

## **Megan Asling, beef farmer and teacher, Warragul**

Firstly, I would like to say, thank you for having me here today. It has been wonderful to learn so much about our future in farming and food production, which is an incredibly interesting and important topic to be discussing.

Today I am looking at the topic of inspiring the younger generation.

When first asked to do this my thoughts were something along the lines of "Great; I'm the younger generation and I am farming, hopefully sustainably, so I know a lot about this".

Then I made the mistake of letting my mind wander.....perhaps I'm not the younger generation anymore!? I am heading towards 40 next year.

I don't know how to work an ipod, I can't figure out why we need to have those apple ipad tablet things that we carry around with us all day. Why would you want to read a book on the computer when you can feel a book in your hands, touch the front cover and smell the pages?

My latest CD purchase was Susan Boyle, and I absolutely love it, so I am beginning to think that maybe I am not that 'cool' anymore and the term 'younger' no longer applies to me.

But the most interesting and funny thing about that is that I am thoroughly OK about it.

I don't mind that I don't know how to work technology and that my seven-year-old daughter does. I don't mind that I am not listening to that 'doof doof' stuff that you hear out of hotted-up cars through your closed windows at the traffic lights. I am OK about shopping at Target for my clothes, and buying them when they are on special. So if that is where I am as a person, how do we inspire the younger generation about farming if our two worlds are so far apart?

Somehow we need to educate our young people to want to be farmers. Somehow we need to show them our enthusiasm for the land and our keenness to pass it on, into new and vibrant hands. Somehow we need to show our young people how to look after our land for a sustainable future.

So how do I do this?

Well, one option you could follow is the option I have taken.

Become a school teacher where you can stand in front of 25 children every day and talk to them about farming. The good thing about that is that they have to stay in the classroom at their desks so they can't run away.

I could have a full audience all day if I wanted to, but of course I don't talk to them about farming all day, but every chance I get I do.

I talk to them about funny stories that have happened on our farm. I talk to them about the cow that calved that I had to help, and I dramatise it so much that they are left hanging, waiting to know if the calf survived or not.

I tell them what I call my calves and why I named them what I did such as the calf named "Draught". It was such hard work getting him out that we all needed a beer afterwards so he was named "Draught" in honour of Carlton Draught.

I tell them about fertilising our farm and what it costs, and ask them what else I could do.

I tell them about the snakes that have visited the house and my brave Jack Russell that has brought our attention to them.

I tell them about the two bulls having a fight over the ladies, taking down two fences and the big breath I had to take at 4pm on a Sunday when we started to fix the fences which went well into the evening.

I told them about the February 7 bushfires and the effect they had on our family and the things we were doing to repair our land. The fencing we had to do and the trees that I planted on our property to encourage the wild life in shelter belts.

I tell the children everything I can about our environment on the farm and I do it with enthusiasm. I do it with a smile and I do it in the hope that I am raising their interest

into what a great life it can be living on the land. I especially smile when I tell them about the beautiful scotch fillet steak that I had for tea last night care of one of our steers affectionately named Digger. He is delicious.

It is important that we educate our children on where our food is coming from and how it is getting to our plate. The children in this area are not naive. They know that milk comes from a cow and that beef also comes from a cow. What we need to be educating them now is about the quality of our food. How does it get to the plate? Is it slaughtered humanely? Does it matter if a chicken is caged for its whole life to produce our eggs? What fertilisers do we use? Are we eating chemicals in and on our food?

We need to educate our young people to be informed so that they can make these decisions about their food themselves.

In turn as a society we accept better farming practices and higher prices for better-quality food because we understand how it was produced and where it came from. They are decisions that our young people have to make, and we as farmers, whether the five-acre hobby farmer or the hundreds of acres food producer have to inform them and share our stories with them so that they are educated enough to make their own choices about farming.

For a young person to see that we care about our environment and the way we farm is important. Young people can be easily swept up into issues and hot topics of their time such as climate change or the push by PETA to stop mulesing. Just look at what they as a group have been able to achieve, with the use of celebrities, who are hugely influential on our younger generation, stopping wool products being sold in stores across the world.

My point is not if we agree with mulesing or not, my point is the effect one group can have on our farming practice and the market for a product.

The younger generation is listening and it is up to us to inform them about how we are going about our farming. They want to know that we look after our animals; they want to know that they are treated humanely.

In my classroom of year six children, we recently had the discussion about palm oil being used in many of the products we eat and the detrimental affect logging was having on the environment of the orang-utans in Indonesia. Their environment is being destroyed to make way for plantations to provide palm oil for the many companies that use it in their products. Students in my class were going home and telling their parents that they were not going to eat certain products any more because they contained palm oil. Students were telling me that they check the back of the packets of food in the supermarket looking for palm oil and if it is a product they can buy. This is 11 and 12-year-old kids. They understand, and they take notice. That's why we need to share our message with them about how we farm sustainably and look after our environment as well, or else there will be no market for our product. The whole world is becoming more interested in our food production and it is up to us as farmers to let them know how we are farming this land.

