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SPEAKERS

Ricky Telg, Phillip Stokes

Ricky Telg 00:04

This is Science by the Slice, a podcast from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Center for Public Issues Education. In this podcast, experts discuss the science of issues affecting our daily lives reveal the motivations behind the decisions people make, and ultimately provide insight to solutions for our lives.

Phillip Stokes 00:33

Welcome to Science by the Slice for part two of our series on agritourism. If you listen to part one of this series, you know that this episode was recorded at an agritourism operation, the red, white and blues farm and Williston, Florida. One quick note about that, since we were outside when we recorded our interview, you'll hear people in the background, motors, and other sounds throughout the episode. And I think that's fitting because we wanted to be on site and talk with someone who manages an agritourism operation. So, who did we talk to?

Jeff Manley 01:10

Alright, so my name is Jeff Manley. My title is the director of agritourism for H&A farms, I guess more efficiently. It's the director of agritourism for H&A Agritourism LLC. And we've got two locations right now in Eustis and in Williston, and we intend to grow those further with the properties that they've already got or will acquire. So I've been an agritourism for, as much as I hate to say it 30 years,

Phillip Stokes 01:47

and Jeff's venture into agritourism started after he graduated from college, which you'll hear more about in just a minute. But I'd say the foundation for his career was formed much before that. You see, when Jeff was 12 years old, he worked in a pharmacy in Jonesboro, Georgia, where he would sweep the floors and dust shelves, among other things. And someone would come in periodically and invite Jeff to go to church into a Sunday school class that this man taught. After being asked multiple times Jeff did go and the person who invited him and taught the Sunday school class was Truett Cathy, founder of

Chick fil A. Over time Truett Cathy became a mentor to Jeff and initially he thought this was more of a charitable act. But eventually their bond grew to an inseparable friendship. Truett supported Jeff to go to college and was even the best man in his wedding. Jeff stated that he learned so much from Truett which really shaped him into the man he is today. And once again, it was after Jeff graduated from college that he got a start in agriculture with Truett Cathy, as he explains here.

Jeff Manley 03:00

started a cattle farm with the founder of Chick fil A Truett Cathy, who was my Sunday School teacher when I was 12. And I worked for him from the time I was 12 until the time I was 50. And the thing was, that is hard as he tried to get me to work at Chick fil A. I just didn't want to work inside. I just thought that was not what I wanted to do. And so he convinced me to commit to working for him after I graduated from college. He helped me get a college Berry College in Rome, Georgia. And after college, we sought out to find what would be of interest to the two of us. And we found a 370-acre cattle farm in little town of The Rock, Georgia, Upson County, and bought that was the notion that we were trying to figure out what God wanted us to turn it into. And so that's kind of how it started.

Phillip Stokes 04:17

Once again, if you listen to part one in this series, you heard that the entire PIE Center team visited the red, white and blues farm during one day of their fall festival. And that's what you're hearing now. We had a fantastic time, experienced wonderful hospitality from the staff, picked fresh flowers, and just enjoyed being outside on the farm. But how did Jeff go from running an operation in Georgia to becoming the agritourism director for two farms located in Florida? He explains that here as we pick up this episode's conversation led by Michaela Kandzer.

Michaela Kandzer 05:01

How did you get from there to here at Red, White and blues today?

Jeff Manley 05:04

Well, after a wonderful, wonderful career, raising my family at the Rock ranch having, you know, many successes through there and really not recognizing it at the time, but when we we started agritourism in the rock, Georgia at the Rock Ranch, there was only one or two other little places in the state and to scale that was doing agritourism. There's some apple places in North Georgia, but there was one dairy in Canton, Georgia, north of Atlanta, that was doing a wonderful job with agritourism. And then we were the, the second, so to speak, to do a corn maze. That kind of thing was really what I started off trying to do a corn maze, field trips, company picnics, and they're our first season we were doing Thursday, Friday, Saturday, every weekend in October and the first weekend in September. And I don't know, I haven't added up those days. But in our first season, in total, we had 46 people attend. So it was an absolute failure. But as we grew in agritourism, so did agritourism grow in the southeast. And so after I retired from the rock ranch in 2019, I went to work with a friend of mine in agriculture, with a wholesale food, cheese. He also manufactures all the sevendust, liquid 7 and out a lot of Bayer chemical products and love that but then Michael and Ryan Michael Hill and Ryan Atwood, owners of H&A farms through recruiter found me and they proposed an idea that I had been thinking about for 20 years. And that is Why could you not have more than one location? Typically, agritourism is a family farm. And it's one location and a lot of dynamics go into why agritourism works for those families. And, but why not more

than one for the Atwood and the hill family. And that intrigued me and kind of excited me and so that's how I took this step to join them.

