

## 2020 Pork Promoters of the Year – Dale & Lori Stevermer

Some may consider the 2020 Pork Promoters of the Year a 'Pork Promoting Power Team', but for Dale and Lori Stevermer, promoting pork and advocating on behalf of pig farmers is a lifelong passion they feel privileged to share with each other and their three kids, Brett, Adam, and Beth.

Growing up on farms in Southern Minnesota, Dale and Lori Stevermer have supported each other's engagement in the pork industry which has resulted in opportunities at the county, state, and national levels. Though there have been shared experiences over the years, Dale and Lori's leadership path has proved to be uniquely their own. With a young family at home, Dale first committed to supporting the industry through his six year involvement in the Faribault County Pork Producers serving as president during his tenure. Thereafter, he transitioned to the state level where he later served as president of the Minnesota Pork Board.

As their children grew older and Dale's service on the MPB began to sunset Lori became more involved at the state level by first serving on the Promotion and Image and Pork Congress committees. Lori brought a different perspective than many because she was able to combine her farming and exhibitor backgrounds, having worked the trade show in previous years with Wayne Feeds and Hubbard Feeds.

From there, Lori was nominated to run for a position on the Minnesota Pork Producers Association board of directors. Lori spent nine years on the MPPA board, serving two terms as president during her tenure. In 2019 Lori was elected to serve on behalf of Minnesota pork producers on the National Pork Producers Council board of directors.

Speaking to both of their involvement on the state boards, Lori says, "We were both passionate about the industry, knew the people, and knew we wanted it to continue and evolve. So, we jumped in and committed to partaking in it."

As leaders within the state and national organizations, Dale and Lori choose to lead by example and engage in promotion and image opportunities that align with their strengths and passions. **"If there is an opportunity to talk about what we do as farmers, or to clear up misconceptions, we want to do it,"** proclaims Dale. "We have an opportunity and responsibility to promote, but more than anything, it's an opportunity."

Throughout their involvement, the Stevermer's witnessed an evolution in events over the years. Instead of solely focusing on grilling, handing out samples, and answering elementary questions about pork, the ideology behind consumer-focused events shifted. Lori believes the primary reasoning for this shift was due to more targeted events, such as Oink Outings, where consumers have the opportunity to ask harder, more in-depth questions concerning farming practices and animal health.

During an Oink Outing event called the Open Streets of Minneapolis this past summer, Lori noted the prevalence of more open conversations. The environment welcomed a diverse group of people with challenging questions, which Lori gladly embraced. The change in promotion to more advocacy and image helps promote the industry along with the product.

“We’ve shifted from those true consumer events to more consumer education and image type events,” notes Lori. “I love the Oink Outings and getting the chance to have those conversations with consumers, not just on the nutrition and food preparation side, but getting into that deeper discussion about what we do as pig farmers.”

Oink Outings have proved to be an effective way to have in-depth conversations with many different types of people. “Seeing in someone’s eyes that their perception of pig farming has changed because of something we have shared is one of the most rewarding things we have experienced,” says Lori.

Though Dale and Lori’s involvement has proved to be personally fulfilling, one thing they are most proud of is the opportunities their involvement has afforded their entire family. Like many young families in agriculture, the Stevermer’s brought Brett, Adam, and Beth to events out of necessity. As the kids grew older, Dale and Lori recognized an appreciation in each of them for the opportunity to be engaged in the pork industry.

Each of the Stevermer kids competed in the Minnesota Pork Ambassador competition where Adam was selected as the first runner-up. Beyond the pork ambassador competition, engaging in events like Oink Outings, Mobile Marketing at the Minnesota State Fair, and the Health and Fitness Expo at Grandma’s Marathon has empowered Brett, Adam, and Beth to be more confident advocates for the pork industry.

Whether at the Minnesota State Fair or Grandma’s Marathon, Dale and Lori recognize the importance of shared values when engaging with consumers. Grandma’s Marathon has proved to be an annual favorite for the Stevermer Family to engage with peers to discuss the power of pork as a lean protein.

“Being a family of runners ourselves, we understand the people that are there, and their need for a higher protein that is nutritious. This event hits a market of people who we have seen a lot of appreciation from,” says Dale.

