

## Bridging the Gap

It is no secret that there is a disconnect between the rural and the urban population. As more people move to the city and fewer farms remain in operation, the gap continues to grow. Urban dwellers often don't see where their food comes from, and many have only a limited level of knowledge concerning the process of getting food from the farm to the dinner table.

Anti-farming sentiments, especially regarding the raising of livestock, are becoming more widespread. This is evident in the media and may in part even be caused by it. Recently, the film *Percy* came under fire for its almost heroic portrayal of Saskatchewan farmer Percy Schmeiser, who became caught in a legal battle against Monsanto for growing patented canola seed without paying for it. Even though the court had ruled that Percy was at fault and had knowingly grown Monsanto's seed, he became a popular face for the anti-GMO movement. Another film, *Cowspiracy*, focuses on factory farming, and argues that the meat industry is killing the planet. These productions, like many others, give a negative, sensationalist, and extremely one-sided view of agriculture. With these kinds of sources becoming so prevalent, it is no surprise that consumers buy into their claims, and this only increases the rift between farmers and the general public.

So how do we fix this? Unfortunately, as is the case with most difficult questions, there is no simple answer. However, there are a few key places to start, and all of them involve education and open communication. There is no better place to achieve these than in the classroom. Starting young is important, given that childhood is when people begin to form their own ideas about the world. Providing education to kids about what agriculture is and why it is necessary is an important stepping stone for shaping their perspectives on agriculture. Taking kids on tours through actual farms and giving them hands-on lessons about crops, animals, technology, etc. will enhance their understanding of agriculture and hopefully generate more interest on the subject in the future.

While including more agricultural education in schools is important, it alone cannot bridge the rural-urban divide. Targeting older age groups is just as important, since these are the consumers that ultimately receive the products generated by agricultural practices. Again, positive relationships can only be built through communication. Social media is an excellent tool to accomplish this. While it is a medium through which a great deal of misinformation is spread to the general public, social media does give producers a way to correct the very problem it helps generate. In the past decade, YouTube has become a popular place for farmers and ranchers to share their daily routines and farming practices. Millennial Farmer and Laura Farms are a few of many popular channels creating engaging content that documents the ups and downs of agriculture. Being open about what life on the farm is like, plus interacting with people in the comments and answering questions, helps contribute to better relationships.

While posting pictures on Instagram and uploading videos to YouTube are certainly steps in the right direction, nothing beats an in-person farm visit. This is what makes events like Open Farm Days and Breakfast on the Dairy so important. They give consumers a chance to visit

farms, learn about them, and support their local producers directly. It's hard for people to deny that producers care about the welfare of their animals, or the quality of their crops, when they can see it for themselves. Oftentimes, critics of certain practices don't fully understand the reasoning behind them. For example, the application of pesticides and the separation of dairy calves from cows at birth are two highly debated topics. Nobody can better explain the thought processes behind these practices than the very producers who use them.

It's all well and good for producers to offer up all this information, but a positive relationship cannot form if it is one sided. Consumers must be willing to listen and learn. Most people will argue that they don't have the time or desire to do in-depth research. Those who do conduct research don't always get their information from reputable sources, which isn't helped by the lack of trust they may have in farmers and in large agricultural corporations. So for the people out there who have questions about agriculture, disagree with certain practices, or even those who rarely consider the source of their next meal, I challenge you to look deeper. Question what that non-GMO certified label actually means or why you believe organic produce is better, and ask a rancher what they're doing to lower their carbon footprint if it's something you're curious about. Be aware of companies that claim to be more environmentally friendly to sell more products and of activists who paint producers as the enemy. It might seem idealistic, but if farmers, ranchers, and their urban neighbours keep an open mind and an open heart, positive relationships are certainly attainable. Striving to be more understanding of one another and being willing to talk is the only way to build a more sustainable future.