



PHOTO COURTESY FARMERS FIGHT

Farmers Fight

Students take part in telling the beef story by forming advocacy group.

by Kasey Miller, associate editor

Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, is home to many traditions. There's even a saying on campus that if something happens twice, it becomes a tradition. The university started as an agricultural and mechanical college in 1876 (hence, the A&M in the name), and the agricultural history sparked the nickname Aggies and many of the yells that students still vocalize at sporting events today, including the yell, "Farmers Fight."

However, like much of the United States, the agricultural population on campus has diminished. With almost 7,000 students in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, agricultural students make up 14% of the 50,000 total students enrolled in the university. This is a much higher percentage than the percentage of farmers and ranchers among the American population, but there is still a disconnect between many Texas A&M students and agriculture.

Tired of hearing negative coverage in the local media and that many of their fellow students had little connection to modern agriculture, ag students decided to take action. Mason Parish, Jasmine Dillon and Victoria Pilger are three of the 10 individuals who created the group Farmers Fight to

promote agriculture on campus and engage people in conversation about the merits of American agriculture. Their goal is to make agriculture an Aggie tradition again.

The group's Facebook page explains: "Farmers Fight is a new ag advocacy movement dedicated to promoting agricultural awareness to the students of

Texas A&M University. Through educational events and media publicity, this movement works to promote a positive, educated understanding of American agriculture so that people may better understand just how vital it is to our nation, economy and way of life."

The founding students have a diverse background,

like the many agriculturalists nationwide. Dillon, a graduate student focusing on animal breeding, came from an urban background, but got involved with FFA during high school in Plano, Texas. Pilger, a sophomore animal science major, started showing livestock at about 3 years of age thanks to her father, who was a high school ag science teacher. Parish, a sophomore ag economics major, grew up on a small cow-calf operation outside of Cut and Shoot, Texas. These three people and their team have brought together 220 students with equally dissimilar backgrounds to join the cause.

Farmers Fight has three primary pillars – training, community outreach and campus connection.

Three pillars

The trio explains that the Farmers Fight group has three primary pillars — training, community outreach and campus connection.

"We developed an advocate conference for our 220 advocates. We felt like before we sent them off to campus to talk about agriculture, they needed to know what they were talking about," explains Pilger.

They brought in three industry leaders from Texas to explain the best way to communicate to customers in order to effectively tell the story of agriculture.

The second pillar is community outreach. To do this, they designed coloring books with an agricultural message, Dillon explains. They took the coloring books into eight elementary schools in the Bryan/College Station area, and ended up distributing more than 700 agricultural coloring books and crayons to 40 classes of first-grade students.

"Farmers Fight advocates went in and walked the students through the story in the coloring book. What was so exciting about this is that the elementary school children got to take the coloring books home and become advocates for agriculture in their homes for their siblings and their family members," Dillon adds.

Another type of community outreach was their Artist Harvest event, where the group reached out to the "artistic crowd" to start conversations. Surprisingly, Pilger says, that was the first time many of the artists had ever talked about agriculture.

The third pillar is campus connection. On April 12, 2012, the Farmers Fight group stormed the campus of Texas A&M. Its many members answered questions, listened to concerns and connected with fellow students.

"Two hundred and twenty students who are passionate about agriculture went out and talked about their story, but more importantly, they listened. They answered questions, and they talked about their personal experiences — allowing customers and allowing our students to truly understand what agriculture was," says Parish.

Many booths were set up across campus with topics ranging from organic and conventional, dairy (including a live cow), poultry, and even a booth about fashion.

He says that the dairy cow was a huge attraction, as many students had never seen a dairy cow in their lives. She sparked many conversations. One young lady came by early in the day in complete protest.

"She was frustrated and could not believe we could treat animals so inhumanely. We asked her what her frustrations were built upon," Parish says. "We come to find out that her entire frustration, her entire reason for not taking part in any kind of dairy or cheese, was simply the fact that she believed that

dairy cows were forced to stand for 24 hours a day and be milked?”

It was this kind of frustration and misperception that Farmers Fight aimed to listen to and hopefully dispel.

Other tools

Parish, Dillon and Pilger say there are many tools to help bridge the gap between consumers and agricultural producers. Programs like 4-H and FFA bring agriculture in the classroom with a hands-on and proactive approach. However, there are other avenues.

They suggest advocacy means such as the Masters of Beef Advocacy program or using social media, like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram, explains Dillon. These digital methods of connection allow your message to reach those you may have never met.

