



# Paving Her Own Way

*Tennessee junior Alyssa Fee has overcome the odds and found success in FFA and Hereford youth programs.*

by Jill Johnson

**M**any youth in the Hereford industry are fortunate to grow up in the business with generations backing their desire for a future in agriculture. But for Alyssa Fee, that was not the case; this 19-year-old Tennessee native has paved her own way to her start in the cattle industry.

Born in Jackson, Tenn., Alyssa has parents who don't farm and have no interest in agriculture. She grew up without a support system and encouragement to be a part of the cattle industry. But from the time she was a little kid, Alyssa had a killer work ethic and dreams to leave her not-so-happy home, ensuring she'd make her mark in agriculture.

## A start in the cattle business

Her interest in agriculture was kindled at age 8, when she began helping an Angus breeder who lived

down the road from her home. Among other chores, she helped in the showring and soon developed a love for showing cattle.

Alyssa said spending time outside was her salvation during childhood. She enjoyed working with cattle but wasn't the biggest fan of the Angus breed. In 2006 she met Scott Woolfolk of Woolfolk Farms, Jackson, Tenn., at a show, and looking for more hours, she asked him for a job.

"I did need help around the farm and decided to hire her," Scott says. "I had her spraying fence rows her first day but quickly realized she had a way with cattle."

Alyssa was excited to work for the Woolfolks because they are Hereford breeders. She says Herefords are more docile than Angus, and she likes working with them much better. But she never dreamed the kind of impact the Woolfolks and their Herefords would have on her life.

"Scott Woolfolk has taught me literally everything I know," she says. "I wouldn't be a part of the agriculture industry today if Scott and the rest of the Woolfolk family hadn't taken me in and taught me the skills that they did. Then they gave me the freedom to take some leadership roles and make some decisions that a lot of kids like me don't get the opportunity to do."

Scott says after doing odds-and-ends chores on the farm and helping in the show barn, within a year, she could do just about anything. It wasn't long before she could operate every piece of machinery on the farm, and she was so good with the cattle. Now, he feels completely comfortable leaving the herd and show cattle in her hands.

"She does all of the homework," he explains. "Alyssa is the one that takes care of the show preparation at home and doesn't always get to go on the road. She's a remarkable young lady, and most kids who grew up on a farm don't have the passion for it that she does."

## Forages are the foundation

Not only did Scott teach Alyssa the ins and outs of the cattle business, but he also exposed her to forage production.

"One of the first pieces of advice Scott gave me was behind every good beef cattle operation is a good forage program," she says. "This advice intrigued me, and I wanted to learn more."

Alyssa soon became part of the farm's hay baling team.

"Since we've hired Alyssa, our hay baling crew is more efficient," Scott says. "If you want to get a group of teenage boys to work faster, put Alyssa on the crew. She out-worked every one of them, and I got a real kick out of it."

He considers Alyssa the assistant manager of the farm's hay enterprises, which include 80 acres of mostly Bermudagrass hay made into small bales and sold to horse owners. That enterprise has more than doubled in size during Alyssa's tenure, Scott says.

Alyssa has also been instrumental in the effort to improve the amount and quality of forages produced on the farm, he explains. The biggest change Alyssa has helped implement over the past four years has been a steady transition from hay to baleage for the cow herd.

"Rain is a big issue in April, and making baleage instead of hay helps



True Hereford advocates, Alyssa and John Woolfolk, visited the Hereford booth at the 2012 Cattle Industry Convention and National Cattlemen's Beef Association Trade Show in Nashville.

avoid problems the lack of moisture causes," she says. "Woolfolk Farms is making more and more baleage mostly because, thanks to its quality, the cow herd is now raised on grass and baleage with no supplements."

### **Her rise to the top**

As a high school student working at Woolfolk Farms, Alyssa decided to incorporate her newfound knowledge of cattle and forages and her farm responsibilities into an FFA project.

She chose forage production as one of her Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAE).

Alyssa set goals and started keeping records of her daily farm responsibilities. She said the main thing she wanted to gain from her SAE was a better understanding of the forage industry and what it takes to be successful and to sell a high-quality product.

"Woolfolk Farms was the perfect place to keep records for my SAE because Scott taught me so much about his successful forage operation," she says. "I ended up making it to the National FFA Convention proficiency award finals. And I won."

Walking away an SAE winner is not the only FFA success Alyssa has experienced. She is also the Tennessee FFA state vice president.

She is very modest about her FFA success and credits her mentor, Scott, and her love of the industry.

"My record book is just something I did along with my work," she says. "I wanted to be a state officer because I like FFA and the members. I wanted to be able to talk to members about the importance of production agriculture."

### **Association involvement**

Alyssa says she is proud to be a part of the Hereford industry and that she wants to take a more active role in the youth sector.

She is currently serving as the Tennessee Junior Polled Hereford Association's vice president.

"I also love the show aspect of the Hereford industry and go to shows every chance I get," she says.

Alyssa attended the 2009 Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE) in Tulsa, where she placed second in the illustrated speech contest. She has also

exhibited at several state fairs in her region, including Tennessee, Kentucky and Missouri. Alyssa says she is excited about attending the 2012 JNHE in Grand Island, Neb.

### **For the good of the industry**

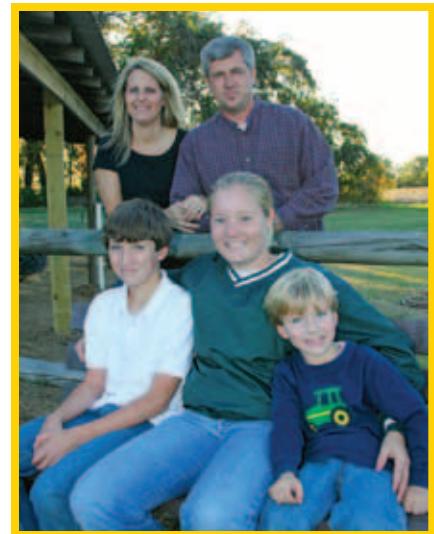
Alyssa is currently living 200 miles away from the farm she calls her favorite place to be. She is a sophomore agriculture business major at Tennessee Tech University at Cookeville.

Even though she has a full course load, FFA state officer duties and is the Tennessee Junior Polled Hereford Association vice president, she still finds time to work at the university's beef farm.

"It's a lot of work and, with calving season, I sometimes work 10-hour days," she says. "But it's hard being away from the Woolfolks, so I like keeping busy and being around the cattle at the school."

Alyssa says she is very interested in genetics and pedigrees. She enjoys being a part of the university's breeding decisions and embryo transfer (ET) and artificial insemination (AI) programs. She is also responsible for the lone Hereford in Tennessee Tech's primarily Simmental cow herd.

After graduating, she plans to go to law school and focus on agricultural law, representing production agriculture. She hopes to earn enough money in that profession to buy a farm and build a herd of registered Hereford cattle.



The Woolfolk family considers Alyssa one of the family. Pictured here with Alyssa are Scott, Cher, John Thomas and Russ.

"If Alyssa could start farming tomorrow, I know that's what she would do," Scott says. "But I told her if she wants to raise cattle, she has to have a job that will make some money. She will make a great lawyer because of her work ethic and dedication to the producers and the industry."

Scott says Alyssa has proved to be much more than just an employee — she's an asset on the farm and a member of the family.

"To me, Scott is my dad, and I truly appreciate everything he has done for me," Alyssa says. "I look forward to my future in the Hereford industry and will always call Woolfolk Farms home." **HW**



Alyssa was recognized as the 2011 National FFA Forage Production SAE winner. While working at Woolfolk Farms she assists with the farm's hay enterprise.