

Growing Pains

Retiring board members Brady Jensen, Elise Hackett, Kristin Bielema and Jason May say goodbye to their time on the NJHA board of directors.

by **Bridget Beran**

When Brady Jensen, Elise Hackett, Kristin Bielema, and Jason May joined the National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) board of directors in 2012, there were 663 exhibitors and 1,651 entries at the Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE). Three short years later, they retired from the board, but this time around, there were more than 800 exhibitors and 2,030 entries. During their time as directors, the NJHA has gone through some serious growth spurts, and these directors worked to ensure that this growth was as painless as possible.

"I will miss this group's solid leadership and direction that they provided, not only for the NJHA board, but the entire organization as a whole," says Amy Cowan, American Hereford Association director of youth activities and foundation. "They were lucky to serve at a time when the amazing growth of the NJHA and the Junior National Hereford Expo has been our biggest challenge. They met each issue that came our way with a positive attitude and quickly went to work to leave the NJHA poised for more growth and success after they handed down their maroon jackets to the next group of leaders."

Brady, NJHA chairman from Courtland, Kan., addressed the rapid expansion in his retiring address, but he and his fellow directors implemented other changes, like shortening the JNHE by a day and starting the Hereford tailgate event. While each of these changes came with challenges, the amount of money saved by a shorter JNHE is substantial, and the tailgate went off without a hitch and received rave reviews.

"Our class on the board had a lot of different things that had to be changed and it was almost always rooted back to the fact that we served three years when the numbers for the show just kept growing and growing," Brady says. "Changing the distribution of membership and regions to better represent the juniors across the U.S. is what I was most excited about. And we watched it work for a year too."

Getting started

The 2012 JNHE was hosted in Grand Island, Neb., as was the 2015 JNHE, so this board class got to go out in the same place that it all began. Walking into the barns this time around, Elise, who is from Tuscola, Ill., says all the

memories of campaigning and being elected came flooding back to her. Reflecting on the night they got their jackets, emotions were high for each of the four.

"Going to the closing ceremonies that night, I was a nervous wreck," says Kristin, of Ada, Mich.

"I sat in the way, way, way back of the expo hall here at Grand Island with my family and everyone and I remember them giving their retiring addresses and walking out and I'm so nervous and I had no idea what was about to happen. Everyone starts walking away, I saw Elise get hers and I saw Kevin Ernst walk over by Brady and Jason and Mallorie Phelps comes walking all the way to the back and she walked around my table and passes me and my heart sunk because I thought it was a no. But she came back around and gave me her jacket and my heart just stopped in amazement. I was so excited and so happy. I got tears in my eyes and I just looked at my mom and my dad and I saw how excited and happy they were for me," she says.

"It was probably one of the best moments of my life, just seeing the pride in my parents' eyes. It was a wonderful moment in my life and something I'll probably never get back."

Nerves were also present for Elise, and she said it was nice to receive her jacket from Andrew Albin, a retiring director from her home state of Illinois.

"The retiring board members said their goodbyes and they started walking down off the stage and I put my head down in my hands and closed my eyes and then I felt the tap on my shoulder and it was just a huge relief," Elise says. "I looked up and my mom was bawling so I cried even harder. It was unbelievable and it's a feeling that only comes around once in a lifetime."

That once-in-a-lifetime feeling carried her and her fellow board



Retiring directors Elise Hackett, Kristin Bielema, Brady Jensen and Jason May present retiring NJHA advisors Jami and Bob Goble, Alto, Mich., with a bronze bull in recognition of their dedication to the NJHA board.

members through their next three years of leading the NJHA.

“It was exciting. It was a lot of different emotions at the time,” Jason, who is from Randolph, Minn., says. “I didn’t think it was going to be near as tough and as long as it was and it turned out for the best. I met a lot of good people. The emotions were real high in that moment.”

For Brady, sitting in the banquet hall waiting for his maroon jacket brought back memories of watching former board members receiving their own jackets.

“I just kept thinking how amazing it would be to be awarded with a jacket,” Brady says. “When I did get the jacket draped over me I was overwhelmed with joy and was excited and ready to take on the NJHA.”

Family matters

And take on the NJHA they did. Shortly after being elected, the new board members traveled to the Program for Reaching Individuals Determined to Excel (PRIDE) Convention in Michigan, and they all agreed that was where they truly started to bond with their fellow board members. For Elise, that was the trip where she says they became best friends.



Jason’s entire family was able to attend JNHE for the first time this summer.

Kristin explains, “I was brand new to it but man, did I feel like I was part of a family. We became friends in a heartbeat and that’s something I’ll never forget. These people are my best friends and I know I can go to them with anything. It’s a smaller family within a bigger family.”