Michaela Kandzer 07:35

That's really awesome. I think that's also a good natural transition. And so we're going to be talking about today which is all about agritourism. So for our listeners. We are currently at Red, White and blues farm in Williston, Florida. We were able to take out our whole entire PIE Center team today we've done lots of fun stuff looked at pumpkins pick sunflowers picked Zinnias wrote on the pumpkin eater, which is a combine that drives around the farm. Rode down the big slide that was really fun. It's much, much taller once you get up there. It looks from the ground. And so can you just tell us what agritourism means to you? What is agritourism? How would you define it?

Jeff Manley 08:09

I would define agritourism in a lot of different directions. The first thing that comes to mind is a vehicle through which to create joy in families in a rural farm setting, because that is one of the most rewarding of residual effects of agritourism. I would also define it as offering different commodities through which younger generations can stay connected to the farm. So for example, if you've got a green bean farm, a corn farm, whatever it happens to be, and you've got grandmother and grandfather, you got Mom and Dad, you might have an uncle and an aunt, by marriage or an aunt and uncle by marriage or who knows the makeup. And it could be 100 acres, it could be 5000. But as those families grow, there's only so many paychecks that you can afford with that amount of land, or that amount of resource. And so if you've got a young person graduating with an agriculture degree or whatever it happens to be, and they want to raise their family connected to those values that we all cherished. In relation to farms and farm families. Well, that commodity might not support them, but agritourism can add it in, you know, people as a crop is really the way I see agritourism and it can add generations back to the payroll and make it very affordable and make wonderful careers. So those are those are those are two ways I define it and then another way would just be An incredible opportunity to support a economically a community in tourism dollars, gas, hotels, restaurants, whatever it happens to be, but then also in paychecks to the local community.

Michaela Kandzer 10:16

Yeah, so it kind of opens up this whole new market segment, right in agriculture. And it's completely different than traditional agriculture, you know, just growing crops and sending them off to packing houses and selling them in a grocery store. And it looks very different and seems to be a lot more fun to right?

Jeff Manley 10:31

Yeah, a lot more fun.

Michaela Kandzer 10:33

Yeah. So what are why would you say that agritourism is important?

Jeff Manley 10:37

Well, I think one, one immediate reason that comes to mind is just the economic driver that it is, you know, you would not think about it, but a flourishing agritourism destination farm, that family farm, depending on the length of time that they're open in a year, and whatever the circumstance that might be, it can generate literally 10s of millions of dollars for a community that you think was during the commute, is there any tourism dollar generated in my community? Well, there's that farm down the road that has pumpkin patch, it is exponential, how many dollars in economic development are created with no input really, from the community, the economic development or the development authority, or whatever particular county might have? So I think the economic driver is a big one. I think also the educational piece is, is a big purpose in it, to teach these young people and, and really now, moms and dads, you know, you know, blueberries don't grow on trees. Strawberries don't, you know, grow on bushes, leather comes from cattle, you know, so many things that they don't understand. And it's really, in this day and time, if we're farmers, there's so much disconnectivity to the younger populations in that family farm, that we will be all doing ourselves a favor, the more that we can educate the population on where our food comes from, and the processes, the safe growing the safe processes that are available.

Michaela Kandzer 12:23

Yeah. And so I really like that you've hit that nail on the head talking about really using your agritourism operation to educate the public and to educate not just kids, but also parents. So how do you guys use your agritourism operations to educate the public?

Jeff Manley 12:36

Well, you know, it depends on the commodity you know, both of the locations that we have currently, we've got blueberries and strawberries, strawberries will come first and then blueberries. And here in Williston, we also have peaches, you know, everything from the variety and the differences of the varieties, whether it's, you know, an early or late if it's a super sweet, or if it's got a little bit less of a palate to it, some folks don't like it too terribly sweet. How much water do they need, we're irrigating, as we said, and the safe growing of it, that oftentimes you have articles that come out that, you know, may or may not be quite exaggerated and in, whether it be organic or traditional farming operations, and so to be able to educate them on, on what we know, to be true and safe in, in growing and harvesting, and then to be able to tie that to a lifetime memory of going with the family to pick blueberries, going with the family to pick strawberries. You know, you've got that memory and then you also encourage folks to make jam we'll be doing how do you make strawberry jam, we'll be doing lessons on how to how do you make a blueberry power or blueberry cobbler delight. And, and you try to teach them, you know, folks that as well. So that, you know it's really sort of a full circle. They don't have to buy in big box chain stores. They can come right out here but recognize how much more fresh it is, how much more wholesome it is, and it sure does taste a whole lot better when they get

