

PEN-TO-PEN

Bonding Hereford youth and preserving written communication.

by **Payton Paschoal**

Networking may seem more appropriate for professionals, but Hereford youth have an opportunity to build professional skills at a young age and meet lifelong friends through the Pen-to-Pen program. Each year, the National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) hosts Pen-to-Pen, a pen pal and mentorship program sponsored by Purina, which helps connect NJHA members of different ages, states and backgrounds.

Peewee and junior members are paired with intermediate and senior members to make connections during two sessions at the beginning of the VitaFerm® Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE). Following their introduction, Pen-to-Pen participants complete activities, participate in ice breakers and hear from a keynote speaker to remind young people about the importance of connection.

Each Pen-to-Pen activity fosters teamwork, communication and relationship building, according to NJHA prior-membership and current communications chair, Libby Rushton. For the last two years, these activities

included a scavenger hunt where the new mentors and mentees worked together to find items and complete tasks around the show grounds. This quickly became the favorite activity of many participants.

“It’s memories like running through the barns looking for scavenger hunt items that are going to stick with them,” Rushton says. “They might not remember anything that we talked about in the sessions or any of the games we played, but we’re going to remember the memories they made with their group.”

That initial connection can sometimes be challenging for mentors and mentees alike. Mentors may wonder what to say to their younger charges. But, Rushton says all participants leave the program with a newfound confidence after stepping out of their comfort zone.

Making connections

Rushton was approached by a Pen-to-Pen participant’s mother who wanted to express her gratitude for the program. She had urged her son to attend Pen-to-Pen in years past, but to no avail. But, this year, her son not only attended but was also excited for the second session to meet up with his group around the barns.

Pen-to-Pen participant, Jorja Ebert, Polo, Mo., enjoyed being

active while meeting new people.

“The icebreakers gave us a break from the seriousness of the show and allowed us to enjoy each other,” Ebert says.

Compared to previous years’ programs, Morgan Richardson, Capron, Ill., says the 2022 Pen-to-Pen program was even more interactive. She used Pen-to-Pen to focus on professional development while serving younger NJHA members. The extra immersive activities helped Richardson form an even stronger bond with her mentee and allowed the young people to learn from one another.

“We do a lot of activities that are focused on communication, leadership and partnership, but sometimes you don’t really know what you are doing because you are having fun at the same time,” Richardson says.

First time JNHE attendee, Mary Elliot Martin, Opelika, Ala., wanted to connect with fellow NJHA members from around the nation. Pen-to-Pen provided her the opportunity to make those connections while building her leadership skills.

“Having someone to look up to builds your own confidence,” Martin says.

“JNHE is a junior-driven event, so it makes sense to start juniors early in building connections through programs like Pen-to-Pen.”

— **Paige Lemenager**



NJHA board member, Ralston Ripp encourages juniors to take advantage of their time at JNHE by building their network.



Kinsley Bremer makes nationwide connections at second Pen-to-Pen session.



Juniors step out of their comfort zones to meet fellow exhibitors.

Martin appreciates how the Pen-to-Pen fosters relationships between NJHA members of all ages by helping younger members understand that older members are approachable and welcoming. She is already looking forward to helping her mentee after JNHE with cattle-related issues or even questions about college.

“Your connections often grow beyond the mentee. If you can get to know the whole family, your network will grow, and you can be even more helpful,” Martin says.

The strength of the program lies in the participants. Three-time mentor, Paige Lemenager, Hudson, Ill., says the program provides support, not just in the Pen-to-Pen program, but throughout all NJHA events. Lemenager still corresponds with her previous mentees through letters, texts and calls. According to Lemenager, the program also teaches good ol’ fashioned penmanship.

Nine-year-old Pen-to-Pen participant, Makenna Smith, agrees.

“It’s a good skill so when you go off to college and you don’t have somebody’s phone number, you can send them a letter. Sometimes it’s better to see their own handwriting rather than a text message.” Smith says.

She and her previous mentor stayed connected by exchanging letters.

Lemenager reflects on her time in the Pen-to-Pen program and the joy brought to her by watching the juniors grow. “Our breed doesn’t have

that level of awkwardness between older and younger members because programs, like Pen-to-Pen, bond us,” she says.

Serving as a mentor and being able to make a difference in someone’s

JNHE experience brings Lemenager great pride. She has witnessed junior members make new connections and grow.

“I have watched them go from a mentee to a mentor without them knowing it,” she says.

Lemenager’s mentees have matured into kind and outgoing young people ready to help the next NJHA member in line. The countless opportunities provided by the NJHA continue to build community and promote personal growth within the Hereford breed.

After another successful year of the program, Rushton looks forward to passing the torch to newly elected membership chair, Lauren McMillan. McMillan plans to continue to improve the program and foster community-building among NJHA members. **HW**



Warren Beeler inspires Hereford youth to work diligently to achieve their dreams.



Mentorship builds leadership skills within Hereford youth.