Though the family changed members each year, for Kristin, the memories of laughter and accomplishment after board meetings will stay with her long after her years on the board are over. For Jason and Brady, PRIDE was also the first time it really hit them that they were on the national junior board and exactly what that responsibility entailed.

“We got to Michigan and we sat through our first three-hour meeting before lunch. You learn real fast what it’s all about,” Jason says. “You learn how many people there are to thank. It didn’t take long to realize how big of a deal it was being on this board and how many decisions you were going to make that would affect this whole breed.”

For Elise, that moment came over and over again throughout the last three years. She says it has been a privilege to serve every junior member she’s been able to help over the years. Though she wasn’t really sure what she was getting herself into in the beginning, she says the last three years have been an incredible ride.

“It hits me almost every event that I go to. The day after I got my jacket, I was out here working the owned show and I was listening to Eldon Krebs and his speech and I looked out at the stands and I was just in awe of what I was about to do,” Elise says. “At every show, I’m reminded that this is such a privilege. I’m so lucky to have been able to serve these wonderful people in my family, because I consider every single person here at JNHE my family. Every time I walk into the grand drive at any show, I’m just in awe of the cattle and the people and I’m just reminded of how important and special this is. I’m really lucky to have been a part of it.”



Kristin Bielema is the 21-year-old daughter of Dave and Jill Bielema, Ada, Mich. The retiring membership chair and former communications chair will be a senior at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Mich., majoring in business. Described by her fellow board members as energetic, driven and social, Kristin has been a member of the Michigan Junior Hereford Association for 10 years, where she served as director, secretary and treasurer. She has attended nine JNHEs and the last four PRIDE Conventions.

Director of Youth Activities Amy Cowan says Kristin worked hard as communications chair to keep everyone informed as well as bringing passion to the NJHA board. Along with Elise Hackett, Kristin was instrumental in starting the newcomer orientation.

Kristin urges juniors who are interested in being on the board one day to meet as many people as they can and to involve themselves outside of the showing. Kristin thanks Amy Cowan and Bailey Clanton, her fellow board members, the Collins family, and her family.

“I wouldn’t be showing a Hereford if it wasn’t for my oldest sister and for mom and dad taking care of everything while I’m away,” Kristin says. “Thank you for supporting me and being proud of me, no matter how I do that day. Thank you for believing in me, even when I might not believe in myself.”

Though she retired from the board, Elise reassured junior members in her retiring address that she wasn’t going anywhere and would be there to help anyone who needed her. She found her passion for the Hereford breed and her

desire to run for the board through someone helping her. That assistance spurred her to help others find their passions while she was on the board. When she was young and showing at her state show, one of her heifers was acting up. But then board member Wade Perks came to her rescue.

"I was really nervous to come to JNHE and he was always there and



Elise Hackett is the 21-year-old daughter of Dave and Marcia Hackett, Tuscola, Ill. Her fellow board members say she is determined, proud, helpful and kind. She will be a senior studying animal science pre-vet at the University of Illinois. The retiring communications chair and former fundraising chair has been a member of the NJHA since she was 6 and has attended multiple JNHEs and PRIDE Conventions in addition to competing in numerous contests.

Director of Youth Activities Amy Cowan says that Elise was always very involved in the mentor program and, along with Kristin Bielema, was instrumental in starting the newcomer orientation. She says Elise was always there for the youngest of Hereford showmen to lend a helping hand.

Elise says those who want to be on the board one day should find their passion and run with it and set their goals high. Elise gives thanks for the Illinois juniors and their families, her family and the NJHA membership as a whole.

"I think that I have them to thank the most," Elise says. "They're the ones that chose me and put their trust in me to lead their organization and I don't think that there's anything else that I could say to them beyond thank you. I feel honored that they chose me to be one of their leaders."

anytime I had a spooky heifer, I could count on a board member to stay with me and make me feel safe," Elise says. "I just love all the little kids. I would consider my time on the board successful even if I only helped one kid realize that they loved to do something, like judging or fitting."

Giving back to the breed that had a huge influence on her life was the inspiration for Kristin as she ran for the board. Kristin says the Hereford breed brought her closer to her older sisters, Lindsay and Kara, as well as bonding her and her dad together.

"This breed itself has done so much for me," Kristin says. "It's shaped me as a person and it's brought my family extremely close together. Without the idea of the Hereford family, my family might not be as close as we are today. I want for all these kids to have that same experience. (I want them to) have these experiences with each other and grow with their families and get all these friendships. I wanted to give back to the association that has done so much for me and has helped build me as a person and given me opportunities to grow. I want to show kids that it's possible through this association."

