and Ethiopia.

Mulvaney says they did surveys based on their country and areas of interest and completed essays on chosen topics. Each fellow ranked their country of choice for



► Mulvaney is pictured during his term as a National Beef Ambassador with his friend Trent Loos (right), who has served as a continuing mentor and influencer in his life.

travel, he says, and most got the trip they wanted. He chose Thailand because he thought it was not a trip easily and regularly undertaken, and because he has always been interested in the Southeast Asian culture.

Mulvaney says each trip will have a different focus, with the Thailand trip focusing on market access. During his 10-member group's time in Chiang Mai, they would study the ag infrastructure currently in place and how Thai farmers get their products from one place to another with consistent quality and in a sustainable way year around. All 40 members left Dec. 26, 2015, with each 10-person group accompanied by an AFA staff member, and returned to Washington, D.C., Jan. 13, 2016. All of the 40 Chances Fellows were scheduled to spend three days in Washington, Mulvaney says, with each group tasked with making a presentation on their experience. He took his GoPro® camera to do some vlogging to document what he learned and what changes he would recommend.

"The beautiful thing about the AFA Leadership Conference and the 40 Chances Global Fellows programs is how diverse the teams are," Mulvaney says. "There are college students with cattle backgrounds, cotton, hay, peanuts, almonds, fruit producers and more. So many ag students in universities are immersed in their own aspect of agriculture and don't realize they are just one part of the whole, but these programs allow us to have a much broader perspective and to be supportive of each other."

Preparation

Mulvaney says the trip the 40 Chances Fellows took in August 2015 to Minneapolis, Minn., to a hostel owned by a local church

was a model hunger study showing them what finding food is like for those who are poor. It was a short trip lasting just half of one week, he adds, with each group of 10 given a budget to buy food in the area to feed their "family."

They received \$9.25 to buy and cook their food for one meal. He says the grocery stores in the area were all upscale and expensive, and they ended up buying a bag of rice, some discount meat and one package of vegetables. They had to assess how much nutrition the food provided and how sustainable it was to produce the food to eat like that on a daily basis.

The space for the group of 10 was crowded, Mulvaney says, with some members of the group sleeping in bunks and some on the floor. He says it was an eye-opening experience for him and the rest of the group, as they were forced to get used to not having all their direct needs satisfied all the time. This experience fostered personal growth and responsibility while keeping others in mind, he says.

Future plans

Mulvaney says he has two passions: the cattle business and youth involvement. He would like to combine the two as a career, whether that means starting his own business or working for an existing organization in the agriculture community. He loves beef cattle and wants to continue in the industry and, if he has a family someday, to bring his children up in that same environment.

He can see himself working for a breed association or an organization like the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), since both types of organizations work toward efficiency and continual improvement. In addition, his year as a National Beef Ambassador gave him a chance to showcase the dedication and hard work of the 700,000-plus beef producers across the country, and to advocate for all individuals connected to the beef community.

Each of the youth organizations in which he has been involved have moved him from one level of experience and understanding to the next, Mulvaney says. From 4-H to NJAA to AFA to the 40 Chances Global Fellows, he says, each experience taught him so much about agriculture as a whole and about himself.

"It's all about empowerment," Mulvaney says, "and providing ownership for you to do whatever it is that you love, and do it well."