Michaela Kandzer 14:23

and they get the whole experience and the memories to go along with it. Yeah. And I think you're I think you're so right there is such a disconnect between the general public and farming and I think it's easy for farmers to get a bad label, get a bad rap when it comes to the sustainability of farming practices. And so I think it's really awesome that you guys offer an opportunity for the general public to come out to the farm and to see that you guys are the stewards of the lands and that you know, this is your workbench. So how important it is to you that you take care of.

Jeff Manley 14:51

Yeah, the last thing that farmers want is, is to shorten the lifespan of what they can produce on their product. Pretty so they're they wake up every morning with the intention of being good stewards and agritourism helps shine a lot of transparency on that.

Michaela Kandzer 15:09

Yeah, I couldn't agree more. Yeah, I think that is a very important aspect of agritourism. So I know we've already talked about this a little bit, but you can ask it again. So what is the value of agritourism operations in your community?

Jeff Manley 15:23

You know, we've kind of talked about the economic driver, we've talked about the educational piece. Another component that comes to mind is the opportunity to gainfully employ a group of, of typically young people, but it might be young, old, and everybody in between. And so not only do they end up with a little bit of change in their pocket, but they also learn things that they might not otherwise. And so we take very seriously that a big percentage of the folks come into work at H&A farms wherever, but in particularly in agritourism, because we try to work with young people's schedules, whether it's high school, college or anything. But we also have to recognize that what we want is if you all go somewhere, and you're the director of HR, at a company, big or small, and you're scrolling down, and you say, this young person worked at red, white, blues, farm Atwood, some he owned a property. Okay. We want that to be like Yale, Harvard. Yeah, we want that theme Ivy League. And, and so the only way that we can do that is to make sure that we're doing what we should be doing as a first time employer for a young person, so that their third and fourth time employer has that benefit.

Michaela Kandzer 16:58

Yeah, well, in what important skills and opportunity it is, you know, to work here and to so you're really educating and equipping the next generation of the workforce in America, which is important.

Jeff Manley 17:09

Yeah, and you know, it could be simple. Hey, you know, we want the guys to have their shirts tucked in. You know, we like it when they say My pleasure. Okay. Well, you say, Well, you know, what, Chick fil A, said, my pleasure. Well, I don't want to steal it from chick flight. Well, Chick fly stole it from Ritz Carlton. And they're both doing real fine. So why couldn't wait, right. So you know, how to make eye contact, how to take their sunglasses off when they're engaging with customers, how to have a firm handshake. All those things are amazingly things that they come here not knowing. And we're working hard means. So we really are intentional and trying to make sure that we train these kids that you know how to work hard, whether it's picking up trash, parking cars, or, or whatever they happen to be doing working in the field, whatever it happens to be.

Michaela Kandzer 17:59

That's really awesome. I really love that aspect of agritourism, but also just this farming more specifically. So can you tell us you know, so about some of the events that you guys host at your farm or the things that are going on year round?

Jeff Manley 18:12

Yeah, so And we'd love to be year round, you know, summer months are hard to grow anything you know, but this is our first year doing fall festivals. So all of our farms are going to have a u-pick component to them. It'll be driven by, you know, H&A Farms is the largest blueberry Packer on the East Coast. And so all of them are highly likely to have a blueberry component. We're adding strawberries also, to have an earlier commodity, one that's so popular. And, and there may be others like here, we have peaches as well. So the driver is going to be some commodity of you-pick. But what we're trying to do also is to not just you know, you know mom and dad, grandma, granddad, they can be happy out there picking blueberries picking strawberries, but the kids you know, and not only that it's to our advantage when you got less young kids out there picking green strawberries and throwing them down that you can't sell a week later when they're red, right? So we're offering them all sorts of activities. So we've got a treehouse village, we've got a playground platform, we've got a petting zoo, we've got jumping pillows, a barrel train, a ball zone, a giant slide, the pumpkin eater,

Michaela Kandzer 19:44

mini golf, you have dodgeball Yeah.

