

Living Up to *Her* Potential

As chairman of the National Junior Angus Association Board of Directors, Janelle Sommers encourages future beef-industry leaders to broaden their horizons and to keep sight of their goals.

Story and photos by
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She grew up as a fourth-generation Angus breeder. Her father was a veterinarian; her mother was the first Miss American Angus. Her older sister served on the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) Board of Directors.

With that background, you would think no one would be surprised when Janelle Sommers of Silver Lake, Ind., was elected to the NJAA Board. Not true.

It surprised her.

"Growing up, I always looked at the green jackets and wanted one, but I didn't even dare picture myself in one," Sommers says, referring to the NJAA Board's official attire. "It's something I always wanted to do, but it's not something I always believed I could do. There's a big difference there."

Now, as chairman of the nation's largest junior beef breed association, she wants other youth to know they have the potential to accomplish their goals.

"I hope they take away, at least from my example, that you don't have to show champions; you don't have to have a lot of cattle; you don't even have to be the most outgoing risk taker," she says.

Raised Angus

Sommers has owned Angus all her life — literally. Her grandfather gave her a heifer calf when she was born, and she officially became a member of the American Angus Association at age 3. She says going to cattle shows and sales were highlights of her childhood.

"It's something Mom and Dad never pushed on us; it's just something that we loved," she says of herself and her sister, Jill. "I grew up with it. It's in my blood."



With her parents' help, Janelle Sommers maintains a herd of 20-25 head, mainly past show animals and their progeny. She says she's an example that NJAA members don't need a lot of cattle or have to show champions to gain from junior membership.

The North American International Livestock Exposition (NAILE) in Louisville, Ky., has a special place in Sommers' heart. She says she's only missed two or three installments of the show since she was born. "Going to see the show in Louisville, with the black cattle and the green shavings, was just about like Christmas," she explains.

The holidays and cattle were often linked in the young girl's mind. She recalls the first Christmas after her sister became a 4-H member.

"I wanted to be in 4-H so bad, I think I was physically going to burst," she says. Not wanting to be left out, she asked Santa Claus for a heifer so she could be in 4-H too. When the fateful morning arrived, she found a stuffed cow under the Christmas tree with a note attached that said her present had been left at her grandparents'.

Expecting a live heifer calf when she got to her grandparents' farm a few miles away, she found about a dozen more stuffed cows waiting for her. "Had I not gotten a pink-and-white stuffed cow with a halter on it, they would have been in big trouble," she says. "At least I had one with a halter so I could pretend I was showing."

She didn't have to pretend long, as Sommers made her cattle-showing debut when she was about 4 years old. She and her sister would lead their grandfather's calves into the sale ring at the local auction market. "Grandpa probably made a few extra dollars off Jill and me leading them into the ring," she jokes.

As soon as she was old enough to exhibit in 4-H and junior Angus shows, she added those events to her schedule. Sommers says 4-H was the inspiration that got her involved in other organizations. "It

led me to become more involved in the FFA and the state Angus association and the national Angus association," she says.

She has been active in the Indiana Junior Beef Cattle Association and as a volunteer with the Boys & Girls Club. She was a director of the Indiana Junior Angus Association from 1987 to 1993 and served as secretary, first vice president and second vice president. She was elected to the NJAA Board at the 1997 National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) in Perry, Ga., just a few months after being awarded the 1996 NJAA Outstanding Leadership Award in Louisville.

She says it may have been hard to get up some mornings at 5 to do chores, but all her activities gave her chances to travel, meet people and gain skills. Through it all she's met young people without many opportunities, and that's put things into perspective for her. "A lesson I've learned already is not to take so many blessings for granted," she says.

Developing her style

Sommers says she hasn't always been comfortable in front of a group and admits she was a shy child. She says she had plenty of self-esteem, but her lack of outgoingness kept her at the back of the room.

"She began as a shy and quiet girl in our 4-H junior leadership program," remembers Karen Lowry, Kosciusko County 4-H Extension educator. "Janelle had been nurtured and encouraged by her parents and grandparents, so when other adults encouraged her and demonstrated that they believed in her, she responded by getting more and more involved and by believing in herself."

Sommers says she tries to remember that fact when approaching her duties as a member of the NJAA Board, and she hopes the young people she meets come away knowing someone believes in their abilities.

"It's not always the outgoing kids who are going to grow up to be the leaders," she explains, adding some youth just need that special attention and push to become leaders too. "When I approach the Board, that's my No. 1 goal and priority: to keep those kids first. I guess my leadership style is, I hope, the enthusiastic and encouraging type. I try to stay upbeat and positive and lead by example."

According to Jerry Cassady, American Angus Association regional manager, Sommers does that well. "The main thing I admire about Janelle is her positive attitude," he says. "I know that gets said about a lot of people, but she's always that way. She's very good about treating every-

one with the respect they deserve, no matter who they are."

It's been fun for him to watch Sommers gain confidence and develop her leadership abilities, Cassady adds. "In a group that doesn't know her, she surfaces as a leader right away, and it's an earned respect. If you present her a challenge, she's really good about envisioning a solution."