At my school, St Paul's Anglican Grammar School, here in Warragul, I run along with a colleague, a kitchen garden program.

Many of you may have heard about the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program, where gardens are set up in schools and students learn how to grow and produce food that is healthy and chemical-free, and then how to cook it and share it together.

It has been a wonderful program that has not only helped students struggling academically at school, but it has raised awareness of food and what it is and how does it get to our plates. Children are learning about soil health, what fruit and vegetables grow best where and when, how to grow food, how to harvest it and how to eat it.

Children are trying foods at school that they would never eat at home. Some children would perhaps never be offered some of these foods at home. But they are going

home to parents now and telling them what they are eating and how to cook certain vegetables. They are going shopping with their parents and choosing what food to buy.

The younger generation are listening and learning and it is through education that we can teach them about farming and our environment.

I don't think we will ever knock over McDonalds but at least we can educate and inspire our younger generation to make a choice.

Every now and again I get sucked into buying McDonalds, and you know what? It tastes terrible and I always get a gut ache a couple of hours later.

However look at what the Angus Beef Society have done. Young people are now aware that they are eating Angus beef in their burgers. It's something definitely to ponder. It just doesn't sound the same saying: Do you want a Murray Grey Burger (which is what we breed on our property). Although I can say that our meat tastes better! And that's what we need to do. We need to promote our products, we need to tell the younger generation about how our food tastes and how we produce it. We need to inform them.

I have big plans for my school, many of which they don't know of yet. Through the Kitchen Garden Program I plan to set up an environmental and agricultural program where again I can teach students to think about their food, teach them to grow it, eat it and enjoy it.

We have started off with chooks, we now have two bunnies that I have managed to slip into my classroom and my next step perhaps will be a miniature goat to keep the weeds down in the garden.

I have also planned the poor orphaned lamb trick that nobody wants, so as a school we will just have to look after it. Of course, I don't need a goat in the garden, but it is a way of getting another animal there and showing the kids how a goat can benefit our garden and our environment.

Next will be a calf and before we know it we will have a farm operating on the oval. I plan to take over the focus on sport in our school and become an environmentally caring and self sufficient school.

I have not quite thought through the part where we slaughter and eat the cute little lamb and goat, but perhaps that is also part of the question about food production ... do we eat cute and cuddly animals too??

My plans are big, but our garden started with the question: Who wants to make a veggie garden out the back? Our garden now takes up a whole hillside of the school. My plan might happen, it might not, but if we don't dare to dream, if we don't take steps to show our young generation what we can do, what we can show them, then how are we going to inspire them to take care of our land and want to farm it?

It is clear to me that we need to encourage young people, we need to inform them, and we need them to question us and we need to show them how we can farm all sorts of products in environmentally friendly ways.

So how do we do this?

We share our stories with them, we educate them through our schools, we invite them to our farms, we offer our food and produce to them and then tell them all about it. And we also hand down our farms to our children and hope that we have inspired them enough to one day, after seeing the world, to come back to the farm.

I always joke with my husband that our daughter will not only inherit our farm but also our debt. But hopefully through her involvement on the farm she will want to carry on our practices and have a love of the environment and farming sustainably that we do. So what can you do?

Invite people to your farms to show them how you farm. Ask the local primary school to give you half an hour and show the kids what you produce and how you look after your environment. Sell your product at farmers markets. Share your knowledge with others. Join the different societies that support your product such as the Gippsland Murray Grey Group Breeders. Participate in days like this and gain knowledge and

network. Read and tell other's stories about your farm and your experience. Write to the local papers about the good work you are doing for the environment. Become a member of a 'Transition Town' which is a push to sell local produce in the local shops to protect our environment from carbon emissions from diesel fuel etc, and eat locally. Invite people over for dinner and find all the local products you can and feed it to them. Good food doesn't need to come from Queensland, you will probably find it right around the corner. Tell your retailer that you want local food. Look at Gaffney's in Warragul, a local fruit and veggie shop, and the advertisement that they put in the paper telling Warragul that they don't import apples from China and never will. Young people are listening and learning and if we show them our enthusiasm and passion for our products and the environment in which we work, change will happen. The norm will become eating our neighbours produce, perhaps even swapping produce. The norm might be choosing whether we are eating Murray Grey or Hereford tonight, or designing our meals around what produce we have in our gardens, not popping into Coles to get what we need and coming out with two bags full of things that are on special. We need to give the younger generation ownership of knowledge so that they can make informed decisions about their food and hopefully that will also inspire them to farm the land in a productive and environmentally friendly way. So the next time you see someone of the younger generation (which in my view is anyone younger than yourself!) have a chat and you never know what may come of it.....