

Kari Robideau:

You are listening to the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development Podcast. My name is Kari Robideau, and I'm an Extension educator, and this is our first podcast of our fourth season. I'm really excited to kick off this fourth season with a special series on youth in ag. Joining me in this discussion are Samantha Lahman and Joe Rand, both Extension educators and colleagues of mine. I am so pleased to have both of you joining me in this first series of our fourth season. Thanks, you guys.

Joe Rand:

Yay, congratulations. We're excited to be here. Happy year four.

Samantha Lahman:

It's exciting to be here.

Kari Robideau:

Well, and I will mention, this is Samantha's first time on the podcast series, so welcome. Joe has been on a number of our podcasts. I really am excited about this series, as we dive into youth in agriculture. We're going to tackle a number of topics and I'll talk about that more later, but before we dive into that, I think it would be interesting for the listeners to hear specifically from the two of you. What is your interest in ag? What is your background in ag? Why am I having this conversation with you, and your current interest in working in youth development with this topic?

Joe Rand:

Well, hi again. My name is Joe Rand, I use pronouns he/him and I work with animal science programming in the central region of Minnesota, which is the 15 counties around the Twin Cities Metro. I also work on the statewide animal science team. I get to help out local educators as they are working within animal science programming, I get to work at the state fair, do all kinds of fun things. I don't have an ag background as you might think of it in the traditional way, but I do live on a hobby farm that we recently purchased and built a house on and have been very interested in horticulture and landscaping for many years and I'm getting ready to start a beef herd hopefully next year, and so diving in head first, if you will. I get to do it for work and so now I get to do it in my personal life. I'm excited to chat with you about that as one of these new, I'm not technically a Gen Zer, but one of these new folks in the ag industry. Thanks for having me, and I'll turn it over to Sam.

Samantha Lahman:

Thanks, Joe. I am Samantha Lahman and I work up in the northwest region of Minnesota. We expand all the way from Alexandria all the way up to the Canadian border. I get to work with a lot of different colleagues and a lot of variety of things within 4-H new development, but specialize most in animal science programming, so that's county fairs, state fair, any regional activities, Project Bowl, and the like. My interest in agriculture started at a pretty young age. I grew up in west central Minnesota in a very, very heavy rural and farming community, with a history of farming in the family and a deep interest and a love especially for animal science.

Samantha Lahman:

I attended University of Minnesota Crookston up in the northern part of the state, where I got to further study agriculture and animal sciences before working with NDSU for about seven years in the ag and

natural resources and 4-H area before getting the chance to return here to Minnesota, to a place that I love and really get to focus on animal science and youth and continue to explore what it means for this next generation of ag enthusiasts coming into the workforce.

Kari Robideau:

Thanks, you guys. As you hear them introduce themselves, you can perhaps understand why I brought these two in for both their personal reasons and for their professional reasons, why they are the perfect ones to talk us through youth and agriculture and all the topics that we want to look at.

Kari Robideau:

I'm going to back up just a little bit to give all of you an idea of why did this bubble up, where did this come from? Well, first of all, last fall, I was contacted by an Extension colleague in the Center for Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources. He shared with me that he had been in conversations and engaged with farmers who were in point those Generation Z, and those farmers had a lot of questions around a variety of topics. How do we work with today's young people?

Kari Robideau:

That's when I connected with Samantha and Joe, and a group of us from those two centers considered how we could provide this information in this area to farmers. That resulted in a webinar that Samantha did, we've had some blog posts, but now we decided to take this information to our own Center for Youth Development Podcast series, because we know so many of you out there are in rural areas or you're interested in agriculture and we want to go down a path of learning more about topics within this area. Those are going to include things like Generation Z working on farms, Generation Z and agriculture in general, LGBTQ+ youth in agriculture and rural youth stress. These are some great topics coming up, but first let's get to our podcast today.

Kari Robideau:

This one is going to focus on multi-generations working together on the farm. Samantha, will you get us started on this? Rural America is known for its multi-generational farms. Set the stage for us, what do these farms look like today?

