

Hereford Friends

The Valek family's multi-generational involvement in Hereford youth activities provided support in time of loss.

by *Sara Gugelmeyer*



Although Jake's life was cut short, he spent much of it with Hereford cattle and Hereford friends.

The Valek family of Agenda, Kan., has been in the Hereford business for four generations. Robin, one member of the youngest generation of Valeks, says Herefords are in her blood. Her great-grandfather purchased the family's first Hereford as a show project for his daughter. Every generation has been involved in the junior program since. And when Robin's younger brother Jacob (Jake) died tragically in a car accident in 2007, the Valeks were moved by how many friends, neighbors and "Hereford family" members reached out to help.

After Robin's great-grandfather purchased his first Hereford, it wasn't long before the Valek family began adding Hereford cows and laid the foundation for the Hereford herd the family continues to manage today. And as the herd and the family grew, so did their involvement in the junior program.

Multi-generational interest

Robin's grandfather, Eddie, eventually took over the Valek Hereford herd and, along with cattle, raised six children on the ranch, all of whom grew up showing Herefords.

Four of the six children, including Robin's father, Bill, showed at the polled Hereford junior nationals. Bill and Mick, Bill's brother, are now partners on the family Hereford operation, and Mick's children, Brandy and BJ, showed Herefords as well.

Bill says the family got into the junior national events as a natural

progression — they were doing well showing and wanted to continue to compete and compare their cattle on the next level. Once they started, they never wanted to stop.

"It gets in your blood," Bill says. "The people are kind of like a big family, and it's great to keep meeting others with the same interests from all over the country."

Their junior national experiences — and the fun they had along the way — led the first generation of Valek juniors to continue with Hereford cattle and, more importantly, to make sure their children, including Robin, got the chance to participate in the National Junior Hereford Association.

"I've always believed that my kids should have at least the same opportunities I had and as many beyond that as possible," Bill says. "Seeing my kids compete and learn and grow and meet people has been wonderful. Where else would they get to make friends with kids from halfway across the country?"

Robin, who showed at her last junior national in 2008, says she feels blessed to have been a part of this multi-generational junior national tradition, and it's a tradition that she feels strongly about continuing. "I definitely hope to bring my kids to the JNHE (Junior National Hereford Expo) someday," Robin says. "The experience is priceless. I was shy when I was younger, and going to junior nationals helped me to get beyond that and gain a lot of confidence. The



The Valek family's commitment to the Hereford breed and involvement in the junior program spans generations. Pictured here at the Republic County Fair (front row, l to r) are: Dan, Marti, Tobi and Cameron Wilber; Robin Marston; Kalli, Mick and Donna Valek. Back row (l to r) are: Bill and Resi Valek; Nancy and Glen Erickson; Janis Krob; Jesse Erickson; Mandi and BJ Valek.

people you meet and the friends you make become such a big part of your life.”

And the family time is also important. Although they keep busy throughout the week, the Valeks try to get out and explore the area while at the junior national, as this event also serves as a family vacation.

“We don't do any other trips, so this is our way to travel,” Robin says. Since Robin began showing, they've missed only a few junior nationals and, as a result, have seen a large part of the country — places Robin says she'd never have seen otherwise.

In the interest of enjoying the family vacation, Robin says her father always limited the number of heifers to one per kid, with an occasional exception, to ensure that the week was an enjoyable one and not too hectic. Of course, the Valeks find plenty to do throughout the week anyway and competed in many events, including judging, team fitting, showmanship and the 3-on-3 basketball tournament.

The week is also an important chance for the extended Valek family to spend time together. Robin's sisters, Mandi and Kalli, are both actively involved in the junior program as are their cousins Cameron and Tobi Wilber. Brandy

and BJ grew up on the ranch in Agenda and the Valek cousins worked on and showed cattle bred and raised on the ranch. Robin's aunt, Nancy Erickson, who lives in Maysville, Mo., traveled with her two kids, Scotti and Jesse, to junior nationals, so the junior nationals have been an occasion for that part of the family to get together with the other Valeks.

Although things have changed some, the Valeks still make time to get together for the JNHE. BJ still lives at home on the family ranch, but Robin married Andee Marston and now lives in Tennessee, and

Brandy married Chris Jones and lives in Lakin, Kan., with their young son.

“Even though Brandy, BJ, Scotti, Jesse and I are grown and most of us have moved away and begun our own families, we still make time for junior nationals,” Robin says. “Many of us plan to attend the event in Kansas City. We have helped to pave the way for the next generation as well as our younger family members. And we have lots of family memories from these trips,” Robin says. “It's good to see all of our family together and also

continued on page 114...



Bill's family pictured (l to r) are: Bill, Resi, Robin, Andee, Mandi and Kalli.



