

The Beingessner Award for Excellence in Writing

The National Farmers Union (NFU) would like to congratulate Marion Studhalter (age 15) of Blyth, Ontario, and Rachel Robertson (age 17) of Paisley, Ontario, who are the winners of the Beingessner Award for Excellence in Writing.

The Beingessner Award is part of the NFU Youth's Campaign for New Farmers, and is given to the authors (age 21 years and under) of the best 500-1000 word essay on agriculture and food issues in Canada. There are two age categories – 15 and under, and ages 16 to 21. The winner from each age category is awarded a prize of \$500. The theme of this year's essay was "Co-ops: An Exercise in Democracy".

The Beingessner Award is named after Paul Beingessner of Truax, Saskatchewan, who passed away in the spring of 2009 in a tragic farm accident. Paul was born on April 26, 1954, and returned to the family farm after obtaining his BA (Hon) in Psychology in 1976 and working with youth in Regina for a few years. Described as the "god-father of modern shortline railways" by former NFU President Stewart Wells, Paul was instrumental in the founding of Saskatchewan's first shortline railway, Southern Rails Co-operative, and served as general manager from 1991 to 1997. When he left Southern Rails, he stayed on as a board member, and worked with the Ministry of Highways Short Line Advisory Unit supporting other efforts of farmers to start shortline railways. Since 1991, Paul wrote a weekly column on farming and transportation issues with a social justice focus featured in papers across Western Canada. After leaving the government in 1999, his expertise on transportation issues resulted in consulting work across Western Canada and the United States. Beingessner also served as a Saskatchewan Wheat Pool Delegate from 1996 to 1998, and was an ardent supporter of the CWB and ran for the position of director in 2008.

Co-ops: An Exercise in Democracy

—by Marion Studhalter (age 15), Blyth, Ontario

Our modern lifestyles demand more rights and freedom of speech. In Canada specifically, we repeatedly hear about our rights as citizens to have the freedom of speech and the right to make decisions. Democracy is built on the foundation that everybody has the right to represent their idea in government. We tend to call this one "practice of our democratic rights". The logic that we have a say in how things are handled has been adopted to apply to the basic everyday needs and services of people. Co-operatives exercise democracy. They reflect our rights as individuals and operate similar to democracy found in government systems.

Growing up, my family farm has always been the latter in decisions made by the loops we were part of. Our operation of 2000 pigs was small, it was too over-see-able and could not compete with immense farms within the loop. We made a living off the minimum and always received minimum rights and freedom. When decisions were made on the regulations for housing, feeding and handling the animals, the large scale operations would be the ones consulted first who would only think of the benefit it would provide for them. As an example, my family was

part of a loop that had regulations on where you buy your feed, when the piglets have to be tattooed and vaccinated, and where you buy the replacement stock. This limited the freedom of how we farmed and it became extremely hard to compete with the income of our operation. The larger farms with extra employees could apply these regulations and always provided a profit to the loop. It was not long till we were literally kicked out of the loop for not being beneficial.

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Photo: Huron Local President Tony McQuail (left) and Huron Local Director Thea Trick (right) present Marion Studhalter (center) with her Beingessner Award.



In a co-operative, this would not have happened. Co-operatives provide equality, meaning no matter the size of the operation and its profit members have an equal say in the decisions and application of regulations. In these organizations you must be a member to receive the benefits, and everyone has the same benefits. No matter how much profit they provide, or how many shares the members have, each member has an equal say in decision making. This can easily be compared to the democratic government system in Canada, where every citizen, no matter how rich or famous has the same voting right as any other citizen.

Another thing that is different from the loop is that a co-operative cannot remove the membership of the member for not being “beneficial”. The same can be said in a democracy: citizens cannot be stripped of their citizenship for being wealthy. In both systems, there are consequences for abusing the by-laws and laws that are established. This proves that democracy and co-operatives both exercise equal rights within their system.

This leads to the fact that co-operatives are not owned by a single person. As previously stated, everybody has a say when decisions need to be made. The Canadian government is not owned by a single person, or ruled by a single party, as a dictatorship: the government is run by only the citizens. Since a democracy needs to meet the needs of more people, there are members of parliament that are voted in to represent the people of political locations. In a co-op there is no need for representatives, but there is a Board of Directors who do the administration parts within a co-operative. One further point, anyone can become a member, if they pay the membership fee. The same goes for democracy - anyone can become a citizen, as long as they pass the citizenship test and

meet the criteria. This also means that as a citizen of a democracy you can be in the government and as a member of a co-op you can be on the Board of Directors.

