

Ag Adventures

► Children attending Colorado State University's Ag Adventures program at the National Western Stock Show love learning meat cuts with Trailer, the Colorado Beef Council's model bovine.



National Western and CSU team up to give city kids an education.

Story & photos by *Shelby Mettlen*, assistant editor

The classroom is where you'll find most elementary-age students on a typical weekday, but for a few lucky Denver school districts, you won't find them there during the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver, Colo.

A steady stream of bright, smiling faces pours into the third floor of the Events Center at the NWSS as kids in first through sixth grade attending urban school districts in the Denver area visit the stockyards for a day of agricultural education.

Melanie Calderwood is an academic success coordinator with the Department of Agriculture and Resource Economics at Colorado State University (CSU), and it's her job during the NWSS to help urban kids embrace agriculture.

"The goal of the program is to educate our urban friends and neighbors about agriculture," she says. "A lot of these kids know they have food, but they don't know where the food comes from — they've never seen a cow, they don't know that potatoes are grown in the ground; so it's really a great place for us to educate them on where their food comes from."

Ag education

The program, called Ag Adventure, has been part of the NWSS for about 20 years, Calderwood says, but 2017 was the first year for agricultural education at CSU to play a significant role.

"We took it over as faculty and staff to engage our students at a different level," she explains. "We have a program at CSU that is a concentration of agriculture literacy, and this is exactly what it's designed for — to educate the people about agriculture on a more informal level."

Ariana Brown is an agriculture education major at CSU and serves as a volunteer for the Ag Adventure program. She was part of a leadership team that participated in a class focusing on how to educate the public and navigate confrontations involving misconceptions surrounding food.

So far, she says, she hasn't encountered any tough situations. In fact, Brown says her favorite part of being involved with Ag Adventure is the parents.

"Interacting with [the parents] and seeing some of the things that the parents don't even know, it's kind of mind-blowing," she says. "I

had a parent ask if all the cows in Colorado are clones. I had to have her repeat the question."

Brown looks forward to teaching agriculture to urban kids as an ag teacher after college. As a farm girl, she has a passion for giving students in urban homes the opportunity to experience agriculture.

Kids love it

"They love it," Calderwood says, simply.

It's a wonderland for the kids. They affectionately named the Colorado Beef Council's model bovine, Trailer, and love milking June, the Western Dairy Association's model milk cow. There's Food-ingo, like Bingo, that uses www.choosemyplate.gov to help engage kids in the process of choosing a healthy and balanced meal, while teaching them where their food comes from and why it's good for them.

"The idea is to get kids to make the connection that, for example, ketchup is made from a tomato, which is a vegetable," Brown says. Helping students follow the trail from farm to fork gives them a better

understanding of where, how and why their food is produced.

Even though most of the students visiting Ag Adventure are second and third graders, some have advanced diet restrictions, like vegetarian and vegan. While that may come as a shock to the farming and ranching community, Calderwood isn't all that surprised.

Colorado has a unique culture, she explains, in that it has a strong agricultural and rural background, as well as a very influential urban population.

"Food choices are a big topic of conversation here in Colorado," she says. "Here, the conversation is organic, natural, shopping at Whole Foods, versus just going to the regular grocery store. The conversation is really, really big here, and we're kind of on the frontline to have that conversation."

The conversation will only get bigger, she says, as the urban population of Denver sprawls into the surrounding rural areas.

Connecting rural and urban

Calderwood herself has rural roots, growing up on a ranch in southwestern Colorado. Her résumé includes showing both Angus and Hereford cattle, as well as participating in 4-H and FFA. Moving to New York City for work gave her an even deeper appreciation for her agriculture background.

"That experience helped me understand that it is so important to have these conversations with our urban neighbors about food and where their food comes from," she says. "Colorado agriculturalists really care about the environment and about providing us with safe, quality, affordable food."

That's one of the reasons why Calderwood was so excited to work with kids at the Ag Adventure program.

"Here's an opportunity to share that story," she says. "Hopefully we can do it more. There's a lot of opportunity in the future for it."

Partnering for outreach

CSU is a significant part of the National Western Complex's renovation, which will transform the original home of the Denver Union Stockyards into a year-round destination for agricultural education and outreach.

CSU, the City and County of Denver, History Colorado, the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, and the Western Stock



► **Above:** "The goal is to educate our urban friends and neighbors," says Melanie Calderwood, CSU.

► **Below:** Ariana Brown, a student at CSU, serves as a volunteer for the Ag Adventures program.



Show Association all came together with the National Western Complex to redesign the 110-year-old historic site.

When completed, the new complex will be home to CSU's Water Resources Center, Equine Sports Medicine Clinic and general education center. The renovated site will also include a Livestock Center, Equestrian Center, Trade Show and Exhibition Hall, Stadium Arena Market, Stockyards and Event Pavilion, transit station, a new arena, and a public plaza.

"With the renovation, this is a perfect time to really get excited about all the things that are going on," Calderwood says.

Inspiring students

Calderwood calls Ag Adventures a "full-circle program." She's inspired by students who participated in the program as youngsters and now, as college students, want to study agriculture to give back.

"As you know, the number of people who are involved in agriculture is not growing at all, including kids who come from a strong ag background," she says, "so we really need to support and educate those who have a passion and find agriculture interesting and exciting."

Being an academic advisor has opened her eyes to the level of opportunity that exists within the agricultural field, she says.

"Don't forget that there are other people who care about agriculture, and we need to support and encourage them," she says. "They might look different, and they might ask funny questions, but it's important for us to engage with them."

Calderwood encourages farmers and ranchers to engage with young people in their communities to teach them about agriculture.

"People want to hear your story, and they want to see what's going on on your farm or ranch," she says, acknowledging that most folks, particularly farmers and ranchers, don't necessarily want to take the time to open up their operations to the public.

"Don't be shy. I encourage you to just get out there," she says. "You'd be surprised how many kids don't understand. Yes, they may live in a small town, but they have never experienced agriculture."

