

# ONE-ON-ONE OPPORTUNITY

NJHA members mingle with college and industry professionals during Bridging the Gap.

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

**Y**oung people shook hands with opportunities — and the people that provide them — during the Bridging the Gap college and career fair at the 2022 VitaFerm® Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE). Bridging the Gap has connected Hereford juniors with colleges and industry professionals from the National Junior Hereford Association’s (NJHA) corporate partners since it debuted in 2019.

Each year, NJHA members polish up their resumes before visiting one-on-one with college recruiters and agricultural professionals. During the event, young people learn about degree programs, scholarship opportunities, career possibilities and potential internships. At the same time, participating colleges and companies can mingle with some of the brightest young minds the agricultural industry has to offer. This year, Bridging the Gap included a speed networking roundtable to further foster professional connections for high school and college-age participants — whom industry professionals and NJHA supporters were excited to meet.

“Our future employees could be standing in this room,” says Michael Hampton, Central Life Sciences regional sales manager. “We need



Juniors participate in speed networking tables at the Bridging the Gap college and career fair.

employees that have a good background in production agriculture. I think this is a good group to start with.”

### Network building

Bridging the Gap proved networking is more than just a buzzword, as the event helped professionals and young people make connections that will prove invaluable in the future.

“Networking is really crucial,” says Ellie Sennett, BioZyme® Vita Charge® marketing brand manager. “And starting early, like some of these kids are, is amazing. You’re bound to succeed if you’re just willing to get out there and try.”

Sennett knows this firsthand, as she grew up making similar connections as she exhibited cattle.

“I hope they learn the importance of networking and developing their

own network of contacts,” Hampton says. “I’ve told quite a few of them tonight that as they get older and get into the last years of college and start looking for internships, it’s important to already have those contacts made in those companies where they are interested in going to work. I think this is a great start; it’s a great way to show them what they need to do to develop that network.”

Lauren McMillan, NJHA director, participated in the event, and as Hampton suggested, she took advantage of the time to make connections.

“It’s a great way to kind of get out of your comfort zone as well as meet people that you might see down the road. Those people might be your boss or someone you have an interview with someday,” McMillan says. “It’s great to make those connections now.”

### Talking the talk

The first step to building a professional network is often figuratively and literally extending your hand, followed by a conversation. For young people, it can be intimidating to rub elbows with polished professionals. But



opportunities, like Bridging the Gap, allow NJHA members to practice their communication skills.

“The more people you talk to, the better you’re going to get at it,” McMillan says. “Now that I’ve done this for years, it’s more comfortable. And I’ve made great connections that have already helped me down the road.”

With practice comes the added confidence young people need to stand out as they enter the workforce.

“I think it’s good for them to develop the confidence and the skills needed to have a one-on-one conversation,” Hampton says.

### Hereford influenced

Standing out among peers isn’t new for NJHA members. The very skills that help young people excel in the showing, such as work ethic, responsibility and presentation, help them find success in their future careers.

“There’s a lot of skills and confidence that the youth get, not only in the showing but also doing all the other contests,” Hampton says. “I think that sets them apart as they’ve got a bit more self-confidence, and that goes a long way.”

Outside of their unique skillset, participating colleges and companies noted NJHA members’ passion for the agricultural industry. That is something Lori Lawrence, BioZyme® show and small livestock business development manager, frankly, found contagious.

“They’re passionate; they’re energetic; they’re fun; they’re talkative. There are all sorts of things that are great about the kids,” Lawrence says. “It’s actually a breath of fresh air to come to a junior national and see the kids all excited and energetic. They’re passionate and not guarded about how they feel about the industry. They feel like the industry is open and bright, and that’s just a nice reflection. Sometimes we go back to our everyday jobs and think, ‘Wow, they see a bright future.’”

Lake Land College agriculture division chair, Ryan Orrick believes these budding professionals are the future of agriculture.

“I would say all that have come through have been very courteous and

respectful, and they’ve asked many really good questions. They just carry themselves professionally,” he says.

### Looking to the future

Nearly all the talk at Bridging the Gap was future centric. Young people made connections to support their career aspirations, and industry professionals shook hands with young professionals they hope to one day hire. These connections make Bridging the Gap an event that colleges, industry professionals and NJHA’s corporate partners readily support.

“It’s really important for us to support the American Hereford Association and young people in agriculture,” says Morgan Jones, Trans Ova Genetics marketing intern. “We believe in the next generation of cattle and bettering the industry, and we know that people are behind better livestock. It’s important to help better those people and provide opportunities



Lauren McMillan practices her networking skills at the Bridging the Gap college and career fair.



Hereford junior, Sam Birdsall, dressed to make the best first impression.

for them. Then, as an industry, we can continue to grow and prosper.”

For young people participating in Bridging the Gap, advice from professionals was simply to keep it up.

“Continue to do things like this; build that network and work on personal communication skills,” Hampton says. “Young people that can do that

in today’s world stand out, and the work ethic that 99% of these kids have will help them run circles around most of their competition.” **HW**



Chris Mullinix and Angie Denton, Kansas State University animal sciences and industry department representatives, recruit potential students.