Jeff Manley 19:47

And then we've also got sunflowers and Zinnias as a u-pick crop, which you're almost year round tin tip probably 10 months the year ,we've got gemstone mining, and so those things can occupy as well. Give, give the family something to do in the field. And then they can enjoy the other thing. And we also are very intentional and trying to keep it affordable.

Michaela Kandzer 20:11

So if we haven't already driven the point home enough, I want to ask you, so why should the public support agritourism operations?

Jeff Manley 20:19

Well, not only for all that we've said, but they're, they're supporting their local farmers. I mean, they really are. We've got wonderful neighbors here that are not in the blueberry business or the strawberry business there might be in the melon business or the cattle business of the peanut business. And all of us benefit. it also creates sort of an inner marrying of things, you know, I mean, I called Local cattle farmer and said, hey, you know, can I buy some hay bales free from you for our family dodgeball? And he's like, oh, yeah, that's great. It encourages a rural camaraderie. It also connects you know, there's always a chamber of commerce or rotary thats doing ag farm week, or some sort of thing with the Florida Farm Bureau or, or their local networking. And it really ties those things in. And then we've, you know, we really talked about the economic importance of it. Because agritourism, a vigorous, thriving agritourism destination, will draw folks from an hour and a half away. Typically, we don't have the metrics history here to know. But oftentimes, you'll see 30% of the population attending an agritourism destination is within 20 to 30 Miles 15 to 30. But 30% is coming from an hour, hour and a half, even two hours away. And so those are the folks that are that are spending more money stay, longer buying gas on the way out, and all those things.

Michaela Kandzer 22:08

Yeah, that makes that's really awesome. That makes a lot of sense. So I think that was last question I had for you today. Do you have any final parting thoughts for our listeners?

Jeff Manley 22:16

No, other than, you know, in support of your local farmer, when you see somebody that's, I mean, they're these farmers are working hard. I mean, they're flat, working hard, whether it's cattle, blueberries, strawberries, peaches, melons, you know, peanuts, row crop, whatever, it is a vegetable, they are working hard, they're rolling the dice on the weather, on their loans for equipment, keeping the bankers happy with their farms, and all that. And if they're moving forward, inviting the public, taking on that liability, willing to do that, willing to educate the community, willing to have the passion that comes with the aggravation sometimes of inviting the public to your farm. If they're doing that, please embrace them. I mean, hopefully they're making money, because they're working hard, and they're gambling that it's going to work. But you don't, you got to recognize too, that there they may be employing the fifth generation on a legacy farm, that that otherwise would not be able to be able to stay and, and be able to afford the legacy that their forebears that they've sort of inherited through perpetuity. So I would say, you know, to anybody that's listening to this podcast, you know, seek out those farmers that are creative in ingenuitive enough to jump out there and, and, and be bold enough to have an agritourism destination or component to their farm.

Michaela Kandzer 23:57

Yeah, I mean, being a farmer, right. It's a hard job. It's hard work. No farmers, no food. No, yeah. And so it is it's so important that we support them. So thank you so much for allowing us to come onto your farm today for taking the time to talk to us and to share your story and share your voice on the podcast with us. And we're really excited to share this with everyone else. So can you tell our listeners where they can find you online?

Jeff Manley 24:19

Well, it's such been my pleasure to have you here and you're in your whole group. But they can find us online at RedWhiteandBluesfarms.com. They can find this at our other location Atwood family farm, and then they can learn more about H&A farms by just Googling looking up Handafarms.com headquartered in Mount Dora.

Michaela Kandzer 24:44

perfect Well you heard it here first folks. You know you got it comes figured out yourself come support the support the farms. So thank you so much.

Phillip Stokes 25:02

I want to thank Jeff Manley for being a guest on science by the slice, as well as the entire staff of the red, white and blues farm for welcoming the PIE center to their farm and allowing us to learn about their operation. That completes our two part series on agritourism, where you heard research on consumers perceptions of agritourism in part one, and what it's like to manage an agritourism operation in part two. As always, I want to thank everyone involved in science by the slice. Michaela Kandzer, Rachel

Raybon, Valentina Castano, Sydney Honeycutt, Ricky Telg, Ashley McLeod-Morin and Alena Poulan.
I'm Phillip Stokes. Thanks for listening to Science by the Slice.