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Texas Brigades Builds Young Leaders; Ranch Brigade To Start

By Colleen Schreiber

SAN ANTONIO — The Texas Brigades program, started almost 21 years ago, has proudly graduated just over 2000 cadets. This year, yet one more opportunity awaits young people.

The Ranch Brigade, the fifth camp to be born within the Texas Brigades family, focuses on sustainable beef production from conception to consumer. The inaugural camp is set for July 31 to August 4 at Camp Buckner in Burnet.

Dr. Dale Rollins, Extension Wildlife Specialist with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, is the founder of the Brigades program. The idea for Brigades came about as a way to expand Extension's educational efforts by developing wildlife ambassadors. Their mission is "to educate and empower youths with leadership skills and knowledge in wildlife, fisheries, and land stewardship to become conservation ambassadors for a sustained natural resource legacy."

The Rolling Plains Bobwhite Brigade was the first camp; it began in 1993. The East Texas Bobwhite Brigade (which became the Feathered Forces) was added in 1995, the South Texas Bobwhite Brigade in 1998, the South Texas Buckskin Brigade in 2000, and the North Texas Buckskin Brigade in 2002. The Bass Brigade and Waterfowl Brigade were added in 2004 and 2012, respectively, and now the spotlight is on the Ranch Brigade.

"We're excited about Ranch Brigades because it gives us a whole new audience and one more venue to develop young community leaders," says Helen Holdsworth, executive director of Texas Brigades.

"Most of the kids we get are 'hook and bullet' kids, kids who hunt and fish. We also get youth interested in conservation or the environment, but there are kids who may only be interested in agriculture or livestock production; Ranch Brigades may be the answer for them."

Organizers of Ranch Brigade, however, hope their camp will not only interest the rural kids but the urban kids who are most likely one or two generations removed from the land and who know little if anything about land stewardship, livestock production, and feeding the nation and the world.

Holdsworth is part of the glue that holds the Brigades program together, though she takes none of the credit. Like so many,

she was bitten when she volunteered back in 1997 as a “covey leader.”

“God smiled on me. I met Rollins, and that was the end,” she says tongue-in-cheek. “I’ve been the executive director since 2002, but I started as a volunteer. The success of this program was built by the volunteers. We have 150 dedicated professionals who volunteer their time to put their blood, sweat and tears into this program. They make it what it is.”

Many of the volunteers have been with the program for 15 years or more. There are a handful of volunteers who started with the original Rolling Plains Bobwhite Brigade more than 20 years ago and are still hooked today. What keeps them hooked?

“I think they would tell you that it’s working with these young people and being able to pass on their knowledge and their passion. Then they get to see these young people pick up the torch and carry it forward. That’s the real reward,” she insists.

It was that way for Chris Farley, the instigator of the newest Ranch Brigade. Farley, who is an instructor in the TCU Ranch Management Program, noticed that some of the kids in the Ranch Management Program had better communication and leadership skills compared to some of their cohorts. When he questioned them, he learned that they had attended the Rolling Plains Bobwhite Brigade camp.

“That’s when I decided I needed to find out more about this program,” Farley says. “I wanted to understand why these kids were so different when it came to leadership and communication skills.”

That led him to volunteer as a “covey leader” at Bobwhite Brigade.

“I went into it not knowing anything, and at the end of those 4.5 days I was blown away,” says Farley. “It was one of the most well-oiled machines I’ve ever been a part of. These kids start out in a cocoon and they develop into a butterfly; when they leave here they are changed individuals. I was also one of those changed individuals,” he insists.

The next thing he knew he was approaching Rollins and Holdsworth about starting a Ranch Brigade focusing on land stewardship from the beef family perspective. A committee was formed and they were off and running.

The model for all of the camps is the same, Holdsworth says, and it has not changed over the 20-plus years.

“It’s hands-on; it’s intense; it’s challenging, and those things will never change,” she says.

More technology is incorporated today, however. Whereas it once was slide shows, Polaroid cameras, markers and pictures cut

out of magazines, today it's powerpoints and digital cameras. They have not, however, gone so far as to relax their rules about certain technologies. Cell phones, iPads, iPods, and the like are all prohibited.

Camp committees meet several times during the year to work on scheduling and curriculum and updating of the curriculum when needed. The basics of habitat management are always covered, including plant identification and habitat evaluation techniques. Staying current and relevant, Holdsworth says, is also important. Utilizing new technology, such as GIS mapping, and new techniques like net gunning, help youth understand modern wildlife management.

Insofar as Ranch Brigades, the original thought was to focus on livestock, but then the committee realized the topic was much too broad, and they reasoned and hoped that maybe one day someone might want to start one for sheep and goats or one for equine. In fact, Holdsworth says just recently someone approached her about starting one for veterinary science.

