City meets country

BY MATEA TUHTAR
"Our biggest hurdle we’re seeing is that there is a big disconnect between agriculture and food – especially with kids now, because they might be generations away from agriculture. We’re here to bring that gap and give them a fun, hands-on experience while teaching them that farmers are the reason we can all eat.”

- Kristen Matwychuk, Discovery Centre coordinator

If you sleep with a blanket, pillow or a duvet, in a house with insulation, paint and a cement foundation - thank a farmer. If you rode in a vehicle, took care of a pet, played sports, wore clothes, or used soap, toothpaste, or makeup, or any other product that is made from plant and animal materials – thank a farmer. And if you had a meal today, thank a farmer.

In fact, the world will need 60% more food by 2050. That’s another three billion people that will need to be fed, and according to the Bruce D Campbell Farm and Food Discovery Centre, Canadian farmers will help fill that demand.

“Our biggest hurdle we’re seeing is that there is a big disconnect between agriculture and food – especially with kids now, because they might be generations away from agriculture,” says Kristen Matwychuk, coordinator at the Discovery Centre. “We’re here to bring that gap and give them a fun, hands-on experience while teaching them that farmers are the reason we can all eat.”

Located at the Glenlea Research Station in Glenlea, MB, the center was built 6 years ago to be a resource for the general public, school groups and industry – anyone who wants to know more about where their food comes from. The Glenlea station is operated by the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences at the University of Manitoba and covers 500 hectares of land including livestock facilities, dairy pastures and plot areas for Plant Science, Soil Science and Entomology.

“So that’s how we can go into the dairy barn, and look into the hog barn and get up close to the animals,” explains Matwychuk.

“We typically see students between Grade 3 and Grade 10, and Grade 10’s are one of our biggest targets because they do the Food from the Land unit in Geography. So our Farm to your Fork program was tailored to match that exactly,” says Matwychuk, adding that the tour can be matched to any age level.

The students’ day runs from 10am-2pm. The students start their day with a guided tour of the center where they check out interactive exhibits that lead them from the farmer’s field to the kitchen table. From there they move into a viewing area where they can look into a real working hog barn and learn about hog farming in the province, including the need for safety measures such as disinfecting workers’ clothes and shoes, and the use of respiratory masks.

Lunch is eaten at the centre and the program’s food component involves the kids making baked goods from locally produced ingredients. “Today we’re making pumpkin muffins, and so our flour is from Elie, and we’re using Manitoba Harvest hemp hearts and Manitoba eggs. We try to keep it as local as possible, and our main goal is to show students these different foods and how they’re grown and how they can make something healthy out of these components. We do add chocolate chips to make it delicious!”

Baking is followed by a wagon ride to the dairy barn – a favorite activity for the students, though some are shocked by how smelly a barn is in real life. For some, this is the first time they’ve been exposed to a farm environment. “We have layer hens in the barn, and they get up and close with the chickens and the cows, and see the pigs. Kids are often surprised when they see how large a farm hog is. They might imagine a pig like Babe, so when they see an 800lb boar it’s a shock.”

The researchers at the station study how to best house farm animals and keep them, and the workers safe. The center shows how animals are raised in agriculture in Manitoba, which might be different from what the kids imagine, or see in cartoons and movies.

“Almost every day I get surprising questions from students, like ‘you thought of that! Some adults wouldn’t think of that.‘ So it’s really great to see them engaged and interested.”

When working with Grade 10 students, Matwychuk also makes sure to talk about some of the controversial topics in agriculture. “Some people are afraid of GMO’s or pesticides, or hormones and antibiotics. Our whole goal here is not to sway the kids one way or another but to show them science based facts, and remind them to be critical of any information they may come across.”

Often the agricultural information that students might find on social media is based on the United States, which has completely different standards compared to Canada. “It can be hard to tell sometimes, but we’re miles away in every way.

So having those conversations is important – if you see something it’s easy to be afraid, but do some more research and you might find something different. We encourage them to question us as well and use those critical thinking skills.”

The center works closely with Agriculture in the Classroom (www.aitc.mb.ca) and Matwychuk likes to show a careers video they’ve created to the Grade 10 students in particular. “They may not be thinking of their future yet, but agriculture is the 3rd largest employer in Canada, and employment opportunities are growing every year. And it’s so much more than just being a farmer. There are so many jobs you can have in agriculture; the possibilities are amazing.”

The center is in the process of upgrading a lot of their displays with new interactive touch screens and a virtual reality headset that will take viewers into a cattle pasture.

“We get good feedback. We get schools coming back every year, and more and more people are becoming aware of us. We’re trying to reach out to schools as an extra resource to add to what the students are already learning.”

The cost for the Discovery center tour ranges from $8.50 to $9.50 a person, and free for teachers. For more info visit: http://umanitoba.ca/afs/discoverycentre/