

# Leading with PASSION



PHOTO BY CRYSTAL YOUNG, API CREATIVE MEDIA

► **Left:** The 2008 National Beef Ambassador team made its first appearance in Reno, Nev., at the 2008 Cattle Industry Annual Convention and NCBA Trade Show. Team members are (from left) Leticia Varelas, Jennifer Rassler, Caitlin Williams, Michelle Wigley and Beth Wood.

\$2,250 were given by the American National CattleWomen (ANCW) Foundation Inc. Caitlin Williams, Tucson, Ariz., received the first-place prize of \$2,500 cash and a \$1,000 college scholarship. Second place went to Jennifer Rassler, Kempton, Pa., who received \$1,200 and a \$750 scholarship. Third-place winner Leticia Varelas, Hope, N.M., received \$800 and a \$500 scholarship. Michelle Wigley, Chico, Calif., and Beth Wood, Pine Bluffs, Wyo., received \$250 each as honorable mention awards.

While preparing for this national competition, participants learn about the importance of the beef industry and beef as an agricultural product. The program highlights the positive effect the cattle industry has on the economy and families. Trained youth ambassadors address industry issues and misconceptions, while they help educate peers and consumers about food safety, nutrition and the Beef Checkoff Program.

## New attitude

The program application process is more than just a written letter, and contrary to some belief, the program is not limited to females. Males are welcomed to compete for a spot on the National Beef Ambassador Team.

“Even though the program is sponsored by the American National CattleWomen, the contest is open to both males and females. Guys generally don’t participate because of public speaking, but the new layout of objectives for the competition will hopefully be better welcomed by all,” says Carol Abrahamzon, National Beef Ambassador Program (NBAP) project manager. Abrahamzon guides the group throughout the course of the year.

Previous years’ competitions included the dreaded public speech. However, for 2009 and the years following, contestants will be put through the challenge of a media interview, two consumer promotion events, two classroom presentations and an issues response.

► **Media interview.** The contestant will participate in a mock media interview. The interview will have predetermined questions to ask each contestant with the option to ask follow-up questions to extrapolate additional knowledge or clarify a point.

► **Consumer promotion events.** Two

## The National Beef Ambassador Program molds young people to become beef industry leaders.

by *Tosha Powell*

The beef industry’s finest leaders polished their boots, starched their jeans and pulled out their “go-to-town” cowboy hats as they came together in February for the 2008 Cattle Industry Annual Convention and NCBA Trade Show in Reno, Nev. Among them, five young beef enthusiasts embraced the opportunity to learn, interact and benefit from the convention.

These individuals weren’t hard to miss in the massive crowd because of vibrant red shirts with the word, “BEEF,” on

their chests. Their passion and enthusiasm for the beef industry shined throughout the convention halls in anticipation for the year ahead of them. Who are these young enthusiasts? They are the National Beef Ambassadors.

### Ambassador program basics

Twenty-one contestants from throughout the country vied for the national title and \$5,000 in cash prizes sponsored exclusively by Tyson Foods Inc. Additionally, three educational scholarships totaling



mock consumer promotion events will be set up for the contestants. Each contestant will be provided with a “sample” to serve as well as beef industry production and nutrition literature and recipes. Scripted “consumers” will approach the table to take the sample. They will ask questions to test the contestant’s knowledge, capacity to perform in the field and ability to present beef in a positive light.

► **Classroom presentations.** Contestants will be provided with curriculum in which to prepare a lesson plan to present to an elementary class of students. The length of the lesson plan and age of students will be determined prior to the contest and sent with the curriculum package. A situation will be set in which the contestant will make the presentation to “students.” The students will have a set of questions to ask regarding the presentation.

► **Issues response.** In the “Ready Room,” the contestants will be provided with a recently published news article that negatively portrays the beef industry. Each contestant will write a brief response to the article. Staff currently working in the online environment will judge the responses.

### Telling agriculture’s story

The ambassadors serve as role models to younger kids in agriculture and as liaisons between those in the ag industry and those against the industry. Thus, the ambassador team travels to various trade shows and consumer events with the challenging task of educating consumers about beef.

As a cattle rancher herself, Abrahamzon understands the importance of connecting the producer with the consumer by telling the agriculture story.

“The No. 1 objective for this program is to increase the demand for beef,” says Abrahamzon, who has managed the program for six years. “The ambassadors are excellent at educating the consumers on food safety, nutrition and beef production.”