It was friendship that brought Jason to the board. After becoming friends with Brady and hearing his plan to run for the board, Jason was inspired to run as well.

"When he said he was going to run, I thought maybe we should do it together," Jason says. "I've always recognized the board members and how much they meant to this association and how much they do for the kids and I wanted to be able to give back to everybody who had given so much to me."

Looking up to the board of directors was also part of what spurred Brady to run, in addition to his experience in the NJHA and at the JNHE.

"The board members over the years had been the people I had looked up to the most," Brady says. "When you combine that with the experiences I had as a junior member, the NJHA

has impacted my life in a way that is truly unimaginable."

Looking back

The four say their memories from their years on the NJHA board are priceless as well as countless. While Kristin swears sometimes all they did was laugh, she also adds that the sense of accomplishment of being able to look out on a grand drive and know that this is the breed she represents tops the list. For Elise, traveling all across the country to cattle shows and helping young Hereford enthusiasts are some of the brightest memories. But the times spent together as a board always serve as a highlight.

"The friendships I've made from being on the board, getting to know each other and their life stories, it's been amazing the whole way through," Jason says. "It's amazing how many people can become your best friends that I never would've even met if it hadn't been for this experience."

Brady agreed, saying his favorite memories come from the times when just the 12 board members were together and bonding as a team. Spending three years working tirelessly side-by-side with someone will certainly build team camaraderie, but for this board class, they became more than just colleagues.



Brady congratulates his sister, Brooke, for being elected to the NJHA board.



Kristin says that being able to help all of the junior members, especially the youngest ones, has been her favorite part of being on the board.

“They’ve helped me grow into something I don’t think I ever could’ve been without them,” Kristin says. “I love you guys. I don’t know what I would do without you. Elise is like my sister. Brady and Jason, they’re like the brothers I never had. I love them to death but sometimes we’ve got to kick their butts into gear. But they all have taught me a lot; we’ve come a long way. It’s been a long haul in the last three years but we pushed through it and we’ve accomplished a lot. It’s been an honor. It’s been incredible. It’s only been three years but we’ve done a lot and moved a lot of mountains. We built a path for people to move more mountains.”

Saying thank you to the rest of his team, Brady says they were class-act people, who worked their tails off to better the NJHA.

Elise says, “They have been my life for the past three years. They have honestly taught me so much, not only about the Hereford breed, but also about myself. Thank you for running, thank you for serving with me, thank you for taking me in. They have truly changed my life and I’m really happy I have the fond memories with them, I wouldn’t have wanted to share them with anyone else.”

While their time on the board is over, the importance of their experience will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Kristin says being on

the board meant the world to her and was an unforgettable opportunity.

Elise says. “This experience has done so much for me. It’s introduced me to some of my best friends, people that will be my bridesmaids. It’s been a great ride, meeting all of the junior members, parents and adult members from across the country. And learning about the Hereford breed has honestly helped shape me into who I am today. I wouldn’t trade it for the world.”

While the ability to travel all over the country and to make lifetime connections topped the experience for Jason, the people are what he says he’ll miss the most.

“I’m going to miss the people,” Jason says. “Every time you try to walk by in a maroon coat, you get stopped and told how good of a job you’re doing or how proud they are of you and getting that and realizing how much people believe in this junior program and how much they believe in the board is unreal. It just doesn’t happen to everybody. A normal kid doesn’t get told how great this program is.”

For Brady, the experience was beyond words.

“I really don’t know if I can answer what this board has meant to me right now,” Brady says. “Ask me in 10 to 20 years and I might be able to tell you. Right now, I can tell you



Jason May is the 22-year-old son of Mark and Ann May, Randolph, Minn. The retiring fundraising chair will be a senior studying animal science at South Dakota State University this fall. Described by his fellow board members as charismatic, hard-working and friendly, Jason has shown cattle for 14 years and has been coming to the JNHE since 2009. He has been a member of the Minnesota Junior Hereford Breeders for seven years and served as president in 2011-2012.

“I met Jason when he ran for a director position and he hasn’t missed a beat since and I couldn’t be prouder of the things he has accomplished as an individual in his three short years on the board,” says Amy Cowan, director of youth activities.

“He brought loads of enthusiasm to the board and a sincere passion for the breed and most importantly the youth. He loved nothing more than to meet as many junior members as he could and he left his mark across the nation as he travelled and represented the NJHA board at shows and events.”

While he first thought contests “were bogus,” Jason urges juniors who hope to one day serve on the board to do as many contests as they can because of the communication skills they build. Jason gives thanks to his family, John and Melody McCurry, the Jensen family, Keith and Danny Fawcett, and Tony Marthaler.

the people I have been granted the opportunity to meet and get to know on such a personal level from all across the country is what I love and those people mean more to me than they realize. It meant the absolute entire world to me.”



