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Clover Connection

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This week, I want to share an article written by Chris Boleman, State Leader for 4-H & Youth Development and Billy Zanolini, Texas A&M Assistant Professor & Extension Specialist for Youth Livestock and Agriculture. We are in Major Livestock Show “season” right now and sometimes this draws increased scrutiny of youth livestock projects/exhibitors by the media and activist groups. All 4-H & FFA youth who exhibit at these major shows go through a “Quality Counts” curriculum to ensure they are knowledgeable of quality assurance and character education as it relates to their livestock projects. I hope you’ll take a few minutes to read this.

Why Quality Counts – “COUNTS”

As many of you know, there has been a lot of media attention surrounding a youth market steer recently exhibited at a major livestock show that animal activist groups wish to save and prevent from being slaughtered. Over the last few days, we have been questioned on this matter as the state leadership of 4-H livestock projects and the leadership of the Texas Steer Validation Committee.

Here is our response:

When we first started Quality Counts over 10 years ago, we had a lot of questions. Questions such as: Is this really needed? Why do we need this? Shouldn’t we already know and practice these aspects of the Quality Counts curriculum?

As the years have passed, we have become more convinced the answer is yes, we must have a program that teaches our youth that Quality Assurance and Character Education matter (and this of course, is Quality Counts).

Allow us to break this down.

Quality Assurance – When a 4-H or FFA youth decides to show a market project at a major livestock show in Texas, he or she knows they are raising the project to contribute to the world’s most nutritious and safe food supply. That is the contract a youth makes with themselves, their family, their advisor, and the respective livestock show.

Youth spend the entire year ensuring they are caring for the animal properly – feeding it, cleaning it, and providing it a safe environment. Exhibitors spend countless hours doing this.

At the same time, our collective goal (as adults) is to teach these youth about the impact their decisions have on the food industry, the consumer, and the public at large. That's the main point: a youth's decisions today on how they raise livestock projects will ultimately impact the consumer.

Taking that one step further, our quality assurance duty is to ensure our youth understand that the commitment to providing a food source can be applied even on a grander scale....a world of over 7 billion people with almost 1 billion waking up hungry every single day. Because these youth are learning these quality assurance practices today, they can better serve the world as adults.

Luckily, in the example I referenced at the beginning, this family and youth know this. They know that the steer is to be harvested for consumption after the sale.

And this leads me to the second objective of Quality Counts – Character Education.

Over the years, we have been asked why Character Education is a key component of Quality Counts. Our answer is as follows: because characteristics like respect, responsibility, caring, fairness, citizenship, and trustworthiness define the person. These six attributes are the underlying theme and foundation of all we do with 4-H and FFA livestock projects. In addition, these six characteristics are what youth exhibit when they are interacting with each other, their competitors, their advisors, and with the judges.

However, the one we will concentrate on in this article is RESPECT. As human beings, regardless of belief, we should always be respectful to each other. We understand that the world is a big place and people differ in values, beliefs, and perceptions. We can even respect people's beliefs that might be different than my own. We are always willing to sit down and discuss these differences so that we can learn and better understand someone else's mindset.

All that being said, there is one thing we will not budge on. And frankly, we are very disappointed about the issue we referenced in the opening. We are sad to say that there are people attacking the youth exhibitor and the family that sold the steer. They have been threatened and attacked via social media. That my friends, we will not stand for. While we can respect people's opinions on issues, we will not tolerate attacking a young person that worked tirelessly with their steer project and knew that the project would end with the steer being harvested.

As we start to close, I guess the question we didn't think to ask when we started Quality Counts is: do adults need this education too? Well, it seems like the public does for sure. Luckily, we are teaching today's youth these lessons so they can be the leaders of our future.

These are the youth that will meet the challenges of feeding a growing world. These same youth will ensure we continue to have the most safe and wholesome food supply on the planet. And it is these youth that will ensure this happens in a respectful and trustworthy manner. They will search for answers, provide solutions and ultimately save lives through agricultural innovations. Youth livestock exhibitors deserve respect not ridicule.

To close, if you are reading this and would like to attack this young lady, her family, or any youth raising market livestock projects for what they are doing, we ask that you respect them and their privacy. If you want to attack someone, we are happy to handle it. Quite simply, it is our jobs, our purpose, and our calling.

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