

### Life Lessons from the County Fair

'Tis the season in the Twin Creeks District and as a life-long member and supporter of 4-H and county fairs, I am reminded yet again of the many life-lessons that are learned when families, friends, clubs, and communities come together each summer around the county fair. As I started working on this article last week during our county fair in Hoxie then again, this past week in Norton, a flood of memories came back walking through the livestock barns and exhibit buildings. The smells, the voices, the sounds, the energy, the emotion... It was just like it was yesterday again back in Barber County, but my perspective had changed, and through adult eyes I had a whole new gratitude for so many life lessons learned at the county fair, a few of which I'd like to share today.

Relationships matter and are the greatest investment we can make if we want to impact the future. A great place to start with this is as a volunteer. Volunteers in our 4-H Clubs, Fair Boards, Exhibit Buildings, Livestock Shows, Food Stands, Home Grown Carnivals, and other activities are the backbone of County Fair events. As the door opens to get to know one another and build relationships, our communities grow tighter which ultimately build stronger, more resilient youth. I think back to the volunteers that I built relationships with over the years, many of which provided letters of recommendation, coached me through challenging season in life, or offered sound advice when I needed it most. Likewise, relationships with one another matter. This world is a really tough and unkind place and we all need to strive to offer a little extra grace, check on one other, and remember that people are often going through things we know nothing about.

Just like on show day, in life, always bring your best, work hard, and give 110%, but just know that sometimes it just isn't going to be your year. If it isn't your year and you're having a bad time, you can still choose to cheer for others. Likewise, it is ok to not know and not be perfect. If you don't know and it isn't going well, it is ok to ask for help and to acknowledge that you're learning. However, attitude is everything, and that is 100% within your control. The temptation to throw our sucker in the dirt when life isn't going our way can be great, and even though we may not be in control of life's circumstances we can be in control of our attitudes. By the same token, a winner's attitude can also be one that is positive and attractive or one that turns people off. Attitude will make or break us in life and it is entirely up to us what we will choose to do with it. I can think of many times in the show ring when attitude was the difference between the kid who received the purple ribbon and the one who received the red ribbon.

This might be a little touchy-feely for some, but just roll with me here, I promise it is worth reading on. Probably the greatest life lesson the county fair has taught me is that it is ok to have big emotions that you know are there but you really don't know what to do with except for cry through and talk about with someone you trust. I can remember selling my first market steer at the age of 7. His name was Aaron and no one had bothered to explain to me the process of the project until it was time for the livestock auction and I basically had to figured it out myself. You can about imagine what followed. Until I left 4-H at the age of 18 it was never talked about and I never was able to put a market animal on the truck after the fair. As a mom, I made sure those big emotions my kids felt were addressed and we talked about those being a sign of how hard they'd worked and how passionate they were about their projects. Amazingly, that safe, open line of communication transferred over into a lot of other areas in their lives and created a pretty awesome relationship with my kids that I wouldn't trade for anything. As I was at the fair this past week and saw a couple of young 4-H'er struggling in the sale ring to part with their beloved critters that they too had put their hearts and souls into, I couldn't help but make it a point to find those young people, tell them about my projects over the years, give them a quick hug, and assure them that those tears meant they had worked hard and were incredibly passionate about their projects.

And now as long-lost tear or two from 7-year old Gimmie Jo thinking about that big 1374 pound black Angus purple ribbon Reserve Grand Champion steer named Aaron slips out of the corner of my eye, I am yet again incredibly grateful to get to share these life lessons from the county fair.