



# YARDS CLASSROOM GETS

Stockyards classroom provides consumers a window to the cattle industry.

by Becky Mills, field editor

Whether it is reaching producers with a mini short course or introducing suburban children to cattle, the Youth Advocacy Research Demonstration Sustainability (YARDS) classroom definitely deserves valedictorian status.

Housed in the Blue Grass Stockyards in Lexington, Ky., the classroom is the perfect setting for the monthly Lunch and Learn series funded by the

National Corn Growers Association. When producers bring their cattle to the stockyard on sale day, they can eat a delicious meal and soak in

information on topics ranging from forages to financial planning.

But YARDS does so much more. The colorful classroom is full of interactive exhibits and displays, not to mention a picture window that looks down on the sorting pens at the stockyard, all designed to tell beef's story to consumers.

"Your average American doesn't know what a stockyard



The wooden cow stands guard outside the YARDS classroom.

With a full-service stockyard, a wonderful café, unique shops and a classroom, the motto of the Bluegrass Stockyards is “Eat, shop and learn ’til the cows come home.”



Left: Niki Ellis, director of education for the Kentucky Cattlemen's Association, heads up activities at the YARDS classroom.

Right: University of Kentucky forage extension specialist Ray Smith gives a talk during a monthly Lunch and Learn at the YARDS classroom.



Then, the museum, which spills over into the lobby next to the Eatery and leads into the YARDS classroom, catches their eyes. In no time, Ellis says children are posing with the steer and feeding the cow.

The cow is the brainchild of Ellis, and the ultimate interactive exhibit. Children and adults alike delight in plopping faux feed in her mouth and following its progress down her throat, through her four-chambered stomach, and out the other end.

“We try to focus on what makes cattle truly sustainable,” says Ellis. “It comes back to them being a ruminant. We sat down with the architect and Bessie

was born. She's the best cow ever.”

The black steer, Chuck, is another crowd-pleaser. He has all the cuts of beef drawn

on him so consumers can locate their favorites.

The YARDS also host consumer and consumer-influencer groups for their own version of Lunch and Learn, including a beef-tasting course and beef-cutting demos.

This summer, Ellis, whose University of Kentucky degree is in ag education, hosted the first Cowboy Camp. The interactive camp let kids from kindergarten through the fifth grade rope a dummy steer, load themselves in a semi-trailer and, of course, eat burgers.

“It also gave them the opportunity to learn how cattle are raised, as well as the people



Jim Akers, general manager of the Blue Grass Marketing Group, says the YARDS classroom is a key component of the stockyard.

who raise them,” says Ellis.

That doesn't just go for the general public. A University of Kentucky animal science class also meets at the YARDS.

“It teaches about the Kentucky cattle industry and the auction market system,” says Ellis. “A lot of

high school ag teachers can't provide cattle experience anymore, and this is the first time some of the kids get to interact with cattle. We not only need this space for consumers, we need it for the next generation of farmers.”

One thing the classroom doesn't share with regular schools is recess. Between the opening on Sept. 11, 2017, and the end of 2019, more than 80,000 people had experienced the YARDS.

## Phoenix rising

Obviously, an undertaking like the YARDS doesn't just happen. It was a silver lining in the tragic fire that burned the former stockyard in January 2016.

“After the stockyard burned, there was a called meeting of about 60 people,” says Dave Maples, executive vice president of KCA. “One of the ideas from the community was education. That stuck.”

“A classroom and museum concept were part of the big plan, but we needed a partner,” says Jim Akers, COO and general manager of the Blue Grass Marketing Group. “It was out of our area of expertise, so it was logical for us to join with KCA.”

It was also natural for KCA.

“Blue Grass Stockyards has always been a great education partner,” says Ellis. “We took a lot of our influencer groups to the old stockyard. It was downtown and convenient. When it came to the classroom, though, they said, ‘We're in the



The window in the YARDS classroom looks out over the sorting pens at the Bluegrass Stockyards.

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is, but here they can see agriculture at work,” says Niki Ellis, Kentucky Cattlemen's Association (KCA) director of education. “It is a true learning experience. Nothing is staged.”

## Drawing them in

The location is perfect. Bluegrass Stockyards is right on the side of heavily traveled I-75, and lures visitors in with the promise of a great meal at Hayden's Stockyard Eatery.

“The restaurant is the big draw,” says Ellis. “It is the pull off the street, and they have been wonderful about partnering with us.”

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business of selling cattle, but you guys are in the education business.”

