

ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES

By Jessica Ziehm

30 calves born and 1,000's of questions answered during the first year of the dairy cow birthing center at the NYS fair

Success for the NYS Fair's Birthing Center

Thirty calves were born at NYS Fair's first Dairy Cow Birthing Center, organized by the New York Animal Agriculture Coalition (NYAAC).

The exhibit was extremely popular, and attracted over 60,000 fairgoers, during the fair's twelve-day run. Live births were certainly the draw, but the interest from and conversations with consumers on all topics related to dairy farming, stole the show.

NYAAC is a farmer founded and funded organization that strives to enhance the public's understanding of and appreciation for animal agriculture and modern farm practices by engaging the public in conversations about animal agriculture and empowering farmers to tell their story firsthand.

NYAAC board members and I never wanted the sole attraction to be the birth. Our intention was to raise the awareness and understanding of modern farms by sharing one of the physical wonders we experience, and by sharing our passion through stories and conversations with the public. We accomplished this. Visitors to the Center stayed hours to observe and converse, and left knowing first-hand that we are indeed family farms, we care immensely for our animals, our land and our product.

NYAAC tagged the Birthing Center with the theme, "There's no udder place for the answer. Ask a farmer." Farmer, veterinarian, student and agribusiness volunteers were provided bright blue "Ask Me" tee shirts and were encouraged to share stories about their own dairy farms, emphasizing the care they provide animals. The dialogues that took place individually and over the microphone quickly turned into two-way conversations.

By sharing personal stories, honest emotions, and factual information, the nearly 200 volunteers at the Birthing Center and I were able to connect on a personal level with consumers and respond to their specific questions and concerns. In every instance, the public walked away with a better understanding of what takes place on a modern dairy farm, and in most cases, had an ah-ha moment along the way when they learned something new or unexpected.

"I think about that whole experience all the time," said Meredith Leonard of Syracuse, a visitor of the

Birthing Center. "Not just the birthing, which in itself is always quite extraordinary. What made it much more special were the reflections by all of you farmers about how you got into farming and why you love it, and the heart and soul everyone puts into the keeping of cows, keeping them healthy and happy, and how it provides such a meaningful life for so many families."

NYAAC partnered with the New York State College of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell University, who provided the veterinary professionals and services necessary to ensure a successful exhibit. NYAAC also received a grant from the New York Corn & Soybean Growers through its checkoff program that provided \$50,000 in seed money and laid the groundwork for additional fundraising from industry businesses and organizations.

The Birthing Center featured three calvings per day and a different farm every other day to present different family stories and farm practices. Cows from six Cayuga Marketing farms were provided. Farmers from those farms also spent two days at the Birthing Center to tell their farm story, explain practices and technologies used on their farm, answer questions and assist with the births.

"What an amazing experience," said Steve Palladino, a partner at Walnut Ridge Dairy, one of the participating farms and a NYAAC board member. "After spending three days at the Birthing Center showing the public something we experience everyday, telling our story, and just interacting with them, it has been one of the most rewarding things I have done. To have hundreds of people personally thanking me for bringing our cows and taking the time to share our story is such a great feeling."

Baby calves were born. Farmers were heard. Consumers listened. It was the trifecta for a perfect dairy public relations event. □

FYI

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