

Daniel Boothe

You're listening to Jay Talk. Today we've got a very special guest in the studio, Samantha Van Dort, a student at both Muskegon Community College and Michigan State University's agriculture program. Samantha recently took home first place at MCC's pitch competition with her heartwarming and hands-on concept GE whitetails. It's an interactive farm experience where visitors can bottle feed baby deer and get up close with other friendly farm animals. The farm is named in honor of her grandfather, who was there cheering her on during the big pitch. Samantha's passion for animals, agriculture, and community is inspiring, and we can't wait to learn more about her journey and her vision. Samantha, welcome to the podcast.

Samantha

Thank you. I'm happy to be here.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, awesome. Well, hey, straight out of the gates, congratulations. That had to be Pretty big moment for you. How did it feel to win first place? Take us to the moment that they said your name and you knew you had won. Did you expect to win? And what were the emotions going through your body?

Samantha

Oh, I definitely didn't expect it. Everyone else had great ideas and it was just really amazing. I was astound to get it and I was really grateful for the opportunity to even participate.

Daniel Boothe

Your grandfather was there. Was your family there? Were your parents there as well?

Samantha

My parents actually, unfortunately, weren't able to make it. was actually my great-grandfather.

Daniel Boothe

Oh, okay, great.

Samantha

And yeah, he was there. My great-grandma was there and then... My best friend was able to come and help me and then my boyfriend and his family.

Daniel Boothe

How'd you celebrate? Did you guys go out to eat afterwards or?

Samantha

No, it was kind of a late night, so we just headed home and I was ready for bed.

Daniel Boothe

Oh wow, that's fantastic. Okay, well tell us a little bit about the story behind GE White Tails. What inspired the idea?

Samantha

So my dad actually started it. We started it in 2019. It's of course named after my great grandpa Elmer. Yes, so 7th generational farmer on the farm now and it started as a deer farm. When my dad started it and we've expanded to 12 acres, he just kind of had the idea to start something new. And we've always loved hunting. I'm a big hunter and we've always done that as a family. We've gone to Iowa and Kansas. We have property. So it was just a great addition to what we love to do already. And I just took it another step and I love the educational side. So I became, or I started doing the tours.

Daniel Boothe

Well, it was named after your great-grandfather. A little surprise. I want to play something for you, okay? This is your great-grandfather on your win.

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I feel very honored. I feel very honored that they would name it after me. And I really enjoy her. And she's a very good person. And I love her with all about her.

Daniel Boothe

What does it make you feel when you hear that?

Samantha

Oh, I could start crying, but yeah, no, he means a lot to me. And he actually lives right across the road, so he gets to see the whole process growing. And yeah, he's amazing.

Daniel Boothe

That's fantastic. Where's the farm located?

Samantha

We're in Zealand.

Daniel Boothe

Okay.

Samantha

Yep.

Daniel Boothe

Oh, that's kind of a trip to here to Muskegon College.

Samantha

Yep, a good like 45 minute drive, but it's definitely worth it.

Daniel Boothe

Tell us a little bit about the agriculture program. I would assume that that's why you came here.

Samantha

Yes, so it's a partner program with MCC and Michigan State University, and it allows me to have all my classes at MCC, and so I take half of my MCC classes, so I graduate with an associate's in science, and then I take my MSU classes here too, which are online or in labs, and then I get a certificate in agriculture technology.

Daniel Boothe

So the idea of Bottle feeding baby deer, that sounds pretty magical. What kind of interactive experiences do visitors find at GE Whitetails?

Samantha

Yeah, so I take them, it's about an hour to an hour and a half tour, depending on the group and also like questions. Some people are more talkative than others, but we first go to fawns and we bottle feed them and we learn about nutrition and kind of what I actually really do on my day-to-day life, which is really just fun. to show everyone that comes. Then we go to the chickens and we learn about egg production. And I think it's really interesting. I mean, chickens are born with the amount of eggs they lay their whole entire life, which is pretty interesting. And then we go to, I have two beef calves right now, and I get to show them meat production and really the purpose that we have the animals for. And As well as their anatomy too, it's really cool sharing with them how those beef calves have the same

