



..... **STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSES MOUTH**
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There are always certain items that catch my eye or my ear when it comes to anything agriculture and this one did because of the obvious disconnect of people to agriculture and particularly animal agriculture. We are in the big swing of the National animal expositions like Denver Stock Show which ended up this past month and the Fort Worth Stock Show that just wound up, Of course the Nebraska Cattlemen Classic is this next week. I was scanning the results of the Fort Worth show today and found that the Grand Champion Steer brought some pretty good “College Money”! The grand champion steer, a European cross named “Big Boy”, was purchased for \$210,000 and the reserve grand champion, named “Goosebumps”, sold for \$170,000. Big Boy and Goosebumps were then both donated to the Fort Worth Zoo, where they will remain for a year. Some of the other livestock shown also get a reprieve and fed a bit longer, while some animals end up with local high school FFA barns. But most of the animals sold in the Sale of Champions are trucked away to meat processing plants for processing and to finish the life cycle. That is interesting and all, but now comes the real story!

There was a special steer that was shown this year, whose name is Oatmeal, was born blind, and in fact was not given much of a chance to live successfully, let alone to succeed in a show ring. But a young 4-Her, Kendyll Williams, saw something in this steer and took a chance on him. She had heard from the family who had raised him that something was wrong, and he’d never work out. They reasoned, with good cause, that a steer being blind probably wouldn’t eat or drink properly, and that he could get hurt. But Kendyll and her family ended up taking him home and raised him for show.

You would assume he was named because of his color, but that wasn’t the case. Kyndyll had this little stuffed cow when she was a kid, and its name was “Oatmeal.” She had given it to her brother as a special gift, so she needed another Oatmeal. So she named him that because this steer was special like that toy. It turned out that Oatmeal was diagnosed with inoperable cataracts that were so thick he likely could only detect light and dark shapes which meant that the process to realize that potential took a lot of love and patience. Most people would think that a young person would never be able to halter break this steer. They would be mostly correct because if you have halter broken a steer you know that it can be done normally in a couple of days. This young lady was determined to succeed and she did. It took Oatmeal took a couple of months, but he did learn to lead and respond to the halter. It took a lot of work, diligence, determination and grit but she did it.

Kendyll routinely addressed every challenge that came with Oatmeal the same way. She would go to his stall every day and talk to him. She found she had to instill a trusting bond and not be too rough with him as he didn’t respond well to roughness. But she said that finally one day, it just clicked and she and Oatmeal bonded and they developed mutual trust. Oatmeal would respond to her voice, smell her and then just relax as if he knew he was safe and secure. As is typical with anyone or any other animal that is blind, they can develop an unbelievably keen sense of smell and hearing. Oatmeal had that capability; Kendyll said that he’ll follow his nose to food, and to his pen in the barn. He did more than survive. The story is good at this point because he was a winner, and she sold him for more than \$8,000 in the Fort Worth Stock Show’s Sale of Champions. Although that already has a great feel to it, but as Paul Harvey would say - Here is the rest of the story!

Just like the hundreds of young 4-H and FFA exhibitors that I have worked with over the years, Kendyll became especially close to her beef, Just like the kids that I have watched lead their calves, sheep or goats or drive their pigs for the last time, she knew the steer would eventually be sold and trucked away, destined for somebody’s dinner plate. Just like a lot of other kids I have witnessed, she hugged him and kissed him on top of the head. Kendyll was worried that Oatmeal would be alone, that he wouldn’t know anyone and he’d get hurt getting to the trailer, so she asked if her dad could take Oatmeal to the truck. The path that the animals take from the show arena to the trucking station is appropriately called the “Trail of Tears” and any 4-H/FFA show parent will understand why. Tears were shed just like a lot of other kids have when this time comes. I can only imagine as close to Oatmeal that she had become it had to be doubly tough on her – and her dad!

Here is where the story becomes sad and a little bazaar. The Fort Worth Star-Telegram published a story about the blind steer and his 13-year-old owner, so they both became “people’s champions”. She was elated that Oatmeal brought a good check for her to help save for college, so Oatmeal paid her back in full for her hard work, diligence and extraordinary care that she gave him. What she didn’t plan for was the backlash she’s received for selling Oatmeal. Who would have guessed the vitriol that would be invoked on her and her family? Some of it posted as comments to the newspaper story, others on social media. Animal rights activists came out of the woodwork. They even called her phone. Kendyll was doing fine until she started reading some of the hateful comments posted on social media and she started feeling bad about herself, thinking it was all her fault. It just broke her heart. Finally her parents wouldn’t let her look at her phone and they went home.

This just makes my blood boil, and you wonder why I react to animal rights activists the way I do? The last thing I heard was that a farm animal sanctuary is currently seeking to rescue Oatmeal, and a Crowdrise.com fundraising effort has raised \$12,000 to buy back the steer. This may be interesting to follow, but my heart goes out to this young lady who did nothing wrong, and in fact did everything right--- but is learning the hard way what this world has become, and that is sad!

The preceding information comes from the research and personal observations of the writer, which may or may not reflect the views of UNL or Nebraska Extension. For more further information on these or other topics contact D. A. Lienemann, Nebraska Extension Educator for Webster County in Red Cloud, (402) 746-3417 or email: dlienemann2@unl.edu or on the web at: <http://extension.unl.edu/statewide/webster>