

Leading On

Hereford producers serve in beef industry roles to give back to the industry that has been so good to them.

by *Katrina Huffstutler*



In a shrinking industry facing growing challenges, strong and willing leaders have never been more important. Important are people who will give up time from their families and operations for the greater good. Important are people who work tirelessly to protect the business and lifestyle they love so that future generations will have the same opportunities.

In the Hereford family, these leaders are everywhere — serving in local, state and national cattle organizations representing the breed and the industry as a whole. Here are the stories of three Hereford breeders currently serving the beef industry and the reasons why they serve.

Richard Gebhart

“It has always been important to serve the industry that serves me,” says Richard Gebhart, chairman of the Federation of State Beef Councils, matter-of-factly. Gebhart and his family manage Beacon Hill Ranch near Claremore, Okla.

With a military career that took him around the world for a large part of his life, it wasn't until he and his wife, Susan, settled back on the ranch in

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Oklahoma that he was able to give back to the beef industry.

He started out serving in a local capacity and then expanded into roles with the Oklahoma Hereford Association and the Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association.

When their girls became active in junior Hereford activities, the couple naturally also began committing their time and energy to those events, something he wouldn't trade for anything.

"We value the hours spent together in the truck traveling to junior nationals and the friends we have made raising funds to support junior programs," Gebhart says. "We couldn't ask for a more rewarding family pastime."

As for his current role, it's something he's proud to be a part of.

"When I got involved with the Oklahoma Beef Council, my eyes were really opened to the value of our Beef Checkoff Program," he says. "I'm most pleased with how the dollar is managed by the producers serving on our state boards. There are over 700 producers and industry stakeholders serving on the boards of the 45 state beef councils. This grassroots structure of individual beef councils is much like our Hereford structure with producers serving at all levels and making decisions that impact our future."

Fifty years ago, in 1963, state beef councils organized nationally to create the Federation of State Beef Councils so they could lead a coordinated consumer outreach effort. Gebhart's services at the Oklahoma Beef Council lead to him serving as chair of the Federation.

"Through this leadership role I continue to learn more

and be more impressed with how our beef checkoff program is leading the industry in addressing issues important to consumers," he says.



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For example, Gebhart explains, as a result of sensitivity from consumers about the affect beef production has on the environment, the checkoff launched a first-of-its-kind beef sustainability research project. This research project will provide insight to the value beef production brings to society, the economy and the environment.

"As we all contemplate where to invest our limited spare time — and there are plenty of requests for that time — I'm more than happy to donate my time to those organizations that improve my bottom line," Gebhart says. "For me that is the Oklahoma and American Hereford Associations and the beef checkoff program through the Federation of State Beef Councils. It's all about what delivers value."

Dale Spencer

When Dale Spencer of Spencer Herefords, Brewster, Neb., returned to his hometown after college, he had plenty of people ask him just why he was back and what he expected to do. His answer was always the same.

"I'd say, 'Well I hope to be a successful rancher and one day be the president of the Nebraska Cattlemen,'" Spencer says.

Today, he's both.

Though the fourth-generation Hereford breeder always aspired to lead the state organization, it wasn't something he pursued.

"I guess I've always been a kind of person who, if something starts to come to me, then I'm going to say, 'OK. If you guys want me to do it I'll do it.' I let them come to me."

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His laid-back style has also always been agenda-free. Spencer is proud to say he has never run for anything, saying, “This is what we’re going to do,” or “I’m going to get in and get this done.”

“That’s what boards are for – working together to achieve things. One thing I like about policy organizations like Nebraska Cattlemen and the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) is your membership determines what your policy is,” he says. “And then those of us who are leadership or on staff take that policy seriously. When we visit with our senators and state legislators and things like that, we carry that membership’s policy. We don’t step out on a limb with our own opinions.”

Leading up to his current role, Spencer served in many other positions as a volunteer leader – starting on the board and then serving as chair of the Nebraska Beef Council, positions that lead

to roles on NCBA’s executive and advertising committees. And, as if these weren’t enough, during his time with the beef council, he also joined the American Hereford Association board of directors. Though he admits doing so much at once was at times “brutal,” he says it was a very fulfilling time, too.

