

LESSONS LEARNED

Newly crowned Miss American Angus shared that being different doesn't have to be a bad thing.

by Jera Pipkin, 2016 Miss American Angus

As I took my first step through those glass doors that led me inside Republic High School, I wondered who I really was. At school, I was a curly-headed, blue-eyed, girly-girl who just wanted to fit in with everyone else. I played sports, was involved in extracurricular activities and maintained a good scholastic record. I didn't want anyone to know what I really liked to do, where I spent all my free time or why I was never home in the summer.

I covered up my FFA jacket when I had to carry it into school. I ducked my head the mornings I stepped out of the feed truck and trudged through the parking lot, praying no one would see. Back home, my hair was tucked under a ball cap and I usually donned shorts and a t-shirt. I spent my free time with the cows. I carried feed buckets, rinsed show heifers, raked and fed hay, and worked until dark. I loved every minute of it.

As a freshman in high school, being different was hard. My peers couldn't grasp this other life I lived — the one I truly enjoyed. I was teased, made fun of and left out. Finding my place inside those walls tugged me one way, but my heart tugged me the other.

Still, there was no way I could hide where I came from. I'm a fifth-generation breeder of Angus cattle. My family has been in this business since 1933. I went to my first cow sale at 6 weeks old and showed my first calf when I was three. I had to be resilient in this struggle I faced. I had to accept that I was different, because being different encompassed everything I loved. Angus cattle made me who I am and taught me irreplaceable lessons. In fact, it led me to discover three lessons that I share with you today.

1. Perseverance is powerful.
2. Winning isn't everything.
3. Experiences cultivate opportunities.



► Jera Pipkin shared three major lessons learned as part of the Miss American Angus competition.

Perseverance

To say that winter on the farm is a challenge is an understatement. While my friends built snowmen, made snow angels and had snowball fights on those days out of school, I zipped up my Carhartts to face winter's fury. Countless days, I found myself climbing out of the tractor to check on a newborn. Sometimes frozen to the ground, Dad and I would warm the calves on the floor of the tractor or truck. Most survived. On the coldest of days, some didn't.

Weather is just one of the many trials we face as Angus breeders, and I am amazed at the perseverance we must have every day. That perseverance has been rooted into the ideals of the Angus business from the beginning. When George Grant brought the first Angus cattle to the United States in 1873, many considered them to be "freaks." Grant, though, realized the true value of his cattle, worked through the hardships, and 150 years

later, those "freaks" are looked upon as idols of the largest, most successful beef breed in the world.

Certified Angus Beef LLC, too, was formed on perseverance. Its founders laid down a set of uncompromising standards for taste as they set out to prove quality beef didn't have to be hit or miss.

Though we have persevered, life is not about the trials we face, but rather how we work through them. Romans 5:3-4 in the *Bible* states, "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

Just as our Angus forefathers overcame challenges, so has my family and countless other cattlemen. We have persevered through blizzards and drought, diseases and defects, highs and lows to make us stronger, more powerful than ever before. Perseverance is powerful.

Winning attitude

Many define success as winning, but is it really? As I entered the showring that day, I had no idea it would have such an impact on my life. Callie was a young girl of thin build and somewhat of a novice behind the show stick. Still, she led a heifer more than three times her size into the ring. As we circled, Callie's heifer knocked her to the dirt. Tears rushed down her face.

I never thought twice about switching heifers with her, and I continued to show her heifer until she was calm and Callie was able to collect herself. By the time we switched back, the class was ready to be placed. Callie would take the blue ribbon that day. Her smile was brighter than diamonds.

While taking the top prize in any event may help fulfill a goal, there's often a greater lesson to be learned from defeat. For me, that day was more about the importance of being a mentor. It gave me the opportunity to serve others and to share my own knowledge and experiences. Being a member of the National

Junior Angus Association has opened my eyes to life beyond blue ribbons. In my time as a junior member, I've been blessed to have several mentors who have each made a significant impact on my life, just as I hope I made on Callie's life that day in the showing.

My mentors — many who have worn the green jacket and served as Miss American Angus — have shared advice, provided friendship and been role models. Being a mentor comes with a top prize as the lessons we learn from the relationships we make are worth more than banners and ribbons. Winning isn't everything.

Cultivate opportunities

Achieving a goal you've set for yourself

may come from winning, but truly our experiences are what help us cultivate opportunities. Growing up, I remember watching my mom work at the computer from her home office. For hours, I would play with Barbie dolls as she designed newsletters and magazines. I was intrigued by all the things she and her computer could do. But I credit my involvement in the NJAA with sparking my own interest in graphic design.

NJAA offers more than 14 different competitive events outside the showing, which can help junior members find their niche, just like I did. That graphic design contest has opened doors to my future as I look to pursue a career in agricultural communications and animal science. Experiences cultivate opportunity.

Life is a journey. It's full of lessons — lessons I have learned because of my involvement with Angus cattle. Perseverance is powerful. Winning isn't everything. Experiences cultivate opportunity. What we do with those opportunities is up to us. Taking the first step is where it starts. Where that step leads is up to you.

It's been said that the first step toward getting somewhere is to decide that you are not going to stay where you are. Embracing who I was and where I came from helped me take that first step into a high school full of 1,200 kids that had no concept of my different life. With a single step, the lessons we learn will guide us as Angus breeders to future success as we journey beyond where we are.



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