



Continuing Your Education

YCC participants share their view on why participating in and hosting such events are important to the individual and to the industry.

by *Shauna Rose Hermel*, editor

Julie Ellingson, a fourth-generation Angus breeder from Saint Anthony, N.D., and Kara Lee, supply programs manager at Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB), were among the 60 young cattlemen and women selected to participate in the National Cattlemen's Beef Association 35th Young Cattlemen's Conference. The Angus Foundation sponsored Ellingson, while the American Angus Association sponsored Lee.

The YCC program is a comprehensive, nationwide tour of beef industry sectors, created to enhance leadership skills in among beef industry professionals. We asked these two young leaders in the industry to explain the importance of continuing your education through industry programs such as YCC. Here are their responses.

Why did you want to participate in the YCC tour?

Julie: I participated in YCC because it is regarded as the premier beef-industry leadership-training program in the nation. As a fourth-generation Angus producer, I am grateful to have a chance to work in the beef business, and I want to do my part to contribute to its bright future. YCC will help me work to that end by teaching me new information, exposing me to all segments

of the industry, introducing me to many articulate, enthusiastic, dedicated cattle producers and polishing my skills so I can become a stronger industry advocate.

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— *Kara Lee*

Kara: My role within CAB had me constantly working on educational events — whether it was for cattlemen or for our licensed partners. I found myself very entrenched in the materials we wanted others to learn, and eventually realized that I wanted to be challenged myself by some new material.

In order to keep our organization on the cutting edge of presenting the best seminars with great content, I knew I needed to keep up. I researched various continuing education options within the beef industry, and YCC seemed to be the most well-rounded opportunity to pursue.

I was very interested in the opportunity to engage at that level with great minds and leaders from all over the cattle industry — not just the Angus community. The commercial cattlemen purchasing registered-Angus bulls and the feedlots that get those



calves are such an important part of our business, and I was anxious to gain more perspective from many of the cattlemen and feeders who live that every day.

What value do you think continuing education events, such as YCC, are to those who participate?

Julie: YCC and other continuing education programs, such as those offered by the American Angus Association, are invaluable to our industry. Not only do they expose you to all sectors of our industry, from pasture to plate, but to others dedicated to its advancement.

I learned so much from the industry experts leading the training sessions and tours on YCC, as well as from my fellow classmates, who brought a wealth of knowledge and experience from their respective areas. YCC gave me a broader understanding of the full-circle beef business and ideas [on] how we can work together to tackle industry challenges and capitalize on industry opportunities.

Kara: The amount of information we were able to cover in a week and a half was incredible. I can't say that all of the information was new to me, but I was hearing it from a different perspective and was able to think about it in a way I hadn't before.

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More valuable than that, I was hearing the questions other cattlemen and industry leaders had on those topics. I was surprised to hear some of the questions on topics that I felt very well-informed on already, and, inversely, there were some topics I was learning about for the first time that were obviously a very passionate area for others.

I can't stress enough how much networking you take away from YCC. From NCBA staff to all the other attendees, the personal and professional relationships you develop are so valuable. Just in the short time since the conference, I can't count how many times I've reached out to someone I met through YCC. I have new people to engage in CAB efforts, new ways to collaborate on projects and new sounding boards to bounce ideas off of as I think about how we can make our programs better.

Was there a thing or two that you learned on the trip that will affect your view of the industry or how you do business in the future?

Julie: I particularly enjoyed learning about checkoff-funded market research and how the industry is responding to consumers' demand for convenience and other factors through innovative technologies, such as defrosting and microwaving innovations. I was equally impressed to learn about how the industry is responding to the vast and influential millennial generation with new digital tools that allow us to fine-tune our message to specific consumers and to reach them where they are at — social media.

It was exciting to hear from Randy Blach of CattleFax, who explained a variety of trends that will fuel positive growth in the



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beef industry. Some indicators are more disposable income in developing countries and an annual exodus of 25 million Chinese citizens from rural to urban areas who will have a stronger reliance on others for food.

Kara: I’ve always known that the cattle business was vastly different from coast to coast, but to have so many types and sizes of operations from varying regions and climates all represented firsthand gives you a real appreciation for the different things we’re all challenged with.

Our time in D.C. made me realize that it’s not okay to only consider the challenges that I face in my own bubble from day to day. I do need to have some level of passion for all the issues we face in the U.S. beef industry.

We spent some time both on and off agenda talking about consumer demands and the changes our industry may see moving forward. I have to realize that even as a millennial, I’m not a “consumer” in terms of our target demographic and I have to keep an open mind about how we position the beef industry moving forward. I sometimes tend to look at trending consumer demands and shake my head thinking that we already do a pretty good job. Now, I realize that I need to give a little more thought to some of those areas in order to keep our business ahead of the curve instead of finding ourselves in a game of catch-up five or 10 years from now.

