

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE

For the week of: April 25, 2011

American Farm Bureau Federation

Universal Leadership Lessons

By Cyndie Sirekis

About 500 attendees participated in the Farm Bureau National Women's Leadership Conference, held recently in Baltimore, Md. "Changing Perceptions, Unlimited Possibilities," the theme of the conference, captures the essence of why Farm Bureau women made the commitment to attend: to learn techniques for changing perceptions about agriculture and women who are involved in it.

Several presentations at the conference drove home points with universal appeal to farmers and ranchers, as well as volunteer leaders of all types.

Going home with one useful idea = success. Terry Gilbert, chair of the AFB Women's Leadership Committee, said if every attendee was able to take home one useful idea from the conference and implement it, she would consider that a success. Further, she challenged each attendee to "meet and get to know at least 10 people to further expand the network of women involved in agriculture."

You can work your way up. Patricia Langenfelder, Maryland Farm Bureau president, described how she got her start in Farm Bureau by participating in a county Women's Leadership Program. Starting as a volunteer at the county level, she learned about the organization from the ground up and sharpened her leadership skills, advancing to serve farmers in Maryland in addition to representing the Northeast region on the American Farm Bureau Federation board of directors.

All kinds of leaders are needed. "We need more women serving in leadership positions in Farm Bureau," American Farm Bureau Federation President Bob Stallman told conference attendees. Noting that there are four generations of Americans in the workplace today for the first time in history, he encouraged more seasoned members to help younger people figure out what leadership roles to pursue in Farm Bureau. Sharing stories about farming and ranching is a valuable type of leadership in itself and "many of the leading voices in this today are women," Stallman said.

Resources are out there, you just need to reach out for them. Nearly 60 small-group workshops and mini-sessions allowed attendees to interact with presenters and covered a broad range of topics such as health and safety, working with the media, answering tough questions and communicating effectively and financial planning.

Updates on why rural development should matter to women and Farm Bureau grassroots advocacy were also provided as well as program updates on agricultural literacy, Food Check-Out Week, Farm-City Week and National Ag Day. A lighthearted refresher on how to avoid gaffes when dining in a formal setting was also presented at the conference.