

Dairy Ambassadors Educate and Enrich

Unique program gives students an opportunity to earn money for college or calves while telling dairy's story.

By Beth Stuever

Colleen Jackson and Tera Koebel can't remember a summer that didn't involve parading their prize dairy animals around a show ring, fielding numerous questions about cattle and the farms they call home. Both young women have encouraged family members, school friends and the occasional stranger to think differently about the dairy industry and its many opportunities.

"We've always been ambassadors for the industry," says Colleen, an MSU animal science junior and Caro High School graduate.

Last February their roles became official at the Great Lakes Re-

gional Dairy Conference (GLRDC), where they were named the first-ever Michigan Dairy Ambassadors. Colleen, 20, represents the senior division, college students under 22, while Tera, 15, represents the high school grades 9-12 junior division.

"It's really just a title for something I already do," says Tera, a sophomore at River Valley High School in Three Oaks. "During lunch at school I often talk to my friends about the importance of drinking milk. This just formalizes the process."

Program recognizes leadership

The Michigan Dairy Ambassador Program was created by the GLRDC planning committee as a way to develop leadership potential in young people interested in careers in the dairy industry.

"We've been concerned about where our future dairy leaders would come from for a long time," explains Sara Long, one of the program's founders. "Young people get pulled in so many different directions these days. It's hard for them to find focus let alone expect them to seek out opportunities specifically designed to strengthen their

career options. This gives us a chance to work with them to develop their leadership potential

while they explore careers in our industry."

Taking the message to the masses

Colleen spent most of her spring and summer sharing her passion for the industry at various events across the state, including health fairs, a state-wide television show and both public and private schools. Dairy ambassadors are required to participate in events in at least six counties throughout the year to educate consumers, farmers and children about the dairy industry.

"I've been to parts of the state I had never seen before," Colleen says. "This program gave me an opportunity to talk to people that I otherwise never would have known. It's good to hear their questions and understand why people think they way they do."

Tera's experiences have included assisting with a fitting and showing clinic for young 4-H members, making presentations during Michigan State University's Dairy Days and working at the Michigan State Fair.

"There's a lot of stuff to do," she says. "And I'm happy to do it."



Top: Tera Koebel canoodles with Firefly, the Holstein calf she bought with her winnings from the Michigan Dairy Ambassador Program.

Bottom: Colleen Jackson worked with Detroit Lions player Dre Bly during the Mt. Morris Health Fair last May. Bly talked about the importance of dairy foods in a healthy diet and Colleen reinforced the message while she passed out dairy snacks.