

MY CYL MENTORSHIP EXPERIENCE

Story by Taylor Grafton, CYL Mentee

When I went to the Cattlemen's Young Leaders (CYL) selections last fall, I wasn't sure what to expect. I was hoping it would be an opportunity to be exposed to more of the industry and broaden my myopic understanding of the nebulous machine that our industry can sometimes seem to be. I was not disappointed. From day one, we got to meet 'higher-ups' in many of Canada's largest companies that interface with the Canadian beef industry, and gain exposure to how the machine works on the national and international level.



Taylor at CYL Spring Forum

After I was selected, I dedicated my internship to expanding my knowledge of how value flows through the different levels of the beef value chain from 'gate to plate'. I did not go to neat locations, or see neat things like some of my peers, but I did get to listen and talk to neat people. The CYL program gives you the opportunity to ask a lot of (sometimes dumb) questions to important people under the pretext of youthful naivety and that's essentially what I did until I felt like I learned something. As it turns out, I think I did learn something, which I'll relate in a minute, but first a little about how I got there.

I can't mention all the people who were kind enough to take the time to answer my questions, but I'll give a bit of a cross-section spectrum of people I got to meet. Especially edifying was the opportunity to attend the Beef Value Chain Roundtable (BVCR) hosted by the Industry Engagement Division of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. At the BVCR a large herd of executive stakeholders in the industry were rounded up and corralled in a room to express what their customers are demanding out of beef and hear what we're going to do about it. It was a rare opportunity for members of competing food service and retail companies to express mutual concerns about a commodity they rely on. Speaking with representatives from these large companies (between their

e-mails and phone calls) was certainly a rare opportunity, but I also wanted to find that guy who's probably out there, who's found a way to bypass most of value chain and make a living selling direct to consumers. I didn't find him, but I found some people who are pretty close at the Gate to Plate workshop held by the Grey Wooded Forage Association. At the same workshop there was a presentation by Dr. Ellen Goddard, Professor and Co-operative Chair in Agricultural Marketing and Business who presented research on consumer trust, and public attitudes towards food commodities, especially beef.

It's been said that if six different experts sit on a rail fence, they will fall off it in six different directions. I expected that I would come away from the experience more mystified than when I started, but as I was compiling my notes at the end of the mentorship I did find at least one very strong common theme among all the conversations I had with everyone who creates, realizes, measures, promotes or regulates value in our beef value chain. It was something that my mentor, Mike Munton, described early on in my mentorship and the theme carried through until the end. We all know that for value to be realized, it has to get from the person who creates it to the person who wants it. But what was striking to me was how important a name is for the people who are looking for and willing to pay for that value. It was almost always one of the first things identified. Names sometimes describe the value, like, 'verified' or 'local' but their main function is to represent it. Commerce happens at a fast pace and there usually isn't time to look into the details of what you're purchasing so a name gives confidence that what's being purchased is what is valued. Most conversations weren't focused on whether or not the value exists, but rather on the problem of identifying the

value so it can flow through the system and be realized. Another name for a name is a brand, so essentially one of my take-aways from the CYL program was how important branding still is in the flow of value in the Canadian Beef Industry.

The sun's now setting on my CYL mentorship and it's been a good ride. I've really appreciated the opportunities I've had through it and I highly recommend to anyone that they apply. For those who haven't been able to see or experience the program first hand, I'd like to end with what I think is one of its greatest strengths. When we hear about a mentorship program we think of ambitious but naïve young people being coached by the battle-hardened veterans of the industry. While I certainly received a lot of that as I previously mentioned, there was also another type of mentorship going on. One unexpected benefit of the program for me was the peer-to-peer mentorship; the calibre of the people who were there to be mentored, were themselves some of the most exceptional I've met in the industry. Although many of them are working for someone or starting up on their own, they also have a vision which extends to whole industry. When you get them in a room, there's a sense that it's going to be hard to rein them in, and that maybe, you should just give that horse its head and let'r run. I mention this not only because I think it's a great aspect of the CYL program, but because I found it incredibly encouraging for the future of our industry. I'm looking forward to seeing my peers in person again at the next Canadian Beef Industry Conference for our graduation and I'm confident we will take all our experiences forward for the benefit of the industry.