Many will recognize the Stevermer’s from public-facing marketing campaigns both at the state and national levels. From billboards to Minnesota Pork’s traveling trailer and from the Pig 3D project to the #RealPigFarming video featuring their family’s love for running, the Stevermer’s have been humbled to represent Minnesota pig farmers.

When reflecting on her engagement in the industry, Lori is proud of opportunities she has had to represent the pork industry in classrooms talking to kids about pork and pig farming. Her sweet spot lies in public speaking. She has spent a fair amount of time preparing materials and

presentations for local primary school culinary and agriculture classes organized through Operation Main Street – a national program consisting of volunteers who tell the pork industry’s story of innovation, quality, and stewardship.

Dale’s proudest moment promoting the industry occurred when he hosted Dr. Marilyn Wells, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs at Minnesota State University - Mankato, for a farm tour. She had never been on a farm before, so Dale took the initiative and invited her and her daughter out to the farm. The one-on-one interaction created an environment in which conversation flowed easily and questions were asked freely.

When it comes to promoting, Dale and Lori’s philosophy is to get involved with the things you feel strongly about.

“When you are involved with a business, industry, and collective group of associates, there’s an obligation to give back and volunteer,” states Lori. “Whether it’s your kid’s events, school events, or industry events, **there is a responsibility to be involved and figure out how to bring that next generation and group of leaders in.**”

Youth programs such as 4-H and involvement at their county fair have led the Stevermer’s to be great resources when it comes to all things ‘pigs’.

“We try to get out into our community and advocate where we can,” Dale notes. “We have become the pig reference people, which is a title we are happy to take on.”

One noteworthy initiative Lori and her daughter Beth partook in several years ago was called the Provider Pals program. This program paired farmers with inner-city classrooms in the Metro area for an entire school year. During the year, the third-fifth graders would write questions about the farm, chores, and a typical day on the farm.

At the end of the year, Lori and Beth visited the classroom and met the students. Not only did this provide a great experience for Beth – to learn that not everyone understands agricultural concepts and what seems to be common knowledge – but it created an opportunity for the students to gain firsthand knowledge of farming practices from farmers themselves.

The Stevermer’s greatest reward from promoting is having an impact, especially when it comes to the “movable middles”. They believe if you can get your story to this group of people first, and have them walk away having learned something favorable, that’s important and a win. Many people are unaware of pig farming practices, so informing them firsthand is a great opportunity which Dale and Lori don’t take for granted.

Communicating the proper cooking temperature of 145 degrees Fahrenheit is one of Dale and Lori’s favorite talking points, along with sharing how great of a protein pork is.

“I love to watch people grab a sample, take a few steps, then turn around and ask why it tastes so good,” Dale says. “So many consumers think it’s the seasoning we’re using, when in reality, it’s just because we’re cooking it to the right temperature to make it tender and juicy.”

In regard to more image-based topics, dispelling myths and notions about corporate farming takes the cake for their favorite talking point.

Lori offers, “We enjoy bringing to light the parallels between small businesses and family farms. Many local businesses are family-owned and have multiple generations, just like farms. We experience many of the same opportunities and challenges. **When we can find shared values as business owners, and more importantly as people, we can then begin to cultivate relationships and dispel myths.**”

As pig farmers, Dale states the unique aspect of raising a protein that makes up the main portion of a meal. The majority of what is grown in Minnesota, referring to corn and soybeans, doesn’t directly end up on consumer’s plates, whereas livestock does. Showing consumers the pride farmers have for creating such a wholesome protein, while expressing the care given to livestock and the steps taken on the farm to make sure it is safe for them, is vitally important.

When asked how they encourage others to get involved, Lori advises to “find your niche and get involved.” If people have questions about how to get involved, she hopes they would reach out to a pig farmer they know or spend time with someone who is already doing it and ask questions. She notes, “It is important to step up and volunteer.”

“We always say that if we can do it, anyone can do it,” Dale states. “I hope we inspire others to realize all you have to do is be yourself when promoting. We are just us, and we promote at the events that speak to us, our lifestyle, and what we like to do.”

Dale’s ultimate goal as a pork promoter is for farmers to continue to have the right to produce. “It is important for people to know what is going on behind closed barn doors. We have a responsibility to remain environmentally sound and do the right things. We need to have the dialogue with consumers for them to understand what we do and where their food comes from while reassuring them we are taking good care of our animals, using our resources responsibly, and being respectful of our neighbors.”