These are powerful tools and have been used in successful ways already, like the Peterson Brothers in Kansas with their videos or Ryan Goodman, a graduate student from Arkansas, with his blogs. The Petersons' video "I'm Farming and I Grow It" has had more than 8 million views on YouTube, while their "Farmer Style" video has had more than 11 million views. Goodman hosts both his own personal blogs (*AgricultureProud.com* and *www.arranchhand.blogspot.com*) and contributes to CNN's food blog "Eatocracy," which is available at <http://eatocracy.cnn.com/>. Both of these examples have been brought to the national stage to tell their story because of social media.

"Social media is not the future. Social media



PHOTO BY KASEY MILLER

► From left, Jasmine Dillon, Victoria Pilger and Mason Parish are three of the founders of the Farmers Fight effort, through which 220 Texas A&M University students have been trained to tell agriculture's story by engaging in conversations about all sectors of agriculture.

is a tool for today. It's what we're using right now to reach out to people," asserts Dillon.

The future

The three students explain that their vision of the future of agriculture included all industry actions being justifiable to the public, conversations being started by industry leaders and, finally, everyone in the industry taking proactive action.

Unfortunately, everyone has seen an example of a news story that illustrates animal abuse on a farm, and Parish says that the goal of Farmers Fight is to create more justifiable means of production practices and being able to communicate those practices.

"Every time one negative article or negative video is released on YouTube, that takes away the positive impact that 100 producers, or 100 advocates, do each and every day. We as an industry have to make sure that we start to hold each other accountable," says Parish. He

grants that no one is perfect and admits that all of us probably have an incidence on our own operation that could be misconstrued if caught on video.

"We as producers must hold each other accountable, but we also must be sure that we justify every action that we do, so that if somebody comes in with a camera, they can, first off, not feel as if we are inappropriately misleading them or ruining their trust, but also make sure that we can explain it," he notes.

He suggests performing individual audits that have been created by universities and industry organizations so that every action can be justified.

Another big issue is being proactive, they say. Dillon gives the example of Chef Jamie Oliver's YouTube video about ammonia in beef a full year before the "pink slime" national media debacle, but no one in the beef industry acted.

"Where were we? We didn't even give ourselves the chance to fail, because we didn't act in the first place," she says.

The Farmers Fight group created a spoken word video entitled *Farmers Fight — Stand Up* to reach more urban audiences. It can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFoGib8AfZo.

The Farmers Fight group plans to continue its efforts with another advocate conference in March of 2013, passing out more coloring books in April, another campus connection event April 11 (themed 4-1-1) and a national conference Oct. 4-5 to share ideas with other student advocacy groups nationwide.

▲

Ready to Advocate

The Masters of Beef Advocacy (MBA) program offered through the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) has trained nearly 4,000 graduates from 48 states since it was launched three-and-a-half years ago. Daren Williams, who serves as executive director of communications for NCBA and oversees the MBA program, says the success of the program has exceeded his expectations.

Williams provided an update on the MBA program during the International Livestock Congress in Denver Jan. 15. He noted that Maine and Alaska are the only two states that have not yet had an individual complete the MBA training.

Williams explained that the MBA program was created in late 2009 to "put a face on agriculture" by developing a grassroots network of beef enthusiasts who would help share positive messages about the beef industry.

The program includes six self-study online courses that cover topics including beef nutrition, how beef is produced, beef safety and the beef checkoff. With this training, MBA graduates can be better prepared to have conversations with others about the positive aspects of beef.

Williams said, "It is mind-boggling some of the questions we get from mainstream media and consumers today, and we (the beef industry) have got to be the ones out there answering their questions."



He continued, "When they go online and do a Google search, we need to be the ones to answer their questions."

Williams reported that MBA graduates are making that happen through a grassroots effort — from talking one-on-one to people, writing editorials to local publications, responding to comments posted online, as well as through individual blogs that tout the industry.

As two examples, Williams pointed to Debbie Lyons-Blythe, an Angus producer from Kansas, and Anne Burkholder, who operates a cattle feedyard in Nebraska. Both women have created their own beef-related blogs — *Life on a Kansas Cattle Ranch* and *Feedyard Foodie*, respectively — and have also garnered national media attention for their roles in helping everyday consumers better understand the beef industry.

"We do a great job talking to each other," he said, "but we've got to reach beyond the choir."

Consumers want to know they can trust their food, Williams said. "You build trust by building relationships, and relationships are built through conversations."

To learn more about the Masters of Beef Advocacy program visit www.beef.org/MBA. Find Blythe's blog at: <http://kansascattleranch.blogspot.com/> and Burkholder's at <http://feedyardfoodie.wordpress.com/>.

— Kindra Gordon