

# Young Farming Champions

*Since its inception 10 years ago, the Young Farming Champions program has trained more than 100 people to promote agriculture to young people.*

STORY MANDY McKEESICK

At Burwood Girls High School in Sydney students are excitedly awaiting a farmer. Many will be imagining an older white male, so when 31-year-old Sam Wan breezes through the door, preconceptions and stereotypes fly straight out the window. Sam is young. She is female. And she is one of them. As a first-generation Chinese-Australian born in the western suburbs of Sydney, Sam's own stereotypical career path may have been a doctor or lawyer, but she has found her calling as a wool broker in Melbourne, and her enthusiasm for the industry is infectious.

Sam is a Young Farming Champion (YFC) – one of a cohort of brilliant youth ambassadors trained since the program started in 2010. They aim to create positive perceptions of Australian agriculture, showcase the plethora of careers and become role models and leaders. Since its inception, the YFC program has trained over 100 people, all of whom are pursuing careers in agriculture and advocating on behalf of the industry. They have visited 400 schools, connected with 300,000 students and engaged with countless numbers of people in the general community. As they

continue to gain experience, the YFCs become leaders in their own right.

The program invites expressions of interest from young people and chooses those showing leadership potential for a two-year program. In the first year, training revolves around polishing presentation skills, consumer insights, dealing with the media and navigating the often difficult questions surrounding agriculture's social licence. In the second year, these skills are taken to school students through The Archibull Prize, where connections are made to bridge the urban-rural divide. "The Archibull Prize >



*Young Farming Champion Sam Wan (at right) discusses the wool supply chain with students from Irrawang High School, Raymond Terrace, NSW.*

## E D U C A T I O N



Wagga Wagga vet and Young Farming Champion Dione Howard.

gives students the opportunity to interact with aspects of agriculture they might generally not be exposed to, and these are opportunities I wish I had at high school," Sam says. "It's an incredible experience seeing the enthusiasm, curiosity and potential in the next generation."

YFC founder Lynne Strong has long been a loud and proud advocate of Australian farming, although her journey to agricultural enlightenment took a somewhat winding path. "I grew up on a farm but had preconceived ideas that farming was neither a profitable business nor one I saw myself involved with," she says. She trained as a pharmacist and it was not until she returned to the family dairy farm at Jamberoo, on the NSW South Coast, in 2001 that agriculture came back into her life. "Looking into the industry I was amazed at the innovation and technology in use and quickly realised how important it was for farming to reconnect with consumers who were increasingly more interested in the people who produced their food and fibre. I wanted

to identify and nurture young people in agriculture who were willing, and had the capacity and capability, to be the face for farming in the community."

For example, 27-year-old Tim Eyes and his partner Hannah run The Food Farm on the NSW Central Coast, where grass-fed cows run alongside free-range chickens and organic vegetables. Tim uses a range of methods to connect with his consumers – from field days on the farm and regular social media updates to taking his message to the Sydney Royal Easter Show as the glamping host. "Connecting with consumers is the final frontier for farmers to gain trust, respect and long-term loyalty, and making these connections on farm and in the public arena is a true honour," Tim says. "No matter what background a visitor to the farm has, we find everyone has a keen interest in getting on the land and engaging with our food and the soil it's grown in. This is something as a farmer I take for granted but it seems to be instinctual for humanity."

YFC alumni are supported to continue

their education and agricultural research and are encouraged to step up to industry challenges, and nominate for national awards. Dan Fox, 28, is a fifth-generation farmer from the Murrumbidgee district of southern NSW who won the 2018 award for Excellence in Innovation at the Kondinin/ABC Rural Australian Farmer of the Year Awards for his work transitioning the family farm from a traditional mixed sheep and cropping enterprise to continuous cropping using regenerative agriculture. He has the smarts to be an astrophysicist yet put his brain to work on the farm. "Winning a national award for innovation is very humbling," Dan says. "Australian farmers are some of the most innovative in the world, driven by the unique challenges we face growing food on one of the driest continents."

In 2018, YFC alumni formed the Youth Voices Leadership Team, with the aim of not only supporting new YFCs but providing a youthful voice to community, media and industry. Agronomist Emma

Ayliffe, 28, of Griffith, and veterinarian Dione Howard, 25, of Wagga Wagga, are two who have stepped up to this leadership position. "We are the future of agriculture and therefore it is up to us to influence the shape of that future," Emma says. "I've had some wonderful opportunities in agriculture and this is a way to give back to the amazing people I work with and to become a role model for those who will follow."

Similarly, Dione believes in giving back. "My dad loves to say, 'The world is run by the people who show up,' and both he and my mum have taught me how important it is to show up, work hard and do great things for your community," Dione says. "I'm part of a very inspiring team of young people who show up for agriculture every day and who I am confident will lead it to a bright future."

Young Farming Champions  
0407 740 446  
[www.youngfarmingchampions.com](http://www.youngfarmingchampions.com)



2018 winner of the award for Excellence in Innovation at the Kondinin/ABC Rural Australian Farmer of the Year Awards Dan Fox (left) with his grandad Bun, dad David and mum Cathie.