Which stops spurred the most questions from among this year’s YCC group?

Julie: Our YCC class was fascinated with the various tour stops and presentations. Each generated lots of discussion. OSI Industries, a premier beef-patty manufacturer that is among McDonald’s suppliers, was a favorite. This is an industry facet few of us had even thought of before, yet a critical step in delivering great-tasting beef to millions of consumers around the world. We had questions about the steps they take to ensure quality, food safety and consistency.

Our visit to the Beltway in Washington, D.C., also generated a lot of questions, particularly as we learned more about problematic policy proposals like the Waters of the United States proposed rule and shared cattle ranchers’ concerns with decision-makers on Capitol Hill.

Kara: The tour of the OSI plant in Illinois prompted a great deal of discussion. It wasn’t just the tour of the plant itself, but the dialogue we were able to have with



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their leadership team and the leaders of McDonald's as their largest partner.

There was a lot of discussion about their seat at the Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef. Sustainability is such a buzzword right now from farm to fork, and everyone is curious about how our end users define it and what they may demand of us in the future. I don't know that we developed a complete road map for ourselves that day, but opening the conversation is a great start.

The time we had with the JBS corporate team was also a very two-way conversational stop. For so many members of their leadership team to give us an hour to ask whatever we wanted was a pretty unique opportunity. The group asked about everything across the board, from international opportunities and challenges to, "What keeps you awake at night?" From my perspective as an industry affiliate member and a beef producer, I was pretty impressed with that dialogue.

You've been on the other side of the fence, sponsoring/hosting events to provide continuing education to cattlemen. Could you describe such an event and why your organization hosts the activity?

Julie: The North Dakota Stockmen's Association hosts a variety of educational workshops, conferences and tours over the course of the year. The cattle industry is a dynamic industry, and helping our producer members stay abreast of the latest information available through these activities helps keep them on the cutting edge and profitable.

Kara: The arsenal of events that CAB puts on in a calendar year has grown exponentially just in my five years with the company. We try to target each event to a specific audience, whether it is focused for chefs, retailers, foodservice distributors or cattlemen. For the first three of those audiences, we nearly always include an element of cattle production education for them.

We know that most Americans are multiple generations removed from production agriculture, and our licensees are certainly no exception to that. Part of our job is to help them understand what goes into their beef before it hits their back door and to make them more comfortable with the agriculture topics that show up in the media. At the end of the day, they are the last salespeople standing between the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] brand and the consumer. We certainly want to do diligence about offering them great training and marketing tools on



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the product side, but if we can give them time with the families behind the farms and ranches, they most always go home with a greater sense of pride in the meat they sell.

We also know that the disconnect does not end with our licensees. While some of the events CAB sponsors would have a focused agenda on helping cattle raisers and feeders better target cattle to an end point of qualifying for CAB, it's equally important for them to understand the needs and challenges of retail and foodservice business and how we address those. One of our greatest education goals for members of the American Angus Association is to help them better understand what our brand is doing to add value to their registered cattle through our licensee efforts. Sometimes the whole pull-through demand cycle is hard to see when you only live in one segment, but we hope that our members can be just as passionate as we are about what we do for our licensed customers.

How does the industry benefit from providing opportunities such as YCC to cattlemen?

Julie: Continuing education opportunities like YCC benefit the entire industry by helping train some of the best and brightest minds and prepare them for leadership. The stronger our leadership, the stronger our industry will be.

Kara: I really can't think of another event where I could be thrown into a group with 60 other adults, most of whom I had never met before, and know that for the next week and a half I would be influenced by the very best and brightest in the cattle industry. We all need to be challenged sometimes with a different perspective or by someone who does things very differently than us. Whether you're a seedstock herd manager, a feeder, a

veterinarian or an industry affiliate, we all get caught up in our own methods. We may think we're still being progressive, but if you don't take the time to step out of your own work for a few days and see how everyone else is doing things, you may become the artifact without ever realizing it. Events like YCC send people home with a new inspiration to just flat get better at whatever it is they do.

For cattlemen who say they have too much to do at home to attend a YCC or BLI, what advice would you give them?

Julie: There is a lot of work to tend to on a farm or ranch, and, consequently, many folks might be reluctant to leave their operation to attend a multi-day leadership training like YCC because it requires them to be away from home. But participation in continuing-education experiences like this will directly enhance your operation. Not only will you learn the latest industry information, you will have a chance to network with your peers and get re-inspired in your business. There are many, many ideas that you will take home and immediately put to use to make your business stronger, more efficient and more profitable.

Kara: Make time. It's that important. I've never met a cattleman who had too many hours in a day or weeks in the year, but we all seem to make time for the things that are most important. I know the scope of the workload I left behind was meager compared to some of my classmates at YCC. Professional development, when done correctly and taken seriously, can be a huge shot in the arm for you and your business, and I believe anyone can make the time away from home pay dividends in the long run.

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