

COMMENT

Getting those priorities right

By Ted Brown
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A Ted Bit

Every year for the past five years, The Sidekick and I have had a standing date the Friday after Labour Day. It's the Agricultural Education tent at Georgetown Fair.

Better known as the 'Ag-Ed' tent, the program is organized by fair board volunteers, as they set up numerous displays in the tent, to be used as a teaching device for Grade 3 students from local schools.

The tent has livestock of all sorts, including sheep, dairy cattle, alpacas, pigs, goats, donkeys, apple orchards, beekeeping and a great display of small farm implements to teach the kids about the various crops and seasons on the farm.

To say it's a massive project would be an understatement, as countless volunteers invest several days, setting up the tent, assembling pens and bringing in the animals, not to mention making sure they are fed and watered for the duration of the fair.

The Sidekick and I present the sheep display, giving the students an opportunity to learn the basics about sheep and lambs.

I have to admit, we get off pretty easy, compared to other presenters in the program.

We simply land in Friday morning, set up our display, which is provided by Ontario Sheep Marketing Agency (OSMA), and wait for the kids to arrive. The sheep for the display are already brought in, as our flock of sheep is biosecure, meaning it's a 'closed flock.' If they were to be on display with other animals at the fair, we can't take them back to the farm, as they could infect our animals at home.

Through the kind consideration of another local shepherd, the sheep are already there when we arrive. So it's pretty easy-peasy.

Other presenters don't have it that easy, and they must bring in their animals and be responsible for their welfare. It involves a lot of work and commitment, but all of the presenters do it, quite willingly, just for the comfort of knowing a group of students will have a much better concept of where their food comes from.

But when we arrived at the tent Friday morning, we learned there was a dramatic change of plans. There were virtually no kids. Instead of a dozen classes of Grade 3 students preparing to learn about agriculture, we had two classes. One from the Catholic board, the other from Halton Hills Christian School.

Apparently, the night before, the Ag-Ed organizer decided it might be a good idea to check with the schools, to confirm they'd be coming. She hadn't heard anything from them, and thought that was a bit strange.

To her dismay, she learned of the change of plan. The teachers and the public board of education are in the midst of contract negotiations, and as a result, extracurricular activities are on hold.

Translation: no school trips to the Ag-Ed tent. Now I know how unions and management work. I used to be in a union. I didn't always agree with my union, and occasionally, I actually ignored the union line.

Generally, any job action taken by management or the union is implemented for the sole purpose of putting pressure on the other side of the bargaining table, to bring about a settlement. I get it— that's labour negotiations.

But when a group of Grade 3 students are denied the opportunity to learn something new and fun, not to mention the efforts organizers have put into mounting the program— well ya gotta wonder about the priorities of those calling the shots.

Bottom line, the kids are impacted. I don't see a lot of sympathy for the teachers and their contract— especially among those volunteers who were standing in the Ag-Ed tent Friday morning.

I'm pretty sure the AG-Ed tent will be back next year, and The Sidekick and I, along with countless other presenters, will return to enjoy sharing our knowledge with the Grade 3 students.

I only hope the teachers and the board get their contract settled, between now and then.

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