It also helped prepare him for his most challenging role yet, leading the Nebraska Cattlemen. Luckily, he says, he also got a bit of a warm-up from them.

“They bring you in as vice president, and then you’re president-elect and then you’re president. And it just seems like every year they keep involving you in more things along the way,” he says.

He says the job as president can vary quite a bit depending on the issues facing the state and industry at the time, but it always means “a lot of interviews, a lot of phone calls and a lot of time.”

At the time of this interview, Spencer had recently been

busy dealing with the sequester and its possible effect on meat inspection. It consumed a big part of his weekly and even daily thoughts and conversations.

“With these kinds of issues, when you’re in a leadership position, you have to be informed,” he says. “You have to be educated and when you’ve got an interview request, you’ve got to know what you’re talking about and you’ve got to make a lot of sense.”

He said the most surprising aspect of serving the industry is how things can change from one week to the next.

“You think you’ve one hot button issue this week and then the next issue. The next week something else turns up and the last week is in the rearview mirror,” Spencer says.

But despite all of the time and stress, he wouldn’t have it any other way. After all, nothing can beat the reward.

“I can’t think of anything else more positive than the great friendships, the great network and the great relationships that are developed,” Spencer says. “And those things will last until the end.”

Barb Wilkinson

Barb Wilkinson, Centennial, Colo., has her dad to thank for her lifetime of leadership in the cattle business.

When she was just a high school freshman, her dad said, “I think we need to attend these Colorado Junior Hereford Field Days.”

Admittedly, she had no idea what that was.

She’d shown in 4-H since reaching eligibility age but had never been active in the breed despite growing up on a Hereford operation.



Dale Spencer, Nebraska Cattlemen president, leading a discussion at the 2012 Nebraska Cattlemen Annual Convention in Kearney.

It didn't take long for her to become involved in the Colorado Junior Hereford Association and eventually to serve on the American Junior Hereford Association board from 1982-85. She says she made lifelong friendships, had great experiences and even came in second in the national speech contest.

Twenty years later, she was serving on the American Hereford Women board with one of those lifelong friends — the same one who beat her in the speech contest, in fact, Bonnie Coley-Malir. She still keeps in touch with Coley-Malir, as well as fellow former Kansas Hereford Queen Diane Johnson among many others.

The executive director of leadership development for NCBA says starting out young in an organization as she did is “so valuable.” It's undoubtedly led to her continuing work both as a volunteer leader and a staff member in the industry she grew up in.

From 1989 to 1996, Wilkinson worked for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, heading up a program originally called Myth Busters. Later renamed Myth Stoppers to avoid legal action from another organization using the name, this group ended up being the precursor to today's Masters of Beef Advocacy, “long before we had online availability,” she adds.

During that time, she trained about 2,000 producers to tell their stories, whether that meant writing or talking about them.

Next, she served as director of communications for the Colorado Cattle Feeders (which later became the Colorado Livestock Association). While there, she got the opportunity to work with the

association's volunteer leaders on a daily basis and quickly realized just how valuable they are to any organization.

In 2007 Wilkinson returned to NCBA, originally heading up



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state services, the group that oversees the Federation of State Beef Councils. But a restructuring in 2009 meant another change for her, this time getting her back to her leadership development roots.

Her job today? She likes to think of it as empowering people to live their legacies. And “‘What is the legacy you want to leave?’ is a question we do ask the officers from time to time,” she says.

She credits her own leadership experience within the Hereford industry for preparing her for her career.

“It was just a great opportunity at both levels to work with passionate people,” she says. “Of course, obviously, our focus with both of those groups is the Hereford breed, but both of them were more about doing things so that somebody else could have that same chance we had — or even for more.”

Just do it

Think you might have what it takes to give back to the industry in a leadership role? Think you can't? Wilkinson has some advice.

“Just don't be afraid to try,” she says. “Don't be afraid to run for an office, or to serve on a committee. I think sometimes we feel like, ‘I can't do that, I'm not good enough,’ or ‘I'm not quite at that level.’ But, no. One of the most valuable lessons that I've learned over the years is that not all leaders are at the podium. There are an awful lot of leaders that are around the room asking the right questions.”

And in an industry like this, there's room for everyone. **HW**