Samantha Lahman:

Sure. One of the surprising things I think for most people to hear is while their farming practices have drastically changed over the years, some things have really kind of stayed consistent. Here in the United States, 96% of our farms are still considered family farms, which means we have at least one generation of family producer actively engaged in farming of some sort. That can be different from farm labor, farm business, we all know some of our larger farms have accountants and agronomists and all those positions that are now filled on our farms.

Samantha Lahman:

One of the other things that really hasn't changed, but is slowly being forced to is our average age of our producers on our family farms. That average age is around 58 to 59, and so that's the age of the boomer, right, our producers that have now lived through all these different farming seasons and growing years and they carry with them so much experience. Now, it's how do we share that experience with the next generation that's going to come in after they inevitably retire.

Samantha Lahman:

One of the reasons why this topic is so important right now, as we think about these family farms and of our age of our producers, a recent Perdue study concluded that jobs in the ag sector are only predicted to be filled about 60% of the time, that's where we're going to cap out. We are going to run out of our Gen Zs and millennials who went to higher education to study things like agronomy, agricultural business, animal sciences, precision agriculture. There's just not enough to go around with such a booming ag sector. This is really where this topic comes into play, because we need to look outside of our family farms and the next generation. Just the two kids on the family farm is not going to be able to run that 1,000-acre farm. We're going to need some outside help, we're going to need some outside expertise, and that's where our Gen Z's are going to come into play.

Kari Robideau:

That's really interesting. The other thing that I know that our multicenter group had talked about as well is that traditionally those farms were taken over by the kids. As you're mentioning the workforce is there. We're going to need to hire young people to take on these roles, it's not going to be your son or your daughter who take over those roles on the farm anymore.

Samantha Lahman:

Right, certainly not all of the roles. Even if they are coming back to farm, we're still going to need some supplemental help and some different areas of expertise that we're going to need to look outside that family unit to find. Plus, we do know that some of our farm families, the youth just don't have the interest or maybe the same passion to come home and work on their own farm. They may still stay in agriculture in some way by becoming an agronomist or even an extension agent, but may not just have the interest in being actively responsible for a working farm.

Kari Robideau:

We need know more about Generation Z. Who is this generation?

Samantha Lahman:

All right, so Generation Z, they are who came after the millennials. If you've looked at your teenager recently and I made a crack about them being a millennial, they are not. They will be sure to remind you that they are not a millennial, they are a Gen Z. They have a good reason too, they are vastly different than the generation above them, in the millennials, which is what I get to call myself. Typically, when we think about generations, they aren't set as certain particular dates. Each generation doesn't start brand new, say, every 10 or 15 years. Generations are defined after they go through those formidable years. After they go through world, global, regional events together, some major significant events, then they're kind of grouped together and that's what's determined to be a generation.

Samantha Lahman:

Our Gen Zs right now typically were born between 1995 and 2010. The oldest of our Gen Zs are now 22 years old. They're entering the workforce, they are graduating from college, they're going to become some major players in our lives. There's about 72.8 million of them, so there is a lot of Generation Z that we're going to be hiring and working with in the very near future.

Joe Rand:

Sam, tell us a little bit more about the defining events that a generation experiences, but specifically that Generation Z has experienced, because given their age, it makes me think those kids were babies when something like 9/11 happened. That's a defining event I know for me and you as millennials, but what are the things that affect Gen Zers?

Samantha Lahman:

Right, so some of the defining events that have taken place for Gen Z, the things that stick out in their mind in those early teenage years is where those are identified, they were born and lived through the great recession, and we'll talk about that a little bit later when we talk about finances on how that has personally affected them and them in the workplace. Things like the school shootings, unfortunately, mass school shootings have become a fairly commonplace thing for Gen Z. The Marriage Equality Act being passed, the Affordable Care Act being passed, multiple presidential elections. Then of course, as we've experienced in just the last two or three years especially, the rising of different social justice movements. We can think about each generation having at least one of those movements that they can point to, whether it was a suffragette or something that sticks in their mind, but for Gen Z there's a lot, the Me Too movement, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, love is love. There is a lot of these movements taking place and it made them very, very civically inclined and very engaged.