Part of the instruction, Farley says, will be about agriculture illiteracy.

"Too many kids don't have a comprehension of food production, and fewer understand how forage is converted to beef and all the moving parts that go on in between with respect to land stewardship and sustainability," Farley says.

Like the other brigade camps, the focus is not on classroom lectures. Rather, it will be fast-paced and hands-on.

"There will be short 15 to 20 minute lectures, but then we might brand something or vaccinate something," Farley says.

On arrival the kids will jump right into a full necropsy of a beef animal.

"They'll spend the first two or three hours inside that cow to learn what makes a cow a cow; what makes it different from a deer or a goat. They'll learn why a cow has four stomachs," says Farley.

Then instruction shifts to the land, starting from the bottom and working from the soil up. They'll learn about healthy soils and what makes them so; they'll learn about water conservation and how water is and will continue to be one of the most challenging issues facing society.

That builds into forages, plant identification and stocking rates, then back to the animal, to low-stress cattle handling, animal health issues and how and why that falls right in with cattle handling.

They'll learn about livestock nutrition, and there will be a discussion on implants and other hot-button issues that are on the

beef industry's radar.

Shifting from the live animal to the carcass, the kids will participate in a fabrication demonstration.

"We'll break down a complete carcass so that they learn that not all beef is rib-eye steaks and sold for \$6 a pound.

"The Brigade motto really sums it up," Farley says. "Tell me and I forget; show me and I remember, involve me and I understand. That in a nutshell is what we'll be doing with these kids."

Cadets will also learn the beef nutrition story and learn about today's consumer.

To give as many kids as possible the opportunity to participate, they are limited to one camp per summer. Many of the kids have, however, attended two or more of the brigade camps over the course of four years, and by this next summer Holdsworth expects that at least several youngsters will have attended four of the five camps.

Graduates are incentivized to return home to spread the message and tell their stories through the "early bird program." Kids who give at least 10 programs by November 1 are rewarded with a hunting or fishing trip or outdoor experience. A program could be a powerpoint presentation to the Kiwanis Club or it might be setting up their tri-fold at the county fair. It could also be helping a landowner develop a wildlife management plan.

"There are lots of different opportunities, because we know that not every kid is going to go out and give speeches," says Holdsworth.

Then in March, graduates are asked to send in a report, a Book of Accomplishments, of all the work they've done. The reports are evaluated by the camp committee, and the top four to six kids are awarded college scholarships and invited to come back as assistant leaders the following summer.

Holdsworth, who has been collecting data on camp participants for the last 10 years, finds that about 60 percent of the kids follow through by doing a few programs and a third of them go full-out.

However, the leaders all say that it's not so much about mining all the gold as it is about finding one or two gold nuggets. Rollins likens it to the age-old story about the young boy who is walking along the beach, throwing stranded starfish back into the water one at a time. Someone comes along and asks what he's doing.

"I'm throwing these starfish back into the water so they'll live," the young boy says.

“Son, you can’t really think you’re going to make a difference to the starfish population by doing this,” the passerby remarks.

“I am to this one,” he replies.

“We focus on individuals,” Rollins reiterates. “We empower them with team building skills, public speaking skills and critical thinking skills, skills that, in my opinion, are not stressed in public schools.”

Holdsworth also reminds that their goal is not to develop wildlife biologists or ranch managers but to empower young people to be community leaders.

“Maybe they’re not all out there carrying the banner and talking about water and soils and wildlife conservation; maybe they’re talking about education for kids or health care.

“We hope that they’ll be conservation leaders,” she continues, “but really, it’s about the life skills and the belief that they can go out and make a difference.”

Rollins agrees, but he points out, too, that today’s kids are going to face a lot tougher natural resource-related decisions than this generation is facing. A burgeoning population ensures that.

“We’re building leaders — future decision makers. While they’re in the boot, we might not see anything, but down the road, when their seedheads emerge, maybe something related to conservation impacts their lives and they take a stance or a different approach because of something they learned from Brigades.”

Rollins lauds the many volunteers and youths who have helped forge the success of the Brigades over the past 20 years. He often quotes a Chinese proverb: “One generation plants the tree and another enjoys the shade.”

“We’re in the business of planting trees,” he said.

A \$400 fee covers meals, lodging and supplies.

“We don’t want money to be a barrier,” Holdsworth says. “We encourage applicants to go out in their community and ask for donations. We find that many of the kids are successful in raising their entire fee, but we also have donors who give us money to be used for the kids who need help.”

Applications for all Brigade camps are now being accepted through March 15. More information is available at www.texasbrigades.com or by contacting Holdsworth or Kassi Scheffer at (855) TXBRIGS or by e-mail at hholdsworth@texas-wildlife.org or kscheffer@texas-wildlife.org.

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