stomach as the fawns that they just bottle fed. So it's really cool to show them that comparison. And then I do have a new addition of three highland cows. So they're smaller. I have a micro mini and then a mini, or two minis and a micro mini. And so I'm really excited for that. I'll be breeding them this May. And They're of course cute, but they still have the purpose of breeding and showing them that. And then after we go through those animals on the farm, we go through, we have 12 acres of fenced in area, which is really the deer farm. And that's kind of the big selling point besides the bottle feeding fawns is very popular. people come and they can really learn the ins and outs of deer farming, which I love. And that's really my passion because it's different in agriculture. So they get to really meet all the does, which are very friendly because I bottle feed most of them when they're younger. And then we also have some bucks that are friendlier. So they get the opportunity to actually feel the antlers and the velvet. And it's really a once in a lifetime opportunity that I love sharing. And then once we go through that, I take them back and I always have the joke of like, you can take a kitten home if you want because I have too many kittens on the farm. So anyone is welcome to take a souvenir kitten home. But I also have honeybees that I sell our honey as well.

Daniel Boothe

That is fantastic. This is all so incredibly impressive. You're 19 years old and you're already got this kind of vision and this kind of motivation. You obviously found at a young age what what inspired you and what motivated you and you thought life on a farm, right?

Samantha

Yes, yeah. I mean, honestly, it wasn't, I mean, we always, I grew up on the farm, but it wasn't until my senior year in high school where I really fell in love with it. And there's such a lack of education for kids now. And that's, I think, what really shows me. And honestly, my faith is a big part of it. And just showing kids like God made all these animals in so intricate ways, like it's so amazing to show them that.

Daniel Boothe

So people are going to hear this. And the first thing is you said you're also a big hunter. How do you reconcile bottle feeding baby deer and then, you know, shooting one for food? You know, I mean, does it ever pull at your heart strings or are you able to separate the two?

Samantha

I think it's having the mindset of these animals have a purpose. So of course, I work really hard to keep all my fawns alive. And I would be lying if I didn't cry, or if I didn't say I cry like when they do pass away, because some of them don't make it, and that is farm life. But it

is, like, that is really difficult. But I mean, I've grown up hunting, and it's kind of like that's their purpose, and we use all the meat, And even these bucks, their purpose isn't necessarily for me at first. They're for trophy bucks. People want them for their antler size and everything. But it's really having the mindset of this is their purpose. And I do get emotionally attached, but it's also teaching kids too when they come like, yes, I love all these animals, but they all do have a purpose at the end of the day. And that's what I really try to teach kids as well, because I think we've lost that a lot in society.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, you know, Hunter once told me, he's like, hey, a lot of these deer, these bucks out here, they die violent deaths and they, you know what I mean? They don't make it. So it's not like we're. they live 80 years and it's not that way.

Samantha

A lot of them end up dying with disease. So a lot of people are like, how can you have them in a fenced in area and stuff like that? But really they don't understand they're living their best life, honestly. It's like they're in Florida in the sun on the beach. Like they have the food they want and everything like that. So yeah, it's really just having the mindset of like that's their purpose in life. And it is hard for people to some to understand that. But I finally am like getting to that point where it's not too emotionally attached.

Daniel Boothe

There you go. My wife's family is big hunters. And I come from the big city. I was born and raised in Kansas City and then I moved to New York City where I was an actor for several years. But then I met my wife and my wife happened to be from a little place called Fruitport, Michigan. So we moved back here after we got married to start a family and So when we got back here, her family and her dad and her brothers are just like huge hunters. They're like, Daniel, we're going to go hunting, right? And I'm like, yeah, sure. It's like, you know, I'm up in the tree and I'm like, and they're like, don't make no waste, man. Such an idiot. So let's get back to the farm.

Samantha

Oh, yes.

Daniel Boothe

Horses.

Samantha

No, that would be, I kind of, I want to learn how to ride horses. That's a new endeavor, that future, future.

Daniel Boothe

Okay, so you've got cows, you've got... Deer. You got chickens. You got kittens.

Samantha

Yes. Oh, so many kittens. Yes.

Daniel Boothe

Dogs.

Samantha

Yes, we have dogs as well. Yep. We have one outside beagle for shunts rabbits with us. And then we have two indoor ones as well.