Lowry describes Sommers as a servant leader. "She leads through her willingness to serve others," the 10-year family friend says. "She is concerned about the job's getting done and being done well, not about who gets the credit."

"I think it's important that we emphasize that there's this whole industry where the consumer is the person — not so much the judge in the showing — we're trying to please."

— Janelle Sommers



Not just a show

Sommers believes doing well, even for little or no recognition, is one of the most valuable lessons to be gained from membership in the NJAA. "I hope they learn it's not about a blue or a purple or a red ribbon, but it's about meeting people, gaining life skills and making the most of it," she says. "It's the showing part that brings us together, but it's not the most important thing."

She says one of her goals for the NJAA is to get young people to look beyond the showing and to become more aware of the industry. That will become even more of a focus in the Leaders Engaged in Angus Development (LEAD) conference and other junior activities during her tenure as chairman.

"I think it's important that we emphasize that there's this whole industry where the consumer is the person — not so much the judge in the showing — we're

trying to please," she explains.

Even "hobby farmers" who raise only a few head need to be aware of the industry, the forward-thinking 21-year-old cattle producer says. She points out that, more often than not, someone else will eventually consume the product, forming an impression of beef's eating quality and value.

Another of Sommers' goals for the NJAA includes maintaining a membership total of more than 10,000. That will take innovation. "We have to keep moving NJAA in the right direction because kids can pick from a million different things," she says, citing options such as sports, extracurricular activities and just sitting at home. "We need to develop our programs and our activities so that kids want to be involved."

She says junior programs must be fun and interactive. Although they are responsible for organizing and facilitating many programs and contests, she hopes NJAA Directors can be more visible in the barns at junior shows and can get to know the members better. She wants NJAA to be in a position to help all juniors become leaders and to provide them with the life skills they need — a challenge in any organization.

Models for living

Sommers realizes a highly visible leadership position like the NJAA Board comes with the responsibility of being a role model for younger members. She says she's been fortunate in that respect because she has had many role models of her own, including her parents, Dick and Sharon Sommers, and the advisors of the organizations in which she's participated.

Sommers gives special credit to her grandparents Dorris and Mildred Harrold, themselves lifelong Angus breeders. For years her mother's parents traveled to every cattle show where she and her sister exhibited to lend moral support and to share in the girls' special achievements. "I really admire their hard work and their good hearts," the grateful granddaughter says. "They're really super-special people to me."

Sommers also credits Lowry with helping her to realize her own potential and to develop confidence. She says her parents instilled in her the qualities of a leader, but the 4-H educator helped her learn to share those talents with others.

"She really helped me blossom and develop into that leader I needed to be," Sommers says. "I guess it was always inside me."

"She's always been there to encourage me to try new things and step out of my

comfort zone; she's challenged me. She's set some pretty high standards for me, but they're challenges I've accepted and know I had to have," Sommers adds.

"Janelle can teach young people about the joys of being involved and doing their best. Her light shines brightly," Lowry says of her protégé.

Looking to the future

Sommers believes the people in the Angus business have set a good example for the entire beef industry.

"It's really a tribute to the Angus breed and Association that they have the foresight to support and encourage junior activities," she says. She credits the Association and individual breeders who support the NJAA for giving young people chances for worthwhile involvement, which will prepare them to accept leadership of the nation's most popular breed and help it maintain that position.

As part of the next generation of Angus breeders, she has some definite opinions about the future. "Nobody loves the Angus breed quite as much as we love ourselves. I think we need to stay aware of that," Sommers says, warning against complacency and calling for progressive action as a breed organization in all areas.

She also says the beef industry should look outside itself for new ideas — one of the insights she gained from attending last year's National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Convention. She encourages all beef producers, young and old, to stay aware of the differences among themselves and the pork and poultry industries. That is where the lessons needed to help beef regain market share will be found, she believes.

NJAA members can actively help the industry, Sommers says. Juniors can teach other young people the facts about agriculture, especially in areas like health and food safety. "Every teenage girl is so health-conscious, and a lot of them are walking around thinking that beef is a very unhealthy, bad product," she explains.

Sommers, a junior in animal agribusiness at Purdue University, sees her own future in working with people in the livestock industry and possibly helping to address consumer issues.

"I want to be a 4-H leader and a Sunday school teacher and an Angus advisor and a community volunteer and raise good cattle and kids," she says.

She's already got a good start on those endeavors. She is a first-year 4-H leader

in her home county; and with the help of her parents, she is maintaining a registered Angus herd of 20-25 head while still in school.

Good advice

Sommers hopes that during her time on the NJAA Board she shows other juniors that living up to their potentials requires some dedicated effort.

"It doesn't just happen because you want it to or because you dream about it; you have to be willing to step out of your comfort zone, develop those skills, and take on those challenges and opportunities that are going to help you develop into that person of integrity — that person with leadership skills," she says.

If any young people doubt it can be done, she encourages them to think again. "I wasn't born wearing a green jacket; it's really something I believe in and that I'm honored to wear, and I want to thank them for that opportunity. I hope they understand that for the longest time I didn't ever believe I could do it."

But she did.