The fifth generation is destined to own and show Herefords in about seven years. Pictured here is Mick's family including: Mick, Donna, Chris, Colby, Brandy and BJ.

to see our extended Kansas 'family' every year. Each trip has its special moments that I'll never forget, and I'm sure the future junior nationals will be just as enjoyable."

Support through tragedy

For the last few years, the JNHE has been bittersweet for the Valek family. Jake's tragic death in August 2007 forever changed the family. Robin says, "You never get over something like this; it just becomes a part of who you are as a person and you learn to live with those emotions."

Although it was an unimaginably painful time, Jake's father, Bill; mother, Teresa "Resi;" and sisters Mandi, Kalli and

Robin all say they are thankful for the outpouring of support from Hereford friends.

"Just the fact of being from a small rural community, we had the support of what seemed like everyone," Resi says. "We had neighbors and friends willing to help out with anything from putting up corn, helping with chores, just generally someone being around 24/7 if we needed them, but also knowing when we needed to be alone."

Robin adds, "Having the love and support of our family, friends and Hereford family certainly made it easier to get through our loss. So many people helped in so many different ways; it is difficult to name them all."

Jake was very involved in showing cattle at the local, state and national levels. He had friends from all across the country from participating in junior nationals. Hundreds of people turned out for his memorial service, held in the local high school gym.

Robin recalls, "I don't remember a lot from the funeral, but there were

so many people who came. The lives my brother touched were incredible. I remember seeing Chris Stephens (then American Hereford Association youth activities director) walk up at the graveside service. It was so nice of him to come. We didn't know Chris personally, so he didn't have to come and pay his respects, but he did because that is the type of people involved in this business."

Robin continues, "The people in the Hereford breed are a large part of what makes the breed so great. They are truly the kind who cares and is always lending a helping hand."

Mandi says, "We received many cards and memorials from people we might not have known personally, but they just wanted us to know they were thinking of us. We would always stop and say how nice that was. It just goes to show the character of the people involved in this business."

Another testament to the strength of the Hereford family is how the junior association memorialized Jake. Sue Rowland, then the Kansas Junior Polled Hereford Association (KJPHA) advisor and personal friend of the Valek family, explains that the KJPHA chose to honor Jake's memory with his name on the sleeve of their JNHE T-shirts.

"It means so much to my family and I that the Kansas juniors have dedicated their state shirts at junior nationals to Jake's memory and will continue to do so until he would have been too old to show as a junior," Robin says. "It is always nice to know people still think about Jake, that he made so much more of an impact than we could have ever dreamed."

The JNHE was such a large part of Jake's life and his family's that it was important to the juniors to take Jake along with them to the junior national in this way, as he would have continued his family's tradition had his life not been cut so short. **HW**



Kansas junior Hereford members honor Jake each year with his name on the sleeve of their state shirts.

Walnut Grove Farm

The Valek family has been in the Hereford business for more than 75 years. Near Agenda, Kan., Walnut Grove Farm's roots trace back to 1935, when Ed Valek purchased a Hereford calf as a 4-H project for his son, Eddie. Eddie and Marcella had six children, sons Bill, Mick and Randy, and daughters Marti, Janis and Nancy. Bill, Mick and Marti have continued the Hereford family tradition at Walnut Grove Farm.

Mick and his wife, Donna, and Bill and his wife, Resi, are partners in the cattle and farming enterprise. The cattle operation consists of 130 purebred cows, 45 heifers and about 25-30 steers, which are finished each year. They also breed some Hereford cows to Angus bulls to produce top-quality black baldie heifers. Most Hereford heifers are kept as replacements.

The Valeks use artificial insemination on about 70 cows and heifers each year to take advantage of the top Hereford and Angus bloodlines available. They also sell between 15 and 20 yearling Hereford and F1 black baldie bulls each year as seedstock. The remainder is either sold as age-verified feeder calves directly to the feedlot or retained for finishing by the Valeks themselves.

On the farming side of things, alfalfa, milo, wheat, oats, corn, soybeans and prairie/brome hay are grown. "Every year we fill a 1,500-bushel corn crib to make our steer ration," Mick explains.

Mick's son, BJ, works full-time on the farm, and Bill's daughter, Mandi, helps out when she's home from college. Mick and Bill's sister, Marti Valek Wilber, helps out at harvest time and with bookkeeping.

During the last 10 years, the family has endured some great losses. Not only was Jake lost from this world, but Eddie passed in 2003 and Marcella in 2007. However, in 2010, Mick's daughter, Brandy, and her husband, Chris Jones, were blessed with the first of the next generation of Valeks, a son named Colby. Mick says, "We hope that Colby will enjoy showing cattle when he's old enough. He already shows a love for animals."

Mick continues, "The Hereford people have been very supportive through the good and bad times. Their support has helped us greatly and is very appreciated. From showing cattle, we've made many lasting friendships nationwide, and from our standpoint, there's no better breed of cattle than Herefords and no better breed of people than Hereford people." **HW**