



Young Leaders

The American Farm Bureau Federation has a program in place to support young men and women (between 18-35) in the agriculture industry. According to Cole Coxbill, the 2016 committee chairman for this program, “The Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers program provides opportunities for young agriculturalists to experience personal growth, learning, and networking. The program has something for everyone with competitive events, agriculture advocacy training and leadership development conferences that highlight policy issues of concern by members from all over the nation. As a result, we work together and become the voice of agriculture and Farm Bureau Proud.”



This program is magnified at the local and state levels. Here in Illinois, our program has a slightly different name. We are the Illinois Farm Bureau Young Leaders. No matter the name, both programs hold true to the same basic fundamentals that Coxbill touched on: personal growth, learning, and networking.

Here at the Winnebago-Boone Farm Bureau, our Young Leaders program runs strong at around 50 members. They focus on those three key fundamentals as well as community service. They participate in a Nation-wide campaign called Harvest for All. Our Illinois Young Farm Bureau members “have worked side by side with Feeding America for the past 10 years to help provide food to those in need around our country through the campaign. More than 50 million Americans – that’s 1 in 6 – including nearly 17 million children, are food insecure, meaning they live at risk of hunger,” according to the Farm Bureau website.

Besides giving back to the community through service projects, some of our Young Leaders serve their communities on various boards. For example, Clay Sohner (26) of Rockford, IL

serves his community and the Farm Bureau organization as he donates a large majority of his time to be on the Winnebago-Boone Farm Bureau Board of Directors.

Sohner is a 6th generation farmer. When his family established in this area from Germany almost 150 years ago, they purchased the original 150 acres, which Sohner still farms today. The Sohner farm used to be made up of several different species of livestock including hogs, chickens, and horses. At this time, Sohner, who farms with his father and younger brother, focuses mainly on their 100 head beef cattle feedlot and close to 2,000 acre grain farm. They grow corn, soybeans, wheat, and hay.

Every day is different on the Sohner farm. Clay's daily tasks can include feeding cattle, cleaning out grain bins, repairing farm equipment, cutting hay, baling straw, and chopping corn just to name a few.

Sohner had the opportunity to be a 4-H member before he joined Farm Bureau. This opened up a world of opportunities including showing beef cattle at the fairs. "A lot of times, my friends would be out doing something during the summer and I couldn't go with because I would be here working with my cattle," said Sohner. "It was a lot of work but it taught me a lot of responsibility."

When asked about challenges he faces being a young farmer he stated, "It is tough marketing your crops and cattle versus someone who has a lot more experience," said Sohner, "They have seen a lot more ups and downs than I have."

Being a young farmer in this day and age can be tough. One area that is tough for all farmers today is connecting with the consumer. At times, farmers get busy doing the work that needs to get done and don't take the time to explain the benefits of the modern farming practices they have put in place. So, when asked about how he would approach the controversial topics of GMOs, herbicides and pesticides, and groundwater contamination Sohner simply stated, "We rely on the ground to make a living, and we feed that food to our families as well. If the practices we put in place were bad, we would not feed it to our own families and we wouldn't do anything to hurt ourselves. Our livelihoods depend on it."

As far as the future of Sohner farms goes, "We are going to keep doing what we are doing," said Sohner, "we will continue to grow with the times."

We at the Winnebago-Boone Farm Bureau are grateful for all of the time and effort our board of directors put into our organization. We thank Clay and all the other Young Leaders too, for being so dedicated to the agriculture industry. (Published August 12, 2016)