

## Pork Promoter of the Year

### Wakefield Pork

For Wakefield Pork, the 2018 Pork Promoter of the Year, talking about pig farming and promoting pork products does not just serve their business but the whole industry.

“Steve and Mary have been promoting what we do for a long time and I think it slowly became ingrained in the culture,” Lincoln Langhorst said. “Some of our employees are now leading the effort on pork promotion. It’s in the culture to promote what you do and be proud of it, whether it’s telling your family, friends, or people across the country. Everybody can do something to promote pork and give pig farming a good name.”

That culture of promoting pig farming and pork began early on for Wakefield Pork.

“Steve’s great grand-father’s picture from when he raised pigs over 100 years ago hangs in our lobby,” Mary Langhorst said. “It gives us a reminder of the legacy that we uphold as pig farmers.”

Over the years, the Wakefield Pork team has participated in many pig farming and pork promotion events on the farm, in the community, and on social media. For Wakefield, opening the barn doors and talking about what they do was sparked when the pork industry’s biosecurity practices intensified.

“When we really started to focus on keeping disease out and ramped up biosecurity, something changed,” Mary said. “That was when I remember thinking; we’ve got to do something here. How do we keep that connection with consumers? How do we let them know what we are doing? How do we share that we are raising pork humanely.”

Lincoln’s personal experience having been away from the farm helped him see the need for promoting pork as he explained, “I lived in the metro area for 10 years. I remember when I was moving out of the metro back to the farm, my neighbor asked if my mom still rings the bell when it’s time for dinner. And they were serious! They weren’t being mean or trying to minimize it. That was their view of a pig farm.”

Mary added, “We would be lying if we didn’t feel like the activists provided extra motivation to advocate. We felt we had to defend ourselves and what we are doing.”

Those experiences showed Wakefield Pork that pig farming had a great story to tell and it was time to step up and share that story.

Wakefield has hosted many groups of consumer and influencers to their farm in an effort to show what happens on a farm.

“I remember the first tour and I was scared stiff,” Mary shared. “I kept thinking, ‘What are they going to think about what we do?’.”

Mary recalled having the author of *Living Skinny in Fat Genes*, Dr. Felicia Stoler on the first tour along with other dietitians, bloggers, and other renowned people. She was concerned about what kind of image they would take home.

“The anxiety before the first tour was probably the highest,” Lincoln added. “But the employees and their passion for what they do made it easy. It’s not too hard to share information when our people are in the barn explaining what they do and sharing how much they truly enjoy doing it.”

Bringing groups of people on farm tours does not come without situations where there may be tough questions or individuals that will not see the things the same way. Mary’s advice in those situations starts with respecting their opinions and listening.

“Respect their opinion and listen to what they have to say,” Mary said. “Talk about what you do and why you do it, and hopefully they can understand it’s what is best for the pig, our product, the consumer, our people, the community, and the environment. Sometimes we just have to be respectful of their opinion and their choice.”

“In those situations, it’s important we explain there are different ways to raise pigs and choice is okay,” Lincoln added. “This is the way we choose to do it and if you chose to buy a different product raised a different way, that’s okay. There’s choice out there and that’s probably the best way to get through the disagreement.”

Mary distinctly remembers a group that had a dietician from Texas on the tour. At the beginning of the tour, Wakefield was skeptical about how she was going to take in this experience because she had strong opinions. The Wakefield crew always tries to watch everybody in the group for their reaction. If it wasn’t positive, they go and talk to them and explain what is happening and why they are doing it. In this case, the dietician from Texas was crying.

“When I went up to her, I remember thinking, ‘Oh boy, this isn’t going to be good,’” Mary explained. “But I asked if there was something I could help her understand. She said to me, ‘Oh, Mary! It’s like a baby hospital. This is so cool and so overwhelming!’.”

Those moments of clarity are what can make the tours and promotion efforts worth it for Mary and Lincoln.

“For me, once you can see their wheels turn and it clicks that this field has manure on it, from the pigs raised in this barn that ate the corn or soybeans from that field, they understand the sustainability and see that we care about what we do; it feels like we did our job for the day,” Lincoln said.

Beyond bringing in groups of people to visit the farm, the whole Wakefield Pork team looks for new ways to enhance their advocacy and promotion of pork using multiple social media platforms, videos, and in-person interactions.

Wakefield Pork partnered with the National Pork Board to create a video for the Wegmans chain of grocery stores based in New York.

“Wegmans wanted a video they could show their employees what happens on a pig farm so then their employees could share with the consumer what they knew,” Mary remarked. “To me, that was a new avenue of trying to step up the game a little bit. It’s one way to share the pig farming story and reach people beyond Minnesota.”

Lincoln agreed when he said, "Getting our story to the people who can influence others is critical because we simply can't take everyone through a pig barn! But, getting to the right people through the use of videos and social media, they can help share our story."

While promoting pig farming and pork take time and effort, Mary sees the value it brings to Wakefield Pork. Mary's motto of, "What's fun, gets done," plays out when empowering and encouraging employees and growers to get involved in pork promotion.

The Wakefield team grills thousands of pork chops each year for community events, fundraisers and high school football tailgates. They visit elementary classrooms all the way to college classrooms. They partner with Hy-Vee and do Meet a Farmer events and Farm-to-Fork classes. Employees and interns volunteer at Oink Outings and the State Fair with the Minnesota Pork Board. Last year they donated 3 sows and their litters to different fairs and had employees volunteer their time with the sow.

Wakefield makes it a point to use any opportunity to talk about what they do. Steve, Mary and Lincoln encourage their employees and growers to be active members in the community and give back. Those interactions serve the community but also create a good image, not only for Wakefield pork but for all pig farmers.

Mary said, "We encourage giving back and joining different groups, taking leadership roles, or coaching positions. We chair different groups and just try to be good neighbors. Giving back shows we care."

Empowering and providing employees and growers with opportunities to promote and the resources to be successful is a priority for Wakefield. Resources like media training, PQA Plus sessions, and Operation Main Street help educate their people and make them better promoters and advocates no matter what situation they are in.

"It is rare an employee wouldn't be allowed to leave work for a promotion event, charity, or civic engagement. All of those things are very important and I think it promotes pork and our image in an indirect way that helps the communities. If everybody does a little something, the whole industry moves forward," Lincoln said.

Upon learning Wakefield Pork was selected as the Pork Promoter of the Year Lincoln said, "I'm most proud of our employees and our growers and the passion that they have to do what we do. I'm lucky enough to work with the people promoting the industry every day and see how a small group of people can help the whole industry. That's the greatest reward."

Mary added, "It's something Wakefield Pork does because it's what we think we should be doing for ourselves and the whole industry. It's truly and honor."