

Open the Gates

Indiana Angus operation welcomes consumers and shares their story. And the results have been tremendous.

by Christy Couch Lee

He spent his career speaking to groups of people. And, he says, it just comes naturally.

So when Ted and Kathy Willer, Willer Timber Ridge, Greencastle, Ind., got started in the Angus business, it was only fitting they would also welcome consumers and industry professionals, alike.

The Willers have been astounded by the changes in perception they've witnessed from those outside the industry, after a visit to the farm. And, they say, you can be an advocate too.

You don't need to be a professional speaker. You just need to open the gates.

Willer Timber Ridge

Ted and Kathy were both raised in the small town of Pine Village, Ind.

Ted spent his career in management and executive positions with various corporations. Today, he continues to work in investment and wealth management. Kathy earned a degree in education and taught in the early years of their marriage. But as they added two children to the family, Josh and Annie, she devoted more time to their care.

As Ted and Kathy's parents needed additional help in their advancing age, they decided a move closer to their roots was in order. An 80-acre farm near Greencastle was up for auction, and the Willers won the bid. And in 1987, they moved to the first piece of Willer Timber Ridge.

"And what do you do when you have 80 acres? You buy some cows," Kathy says with a smile.

Ted — a numbers man — researched breeds and realized the high value found in Angus genetics. And that's how the herd began. Soon, Willer Timber Ridge grew from five head to 100, and from one farm to three.

"Our focus is on performance and creating 'bull-maker moms,'" Ted says. Each year, they participate in the Midland Bull Test in Montana, Werner Feed Efficiency test in Iowa, and the Indiana Beef Evaluation Program test.

Opening their doors and their gates

For the past several years, the Willers have opened their farm to both agricultural and consumer audiences.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WILLER TIMBER RIDGE

This summer, they participated in the Indiana Beef Cattle Association (IBCA) “Farm to Fork” field day, which included culinary students, dieticians and students of the Indiana University school of medicine. During this experience, this non-agricultural audience witnessed Willer Timber Ridge cattle being raised; heard from Willer about sustainability and conservation; heard presentations on preparing *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB) in a variety of ways; and learned from a local veterinarian and feedlot manager.

“These participants were given a survey coming in and then going back, and their perception of the beef industry made a 180-degree turnaround from that one day,” Ted says. “They learned what truly goes into the care of these animals and essential nutrition provided by beef. We eased their concerns about the animals’ health and well-being, too. And these people will go on to talk to others and influence others within their personal and professional circles.”

Another unique opportunity was the Putnam County Convention and Visitors Bureau Covered Bridge Dinners in the fall, where visitors from the area — as well as from Chicago, Louisville, Cincinnati and Indianapolis — dined at tables on the local Houck Covered Bridge and visited with those who produced their food.

“I had the opportunity to sit across from a gentleman from Chicago who was critically questioning the practices of a regional dairy and entertainment operation,” Ted says. “I was able

to answer his questions and explain protocols on handling and treatment of the cattle. And after our conversation, he saw the possibilities of an entirely different, positive perception, versus what he had seen on TV.”

On the day following the meal, attendees had the opportunity to visit local farms. The Willers say about 20 people took them up on the offer and got a firsthand look at beef production.

For two years, the Willers have also opened their farm to the LIVEstock Music

Festival — an event founded by their son, Josh. This two-day music festival is held on the farm’s pasture, and includes music, camping and fellowship — and proceeds benefit local charities. Although the event isn’t directly advocacy, the Willers say they believe the event exposes hundreds indirectly to agriculture.

Freezer beef is more than a business

In addition to marketing their cattle to commercial producers, Kathy also manages a freezer beef business for Willer Timber Ridge. She believes in the value of customer service and often makes deliveries for her mostly urban customers.

Through this process, their beef makes its way into the homes of many without any previous connection to the beef industry. And, she says, it’s a tremendous opportunity for education. So much so, they plan to begin a field day for their freezer beef customers next year.



Consumers from as far away as Chicago, Louisville and Cincinnati visited with local producers during the County Convention and Visitors Bureau Covered Bridge Dinner.

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PHOTO BY CHRISTY COUCH LEE

“It gives me an opportunity to share facts about the beef industry, as well as animal welfare and safety,” Kathy says. “And people absolutely love the flavor and the quality, too.”

Why speaking up is important

Ted says it’s no secret that the cattle industry has its opposition in animal activist groups.

“We love the cattle business, and there are many misperceptions in society,” he says. “The line between truth and facts can be somewhat blurred, and some people want to do away with agriculture. Let’s get the facts out there.”

Ultimately, they say, they enjoy sharing with and about the industry they love.

“It’s all about giving back to an industry that has

given so much to us,” Ted says. “And we get so much out of it, ourselves.”

You can do it, too

Ted says public speaking comes somewhat naturally to him, based on his professional background. But you can become an advocate for the Angus beef industry without stepping onto a stage. Simply make yourself available, he says.

“Talk to people involved in your local cattlemen’s associations, universities and restaurants,” Ted says. “You don’t need to be a ‘brainiac.’ Just tell your story. ‘This is who we are, and this is what we do with our cattle.’ It’s that simple.” **AJ**

Editor’s note: Christy Couch Lee is a freelance writer from Wellington, Ill.