Daniel Boothe

What are the indoor indoor animals?

Samantha

One is a labradoodle.

Daniel Boothe

Oh, those are nice.

Samantha

And the other one is Burnadoodle, but honestly, she's more Bernese. She sheds everywhere.

Daniel Boothe

Growing up, we had a beagle as well, Molly Doggy. She's a beagle. And just dumb as a box rocks. Just nothing going on upstairs.

Samantha

That's surprising.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, are beagles, do you think?

Samantha

Yeah, they're very smart animals, but...

Daniel Boothe

It's just stupid as the day is long. God bless that little dog. Okay, so you know this is a really cool concept. I would imagine that there's huge appeal to like elementary school.

Samantha

Yeah.

Daniel Boothe

Field day trips and things like that, educational component. What do you envision this business growing into and where would you like to see it grow?

Samantha

Yeah, for sure. Well, I started really just focusing it towards homeschoolers because they have a lack of opportunities. So last year, I really, it was a lot of homeschoolers that came, family groups, things like that. I do envision it for, yeah, more elementary, I mean, even high schoolers. I work, I have worked with the Critter Barn a little bit because they're like 20 minutes away from me. So they are a great help and they are a great way for kids to learn about education and a little bit of my competition, but I do, since I specialize in deer, it does make me stand out a bit. But I would definitely say for more public school wise and stuff, it's just figuring out the group stuff because deer can get skittish and having a bunch of kids in a huge group. So my group sizes are smaller. It's really just depending also on how many fawns I'm bottle feeding. So this year, I'm hoping to have about 100 fawns, but bottle feeding, hopefully only like 25, 30, and then that'd be my group size, just so everyone gets a chance to bottle feed the fawns.

Daniel Boothe

So you won the award, \$5,000 goes towards your business. What do you intend on doing with the prize money?

Samantha

So I am planning on doing, is adding more of a ventilation system and updating the barn where I do bottle feed. just because, first of all, the ventilation system's nice because some animals that, or some animals, some people that come to the farm, honestly, they don't know how animals smell and it can be really off-putting and their kids will like walk in, they're like, ew, this stinks. And they're already like kind of in a bad mood about the tour. So

I really want to make it the best it can possibly be. So allowing even for the smell to be better in the barn is really great. And then making updates like really installing, which is actually happening tomorrow, installing a new fencing for my fawns. So it's more of like a dog park where you have an entrance into a smaller area and then you enter into the bigger area just so it's safer for the fawns so they can't get out and the people, so they're not just getting crowded by fawns right away.

Daniel Boothe

Okay, let's wrap up and talk a little bit about some semantics and some specifics. First and foremost, where are you located? How can people come? to GE Whitetails and feed a baby deer some milk.

Samantha

Oh yes, of course. So we're located in Zeeland, Michigan. And if you honestly just look up GE Whitetails, we have Facebook and Instagram and I'll be.

Daniel Boothe

Open to the public.

Samantha

Yep, open to the public. I'll be posting more about tours and a link for that soon. So it'll it'll start tours will start roughly probably beginning of June when fawns are getting born.

Daniel Boothe

Perfect. I've got a seven-year-old, a seven-year-old boy and a four, a five-year-old girl and a four-year-old girl.

Samantha

Perfect age.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, perfect. I'm perfect. I will be out there this summer. How can people find you online?

Samantha

Instagram and Facebook, that's the best, is just look up GE Whitetails and you can follow me there. Working on getting a website going, but still just those are the best ways to contact me.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, those things take time. And okay, final question, I guess. What's the best venison dish? Is it a hamburger? Is it spaghetti? What's your go-to?

Samantha

Oh boy, that's really hard because now that I have my own beef calves, I'm not going to lie, the beef is on top. Honestly, I don't know. The heart might sound really weird, but the heart is really good. It's really tender and it's like you don't really eat a lot, but it's pretty good.

Daniel Boothe

Samantha, I'm just going to have to take your word for it.

Samantha

That's hard. That's hard because my beef calves, like their beef is better for burger wise.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah.

Samantha

For better than medicine. Yeah. So that's a good question. I'm not really sure.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, there you go. GE Whitetails, Samantha.

Samantha

Thank you so much.