

# Let's go to COW CAMP

AMPI members create program  
for suburban youth

There's cheerleading camp, music camp, church camp, sports camp and, since 2008, youth in a southeast Minnesota community can attend cow camp.

The idea of AMPI members Glenn and Deb Johnson of Claremont, Minn., the camp delivers a four-day, on-farm experience for youth who don't live on a dairy farm.

"Now I talk about cows all the time, whether people want to talk about them or not," says

former camper, now 4-Her Kylie Kruckeberg.

## Cow camping

Day one of the camp takes place in the classroom. Campers learn about dairy cattle breeds, feed, nutrition and housing.

"We share videos of several different milking systems to show the depth and breadth of the industry," Deb says.

Campers pick their calf from the

Johnsons' herd on day two and learn how to lead them. The calves are usually four months of age and younger.

Day three is washing day and preparing for the final day of camp.

"On that final day we load all the calves onto a trailer and bring them to the local school to put on a show for the school-aged summer care program," Deb says. "Family and friends are invited, so we usually have a crowd of about 100 people."

## Enriching communities

The idea for cow camp was born from the realization that a growing percentage of the population is several generations removed from the farm.

"Steele County was once the buttermaking capitol of the world with all the farms in the area," Deb says. "We've lost many of those farms, and the children that came with them."

*Cow camp graduates, from left, Kellen Nelson, Lilly Zollner, Kylie Kruckeberg and Afton Nelson pose with three of the heifers they exhibited at the Steele County Fair in Owatonna, Minn.*

“ Yes, cow camp is about cows, but it's also about instilling core values learned on the farm and making memories.”

Glenn and Deb Johnson  
Claremont, Minn.



The majority of today's youth simply aren't exposed to animal agriculture."

As the director of community education for Owatonna public schools, Deb saw an opportunity and cow camp was created.

"The program became so popular we began offering 'rookie' and 'pro' versions," Glenn says.

This year, pro camp enrollment filled in six minutes and 15 names were put on a waiting list for the rookie and pro camps.

When a camper "graduates" from camp, the Johnsons encourage those who remain interested to consider the 4-H dairy project. In 10 years they've worked with 13 youth as part of the 4-H lease agreement program, and regularly exhibit more than 30 animals at the Steele County Fair. In 2017, nearly half of all dairy animals exhibited at the Minnesota State Fair were leased.

Like the Johnsons, their cooperative recognizes the importance of supporting local communities and dairy youth programs.

*Former cow camp attendee-turned-counselor Lilly Zollner, right, watches campers practice proper showmanship techniques.*

In addition to encouraging employees to volunteer, AMPI sponsors dairy breakfasts, farm tours, county fairs, 4-H and FFA programs throughout the six-state membership region.

The co-op is a longtime supporter of the National 4-H Dairy Conference held in Madison, Wis., each year during the World Dairy Expo. The three-day conference is attended by members' children and dairy youth from across the country. This year, cow camp graduate Lilly Zollner was selected as one of the delegates from Minnesota.

## Starting your own

For those interested in starting their own cow camp, Deb suggests taking the time to develop a detailed plan and start with a manageable number of campers.

"We regularly remind everyone of the

three rules of cow camp: listen, listen, listen," she says. "We want everyone to stay safe, have a good time and do good work together."

Glenn emphasizes the importance of teamwork when working with the 4-Hers.

"It's nice to win, but it's more important if you gain a friendship in the process," he says. "Yes, cow camp is about cows, but it's also about instilling core values learned on the farm and making memories." DD