“We as ambassadors have the opportunity to travel to producer- and consumer-related events,” Williams says. “Past ambassadors have gone to speedways, the National Beef Cook-off in Chicago, the Boston Marathon, the Minnesota State Fair and, of course, the NCBA (National Cattlemen’s Beef Association) convention. We have the opportunity to work with others throughout the industry and promote beef and let those who aren’t familiar with the ag industry [know] about the healthy prospects of beef.”

This country has become such a technology-rich society. Many Americans spend numerous hours online. The

## Ambassadors at the capitol

The National Beef Ambassadors spend an entire year devoting their spare time to beef industry promotion. With the knowledge gained from ambassador experience, each team member has the opportunity to dive into the industry a bit further with an internship provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) Livestock and Seed Program.

The internship program noticed a trend from year to year — each internship candidate was a past ambassador. Thus began the relationship between the two programs. The USDA Livestock and Seed Program offers a paid internship including transportation and housing. “By selecting from young beef ambassadors, the USDA knows it will be gaining an exceptionally qualified intern,” says Carol Abrahamzon, National Beef Ambassador Program project manager. 2007 Ambassador Chris Molinaro, Pennsylvania, has the opportunity of a lifetime to work this summer at USDA offices in Washington, D.C.

“I’ve seen firsthand how so many people work together to improve the beef industry. It’s exciting to see this as a young person and be involved in helping promote and improve the industry we are each a part of,” Molinaro says. “I look forward to the networking and real-world experiences I can gain from the internship.”

The Livestock and Seed Program is responsible for the grading and certification standards of beef. The internship will consist of a summer filled with promotional events, public briefings and working on new labels, such as the grass-fed label.

“The student’s responsibilities during the internship are wide open,” Abrahamzon said. “The goal is to keep the experience flexible so the intern has the opportunity to learn as much as he or she can.”

ambassadors realize the importance of reaching consumers by any means possible. They reach consumers through blogging — online journals and editorials.

“We have realized the importance of finding our voice online,” Wigglely says. “We can begin to tell our story and connect with our target audience through a fun media form. While on the road to new events, Leticia and I will be updating our blog site called ‘Raising the Steaks’ (at [www.raisingthesteaks.com](http://www.raisingthesteaks.com)). Past ambassadors have blog sites as well.”

2006 ambassador Amanda Nolz of South Dakota uses her web site “Chewing the Cud,” [www.chewingthecud.org](http://www.chewingthecud.org), to voice her passion for agriculture. Nolz, a budding journalist, posts blogs on everything from the day-to-day ranching business to her opinions about remarks from animal rights activists.

Chris Molinaro, Pennsylvania, says it is both her passion for and responsibility to the industry to spread a positive image of beef and the agricultural industry. Molinaro’s site “Beef Matters,” [www.beefmatters.com](http://www.beefmatters.com), receives visitors from all walks of life.

### Express yourself

The ladies on this year’s National Beef Ambassador Team look forward to their industry assignments and meeting new people along the way. The young ladies come from very diverse backgrounds, and each one has a different personal view on the industry; however, when asked how they would tell other young folks in the industry to become involved as a

spokesperson, each answer was remarkably similar.

“Never be afraid to voice opinions, don’t be afraid to ask questions, and tell your story,” Varelas says.

“Become a spokesperson of the industry. Even if no facts can be given, a personal experience can help spread a positive light on the story of beef,” Wood says.

“We are all ambassadors in our industry. The best way to spread the beef story is by word of mouth. We have to be willing to get out there and talk about beef,” Williams says.

There is no doubt that the infamous red shirt of a National Beef Ambassador comes with a guarantee of great things for the beef industry. The goals have been set for this team, and their dedication to beef promotion is evident to everyone they meet. With their talent, enthusiasm and passion for the beef industry, the 2008 National Beef Ambassador Team will undeniably accomplish huge strides in educating the consumer and increasing the demand for beef.

**Editor’s Note:** Youth, please share your use of the Internet with your parents. It’s a matter of personal safety, and you might teach them a thing or two about beef and about using the Internet in the process. Never accept an invitation to meet someone in person that you’ve conversed with on the Internet without being accompanied by your parents. If they care for your welfare, they’ll gladly meet your parents.

Parents, please take the time to share in your children’s Internet experience. It is a great tool if used with common sense and caution.