Kari Robideau:

Okay, so we've established that there are going to be jobs available in agriculture coming up. We've established that we have a lot of Generation Zers years and a little bit about how their generation looks at things and how we characterize Generation Z. Let's go back then to jobs and agriculture, how do we get them on the farms? How do we employ them? How do we get them in the door?

Samantha Lahman:

That is a great question. They are going to be vastly different than their millennial counterparts. For any millennials that are listening, or Generation X that are listening, as soon as you graduated college, especially when I think of millennials graduating into the great recession, it was just grab a job, sometimes any job you can find. Gen Zs aren't really going to have to do that thankfully, and it's great for them. They're going to have some options. Making sure that we're tailoring our workplace experiences to what they're looking for is going to be some of the key factors in getting them in.

Samantha Lahman:

Concordia St. Paul has an absolutely wonderful infographic that you can find on their website with some of these statistics for Gen Zs. 70% say that salary is going to be the top motivator for them. We kind of wonder, well, of course, it's going to be the top motivator for almost anyone, but the key thing to connect with Gen Z is as Gen Z was aging in through high school, what they saw in the generation above them was millennials struggling, student debt, affordable housing, healthcare, and graduating into that great recession. For Gen Z, they've been watching and they've been learning. They're more likely to take elective classes in things like finance, personal finance, business accounting, which is great. They're all things that I'm sure all of us wish we would have taken once you're through your schooling. They're making decisions that are going to directly affect their finances for the future.

Samantha Lahman:

70% also say that health insurance is a must. We think about those older Gen Z, it's an absolute must. We're going to look at salary and does it come with health insurance. 35% plan to start saving for retirement in their 20s, which we all know we should do. They're this generation that's actively showing that they are going to do it. They've already started. For some of those, as we said, they're in their 20s, their early 20s, they've really started working on it.

Joe Rand:

Sam, I'm hearing you talk about the different ways that Gen Zers are engaging in education, but I also hear a lot of ways that those skills could be used in ag, maybe in different ways that we haven't considered before. I say that because I know some Gen Zers who are doing ag marketing, which wasn't even an industry or a big industry a few years ago, but also ag finance and other jobs like that. How do we engage those skills in the workforce, in the industry?

Samantha Lahman:

No, that's a great question, Joe, and I'm sure one that every producer is asking themselves when they're thinking about hiring on a Gen Z employee. A lot of that comes down to tailoring. What they're going to be best suited for is really where they're going to shine. The great thing about Gen Z is they're pretty outspoken, so they will tell us what they're really, really good at. Sometimes it might be something newer or flashier, like a social media manager, which would not have existed 10 years ago by any means, but is now a staple in most of our large ag companies. But it might also be something that works towards HR and working with fellow employees, or it might be in providing some sort of education or training to other employees, as well as people that maybe aren't in the ag sector, using them as spokesman for your farm is one kind of unique way.

Samantha Lahman:

But one of the things we know about Gen Z is we've kind of nicknamed them the do-it-yourself generation, and that's in part because they're growing up with YouTube. YouTube, if you've spent any time on it, you can learn to do just about anything on YouTube. Our Gen Zers have grown up with that kind of concept and that in mind of, yes, my formal education is really important to me, but I also know that I can figure out how to do this if I put my mind to it.

Samantha Lahman:

One of the examples I've given in the past is if you give the Gen Zer a task of, "Hey, I'd like you to take the automatic feeder refill and feed the replacement heifers," great, they will probably do that, but there's also a really good chance that they're going to pull up the online owner's manual, download it to their cell phone, maybe read through it as they're doing something, or listen to it as it would be or listen to an audio book, and they're going to uncover three or four different functions that we didn't even know existed with the software, the system that they were given. Gen Zers are able to multitask, they can think in multiple different directions. They're very fast moving and self-motivated

Joe Rand:

Sam, as I hear you talk about Gen Zers wanting to be at the table and have their voice heard and how that might be hard for farmers and ag professionals to hear and to change, it really also sounds like they are going to be assets to us and crucial in the forward progress of the ag industry.