To help explain this concept, my family is a member of the Ontario Goat Co-operative, where they paid a membership and administration fee to become a member. As a member we can sell our milk to the co-operative and get a fair price for the milk. The amount of milk we can ship depends on how many shares we have in the co-op. All the milk producers in the co-operative sell their milk at the same price. Also, they hold meetings throughout the year to discuss production and marketing methods. At these meetings, by-laws or regulations can be passed if the majority of the members present agree. To continue, if my parents wanted to, they could run to be a director in the Board of Directors. Like a government election in Canada, the members present at the general meeting vote for the directors. As analyzed previously, democracy in Canada and co-operatives have many similarities and their philosophies overlap. All the people who are part of the system have a right to vote and be part of the administration.

In conclusion, co-operatives exercise democracy in Canada. We are very fortunate to have found a way to practice democracy and make it visible in our day-to-day lives. Co-operatives give family farms the opportunity to survive the pressure of the economy and compete with the industry-focused farms. Co-ops provide more rights to farms and allow a community to form that includes voting to make decisions. These systems mirror the democratic government of Canada and should continue to do so.

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The Paul Beingessner Award for Excellence in Writing

Award Criteria and Details:

- There will be two age categories – 15 years and under, and 16 years to 21 years. An award in the amount of \$500 will be awarded to one essay in each age category for a non-fiction letter or essay 500-1000 words in length.
- Your essay should deal with the topic “*What should governments do to help tomorrow’s farmers succeed?*” You may create your own title.
- Deadline for entries is October 15, 2013.
- The prizes of \$500.00 will be awarded at the NFU Convention in November 2013.
- All or some entries may be published by the National Farmers Union.
- Send entries to the National Farmers Union: By email: nfu@nfu.ca, or by mail to: National Farmers Union, 2717 Wentz Ave., Saskatoon, SK, S7K 4B6. (We will confirm that we received your email submission within a week. If you do not get a confirmation email, please resend your entry or phone the office at (306) 652-9465).



Co-ops: An Exercise in Democracy

—by Rachel Robertson (age 17), Paisley, Ontario

Co-operative. What does the word mean? The first time one hears it they might think it has something to do with a group of people co-operating to get a job done. And they would be mostly right. The Oxford Dictionary refers to a co-operative as: “*noun*: A farm, business, or other organization which is owned and run jointly by its members, who share the profits or benefits. *adj.*: Involving mutual assistance in working towards a common goal.” This means that instead of a group of business men sitting around a big table making decisions about the direction in which a crop or business will go, the farmers and people involved in growing or producing can make those decisions. It cuts out the middle person. The person who buys or produces the product can be directly involved in its distribution and profit. There are many such organizations and businesses all over the world. Worldwide there are almost one billion members who have ownership of a co-operative. In Ontario alone there are approximately 1,300 co-operatives functioning in over 400 rural areas, towns and cities.

One might think, “How does that affect *me*? I don’t care.” The fact is it does. Co-operatives bring the production and decision making onto home soil. Instead of someone far away making the decisions about what you buy in your local grocery store, it could be the man down the road or that woman who walks right by your door on her way to work every morning helping to make those decisions. Another question a person might have could be something along the lines of, “Does this *really* work? I mean so many voices and opinions in one room. Nothing would ever get done!” Now that could in fact happen, as has been demonstrated in the past. But for some strange reason, and some would do good to learn from this, it works the majority of the time.

A co-operative functions in somewhat the same way as a democracy. The owners or providers of the



service work together with other members in order to make decisions and bring the service to the public. The members of a co-operative see it in a fairly positive light. “It is a way of working together to try to deal with the external factors that can sometimes affect your business and your life. You can try and make sure that you can change those. External factors that you can’t control such as government regulations and the like,” says Stewart Slater, member of Organic Meadow Farmers Co-operative, Quadro Communication

Co-op, Ontario Natural Food Co-op and Mountain Equipment Co-op. “You feel like you have people you can look to for support that are going through the same kind of experience as you are and you feel like you can trust them more because they have the same stakes in the co-op that you do. You feel like people are concerned just as much about how you’re doing as how they’re doing.”

This year, 2012, has been made the international year of the co-operative in order to raise public awareness about its existence and function. Co-operatives have existed in human history for as long as humans have been organizing and working together. Over time they have been used for many different functions, such as assistance with savings or selling oatmeal. Anything that one could sell or provide a service for could be made into a co-operative. People have been working together for centuries in this sort of workforce. And it seems to be working. Perhaps the song “Solidarity Forever” describes it best, “When the union’s inspiration through the workers’ blood shall run/There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun/Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one/But the union makes us strong.” We are stronger when we are together and working for the needs of all not just the needs of the one. This is the point of a co-operative.

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