

You Make THE Difference: How Wisconsin Fairs Found New Energy

by Jayme Buttke, IFMG, CFE



When Wisconsin agreed to be one of the first states to host the *You Make THE Difference* Tour, I'll admit – I was nervous to take that leap of faith. But what unfolded proved to be more inspiring than I could have imagined, and I'd gladly host these meetings all over again. It's a very exciting time for our fair industry!

Fairs: More Than Just Entertainment

The mission of the Wisconsin Association of Fairs (WAF) is to provide innovative programming and resources for our members to enhance and support the vitality of the fair industry and the communities we serve. The 'You Make THE Difference' leadership tour truly aligned with our mission, and I believe it will benefit all our communities. With more than 74 county and regional fairs statewide, fairs are more than just entertainment – they are economic drivers, leadership incubators, and community cornerstones. The tour embodied this mission and reinforced the vital role fairs play in Wisconsin counties.

We were honored to be the first recipient of a Fairs.com grant to bring the "You Make THE Difference" program statewide. This fully funded national effort aims to enhance community events, such as county fairs, by equipping fair boards and volunteers with leadership, outreach, and organizational development tools. These are precisely the skills county officials value in their local partners.

Our board first encountered Ian Hill's work at the International Association of Fairs & Expositions Convention in 2024. An award-winning humanitarian and internationally recognized expert in community development with over 25 years of experience inspiring leaders across North America and beyond, Hill's message resonated strongly. Without evolution, the fair industry risks losing relevance in a rapidly changing society. County fairs – and the county governments that support them – must adopt innovative approaches, demonstrate leadership, and foster community building.

His compelling vision led to his invitation to be the keynote speaker at our annual convention in January and to lead the spring 2025 district training tour. This decision began a transformative initiative for our state's fairs. In April, I watched more than 200 fair board members representing 67 fairs come together in five regional gatherings. The feedback we received has been exceptional.

Addressing Key Challenges in the Fair Industry

This program addressed the fundamental challenges faced by local fairs, including volunteer retention and recruitment, advocacy, fundraising, and effective communication. Participants explored key leadership themes to gain a deeper understanding of their roles

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as event organizers and stewards of tradition, community assets, and economic growth.

Our fairs serve as platforms for youth development, agricultural education, small business exposure, and civic pride – all of which directly contribute to the vitality of our counties. The “You Make THE Difference” tour reaffirmed that as fair leaders grow, so do the communities they serve.

Energized Leaders and Stronger Communities

Investing in fair leadership strengthens communities. The ripple effects are already evident. Every one of the 200 attendees left energized and inspired, many with specific plans to improve their boards, deepen community partnerships, and reimagine their fair's role in local development. For some, they are now dreaming bigger than ever before. This momentum will benefit counties both culturally and economically.

This tour, along with the 30-day follow-up, surpassed my expectations. If your state's fair industry is considering having Ian present, don't hesitate – just do it! Be part of the ‘You Make THE Difference’ Tour! I'm excited to see what the future holds for fairs. ❖

Jayne Buttke, IFMG, CFE, serves as the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Association of Fairs. She also participates in the IAFE 2025 Convention Program Committee.

What Is the “You Make THE Difference” Initiative?

Overview

- A national grant-funded leadership initiative powered by Fairs.com, designed to equip fair boards and volunteers with practical strategies to thrive amid today's shifting environment
- Sponsored by Fairs.com in partnership with leadership expert Ian Hill

Core Objectives

- Help fair organizations overcome key challenges, including volunteer shortages, financial sustainability, and leadership fatigue

Components of the Program

- **In-Person Training** – Up to six days of tailored, on-the-ground training across a state to engage fair boards and volunteers directly
- **Follow-Up via Learning Portal** – A 30-day online support platform to reinforce knowledge and sustain momentum; remains available for future training and reference
- **Implementation Funding** – A \$1,000 grant to offset planning and logistical costs for the state fair board hosting the program

For more information, visit
www.fairs.com/you-make-the-difference

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