Samantha Lahman:

Definitely. There's very few skills that the Gen Zers are going to be bringing onto the farm which aren't going to be hugely beneficial. As you pointed out, Joe, there's going to be some tension. There always is when we're bringing in multiple generations together. As we think back on that family farm, we can think about just transitions that take place that cause some of that generational stress. We think each time that farm is going to change hands, we're going to adjust practices, operating systems, update technology, the employee structure, but there are certain traditions that really will span across all generations that can really bring everybody together and can make Gen Z feel right at home on the farm.

Samantha Lahman:

For me, in our family, it's the radio. There is an old black box radio that hangs on a rusted nail in the corner of our barn and the radio station never changes. It's kind of an unwritten rule that that station is not allowed to change. The last time it was, I'm sure it was during a wild rebellious streak when I was a youth and I wanted to hear anything else other than Aretha Franklin, The Rolling Stones or Twins baseball. I changed it over to probably what would have been early 2000s hip hop. Shocker, it didn't last more than probably an hour before it was changed back. You get to listen to those things and you become entertained by what's playing because it's what's available. I would always get really excited when the chart topper or a throwback, My Generation. I don't think there's any other song anywhere in the play catalog that connects with every single teen in America, no matter what generation you're coming into. Misunderstood, want to make a difference, trepidation for the future, everything that we've all gone through as we age up into that workforce age, through college and into adulthood.

Kari Robideau:

I love that story, Samantha. You've talked about how I think every generation wants this, but especially Generation Zs, they want to connect with the work they're doing. They want to have meaningful contribution, and they're going to do it differently than generations have done it in the past.

Samantha Lahman:

Right. We think of things like communication styles, having technology available in your back pocket, work habits, work hours, work-life balance, those are all things that are going to be different, even if they're only slightly different. They can divide us a little bit, so if we look for those little tiny traditions or those little commonalities, that's really what's going to bring us together and help us understand each other a little bit more. Knowing where we came from, what influences we've lived through, we can put on that brand new lens of, okay, I can understand where they're coming from, I understand this value in this need to be beneficial to the greater operation and be a part of all of this.

Samantha Lahman:

When we find those commonalities or we uncover those unwritten rules of our farming operation, like which side of the parlor do you milk on or who gets the good office chair during the work meetings, no matter how small, welcoming Gen Z onto the farm and embracing those traditions together is going to make all the difference.

Kari Robideau:

Thank you, Samantha, and thank you, Joe, for this conversation.

Samantha Lahman:

Thank you for having us. This was fun for my first podcast. I'm excited I let you talk to me into it.

Joe Rand:

I'm excited to dive more into Gen Z on the farm As we keep going in this series. It'll be interesting to hear more from Sam and from Aly and to learn from one another, and hopefully help out some folks out doing the work.

Kari Robideau:

Absolutely. I am excited as well. Please continue to listen along with us as this series rolls out. As I mentioned, this is the first podcast in this series. I also want to mention that we are going to be releasing some blog posts on our Youth Development Insight blog that you'll want to look for as well. As we conclude this podcast, I'll also invite listeners to go to www.extension.umn.edu/youth. There, you can find training, education and tools for youth workers and volunteers. We also want you to check out our Minnesota 4-H program if you haven't already. You'll find out ways that you can get involved, whether you are an adult volunteer or you are a young person who wants to be engaged in the program.

Kari Robideau:

That is going to end our podcast for today. Again, thank you, Joe and Samantha.

Joe Rand:

Thanks, we'll see you next time.

Samantha Lahman:

Thanks, Kari.

Kari Robideau:

Please tune in again soon.