Brady Jensen is the 22-year-old son of Kevin and Sheila Jensen, Courtland, Kan. The retiring chairman is described by his fellow board members as passionate, eloquent and focused. Brady graduated from Kansas State University in May with a degree in animal science and industry and agriculture economics.

He has been a member of the NJHA since he was 7 and has exhibited at all but one JNHE. His honors in the NJHA range from being named Junior Herdsman of the Year to winning champion or reserve champion showman in every age group. He also served as the NJHA membership chair.

Director of Youth Activities Amy Cowan describes Brady as a true leader and an outside-the-box thinker. She says she remembers him at his first JNHE and how he embraced the NJHA chairman role at his last JNHE.

"From the trailer parking lot to the judging contest arena, clear through to his retiring remarks at the awards ceremony, Brady took a professional approach and his Hereford pride was evident every step of the way for our retiring chairman," Amy says.

Brady says future board hopefuls should run early in their junior career, and running for the board will be a rewarding experience. While Brady says the entire NJHA is to be commended for supporting the board, he offers special thanks to Amy Cowan and Bailey Clanton for all the hard work they put in, along with his family.

"My parents and family are the best support system one single person could ask for," Brady says.

Handing it down

As they came full circle back to Grand Island, they were faced with the moment of handing down their jackets and the responsibility of leading the NJHA to four new deserving candidates. For Brady, whose little sister Brooke ran for the board this year, it was an especially great moment.

"I was just finishing up my retiring address and already knew I was getting the opportunity to pass the jacket on to my sister so I was so excited for her chance to get to serve the board. Just realizing I was handing my jacket over to someone so ready to serve the organization made the feeling a little easier," Brady says.

For the others, coming to the end of their journey was hard but not without its bright spots, as well.

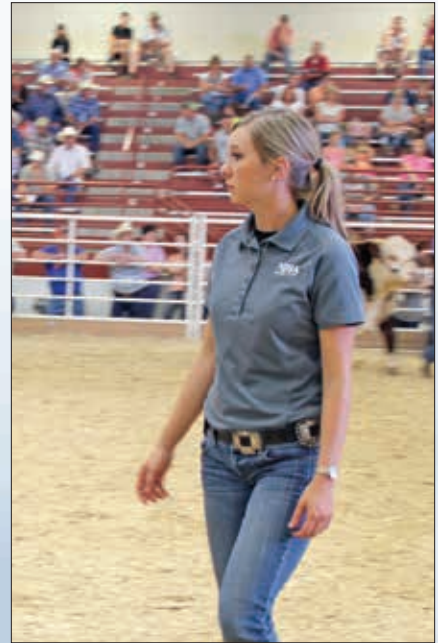
"It's hard to believe that three years have gone by," Elise says. "It's very bittersweet but I'm excited that I can finally be with my family and my cattle again. I'm going to miss this. I'm going to miss all the kids but I'm still here for another year."

Having his whole family present at the awards ceremony for the first time made the experience better for Jason.

"It was sad and I tried my hardest not to tear up but I did," Jason says. "But getting to experience it with my family was pretty amazing. This was the first time they've all been at the show so that was pretty cool. Getting to do it with my good friend from back home Tony (Marthaler) the whole way through and having all these supporters who've been there along the way with me that night was pretty cool."

In handing down their jackets, they also offered advice to the board members who would follow in their footsteps. Kristin reminds future board members to stay on top of their schedules and to communicate with their fellow board members.

"Encourage each other; a family works best together when it's helping each other. It's hard to have twelve big, independent, leader personalities in a room," Kristin says. "Learn to be a follower, as well as a leader. You can



Elise was inspired to run for the board by former board members who made her feel safe in the showring when she was young and now she tries to always be there for juniors while they show.

do a lot by being a supporter of the rest of the board and the ideas that they have."

Brady encouraged current and future board members to keep climbing their mountains and always to keep improving. Elise reminded juniors that while this job can be tough, they should never forget to have fun and to make the most of every opportunity.

"You have to be flexible, because those who are flexible are never bent out of shape," Elise says. "Board members have to remember that there is not a single person running this organization. This is a group of highly qualified members and one person isn't going to get all the credit, so don't expect that. You'll have to work as a team. Don't let anything pass you by because these three years go by so fast. Before you realize it, you're going to have to hand your jacket off and you'll have so much more that you wanted to do."

Jason gave simple but straightforward advice for those set to follow in his shoes.

"Learn how to live with no sleep and get comfortable boots," Jason says. **HW**