It is truly a partnership. Blue Grass Stockyards donated the classroom space. Ellis is an employee of KCA, although she spends almost all her working hours at the YARDS. That still left the need for funding for furnishings and exhibits. That’s where Farm Credit of Mid-America and Tarter Farm and Ranch Equipment joined the project.

Ellis also worked closely with Nomi Design in Lexington, the firm that designed the whole stockyard.

“They specialize in education buildings,” she explains, “but some of their people have a cattle background.”

They also have a woodworking shop in their office and brought Ellis’s vision of Bessie, the best cow ever, to life.

While some in the cattle and

stockyard industry would shudder at the thought of inviting the public in, much less providing them with a picture window to view the sorting process, Ellis says Akers welcomed the opportunity.

“When I asked Jim if he was going to open up his doors to everybody, he just said he believed in his crew,” she adds. “Blue Grass Stockyards has always done a great job of managing and explaining their facility.

“There are a lot of people in our organization who think I’m crazy,” Akers admits, “but I tell them we have to do this. We’ve got to be more open about what we do. There is a lot of sorting that takes place right in front of the window.”

One thing has stayed the same at Blue Grass Stockyards, both at the old facility and the new one:

“We have a zero-tolerance policy for rough-housing,” Akers stresses. However, in reference to the picture window at the YARDS, he does say, “If the cattle are wild, I tell the guys to take them somewhere else to sort them.”

His open-window policy is starting to pay off.

“We’ve worked with our farmers and the

public. We’ve battled through getting people comfortable,” he explains. “Now we’re starting to get compliments and have farmers tell us ‘thank you’ for doing it.”

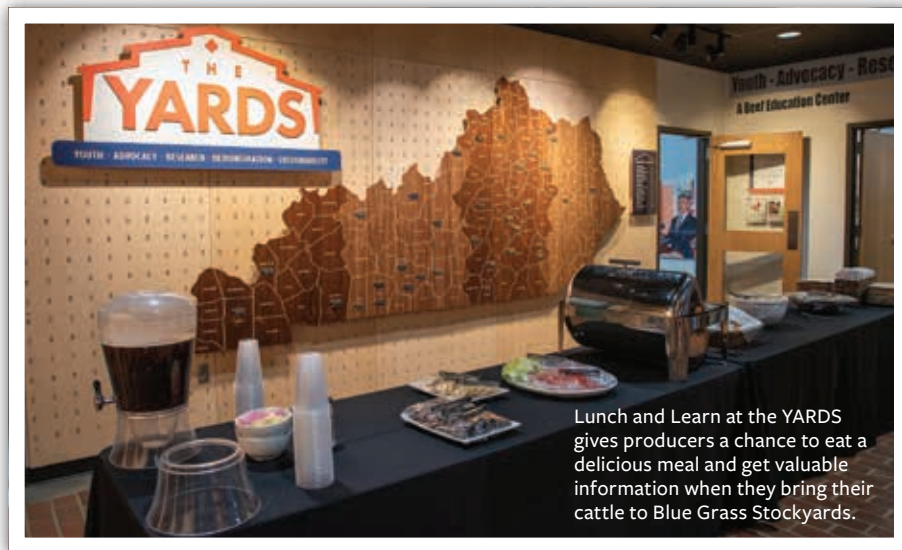
He adds, “If someone is looking for a problem, I’d much rather have them here and explain why and what we’re going to do to rectify it.”

So far, there have been zero

complaints about how the cattle are treated, and the YARDS continues to get nothing but straight As.

“It has been such a key component of the big picture of this place,” says Akers. “We’re exposing the consumer, the public, to what we do for a living. It is wonderful.”

Editor’s note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer from Cuthbert, Ga. For more information on the Blue Grass Regional Marketplace, which includes shops and offices, Hayden’s Stockyard Eatery, the stockyard and the YARDS classroom, see [www.bgregionalmarketplace.com](http://www.bgregionalmarketplace.com).



Lunch and Learn at the YARDS gives producers a chance to eat a delicious meal and get valuable information when they bring their cattle to Blue Grass Stockyards.



Left: The museum displays antique tools formerly used in cattle production. A fun cutout also provides a photo op at the entrance to the YARDS.

Below: The YARDS classroom displays sample cattle rations.



Bessie shows producers and consumers how feed goes in one end and is processed, then comes out the other.



Chuck the steer shows producers and consumers where their favorite cuts of beef are located.



A display of the classes of cattle educates consumers at the YARDS classroom.