

Two Businesses, One Leader



2015 AHA President Eric Walker led the Association through a year of change, setting up for successful times ahead.

by Julie White

His cell phone rings in mid sentence, and with utmost Southern politeness, he excuses himself from the conversation to take a call and answer some questions from an employee at his tree and shrub nursery. Getting back to the conversation at hand, he notices a recently born, wobbly Hereford calf and new mom over by the pond, so he turns the truck toward the pair's direction, anxious to find out the calf's gender and if it's doing well.

On the phone again, he calls his herdsman to share the news. He picks up an iPad out of the console to record the outcome on a spreadsheet and jokes that the truck is his office as he goes back and forth between the two businesses he owns and oversees — Walker Polled Hereford Farm and Walker Nursery.

Leadership is not new to American Hereford Association (AHA) President Eric Walker, Morrison, Tenn., but with each role he's taken on, he says he's

learned something along the way while hoping to give back to organizations and businesses that have meant much to him. See "Balancing Businesses" Page 31.

"It's been an honor to serve as president and follow the footsteps of the tremendous leaders we've had in the past," Eric says. "Those are the ones that are making today successful."

AHA Executive Vice President Jack Ward says Eric has been dedicated to serving the Hereford breed. "He has given a great deal of time during his presidency traveling to sales, field days and other meetings representing the AHA."

Jack says Eric showed great leadership through the challenge of finding a new executive vice president while maintaining stability with AHA staff in order to keep the Association moving smoothly. "He is well organized and has done a great job of keeping

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Walker Polled Hereford Farm began with Eric Walker's father, Sam, and Eric hopes to one day pass it on to his son, Cody. Pictured are Cody, Eric and Rhonda Walker.

the communication open between staff and Board committees," he says.

"Eric has always been an advocate for keeping the AHA at the front of breed improvement, marketing and creating efficiencies at the AHA office while being fiscally responsible. We are grateful for his time leading the Association."

Hereford roots

Eric's interest in Hereford cattle began when he was a child. His father, Sam, owned a commercial Hereford herd. Eric purchased his first registered female in 1981. "I grew up with red-and-whiteface cattle so that's what I knew," Eric says, as he thinks back on his involvement with the breed.

"I knew they were docile, easy to handle, good mothers and fertile. I always liked red-and-white cows on green grass. I've continued to breed and grow my

herd to present day to 125 cows and we'll be breeding 60 to 65 heifers this next season. With natural calves and embryo transfer (ET) this calving year we'll have 150-160 calves."

Eric, along with his wife, Rhonda, son, Cody, and stepson, Casey, manages Walker Polled Hereford Farm in middle Tennessee and strives to produce predictable, performance genetics for their customers. Cody joined the family's cattle and nursery business fulltime in 2009, and Eric says he helps out in all aspects of both operations. "He's very well-rounded and will be ready to step into my shoes eventually," Eric says. Also helping out day-to-day for the past 16 years is herdsman Ray Kozak.

The Walkers have a broad-range breeding program in an effort to meet the various needs of their customers. "We're not specifically one bloodline," he says. "We try to have cattle that will work not only here in the Southeast, but all across the country."

The family has hosted 18 production sales since 1986 and will have its 19th sale Labor Day weekend in 2016. Walker genetics have sold to 37 states, Canada and Mexico, and the Walkers have shipped embryos to Europe.

Eric extensively utilizes artificial insemination (AI) and continues to grow their ET program. "One of the biggest issues facing us in using ET is the shortage of recipients so we have farmed out to some cooperator herds to raise calves for us," he says. "We put in our first IVF embryos last year and those calves are being born now."

They have two calving seasons, calving some cows in the fall and a majority in the spring. The herd is pastured on approximately 500 acres of fescue grass, and the Walkers purchase grain for feed and supplement. They also make their own hay.

"We are fortunate in my area to have 50-inch rainfall a year and that, of course, makes an environment for growing grass really good," Eric says. "When we are in a cool, wet season the pastures are lush and cattle do extremely well. Also here the weather



Producing predictable, profitable cattle for his customers is Eric's goal.

can get hot and humid and the Hereford cows have adapted to that well."

Eric says his main goal for his cow herd is to produce cattle that are productive, functional and fertile and raise calves every year. "I prefer a cow that I would describe as middle of the road," he says. "I don't want to get extremes that's too small or too large. I want to stay in the middle and hopefully that way we can have cattle go out and be functional and predictable, and have a cows that can wean a high percentage of their body weight and bring in a good calf each year."

Eric keeps the commercial cattleman in mind when marketing bulls. "I want to produce bulls that can go out into the commercial industry and do well for those commercial breeders," he says. "I want them to have live calves at birth and yet get up and go and grow really fast up to weaning and yearling and hopefully improve carcasses for calves that they're raising."

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Eric prefers moderate cattle which he believes will meet various market demands.

Balancing businesses



Along with Walker Polled Hereford Farm, Eric Walker, Morrison, Tenn., owns and manages Walker Nursery. The business was founded in the 1950s by Sam Walker (Eric's father) and his five brothers near McMinnville, Tenn.

The business saw steady expansion through the early 1970s as a local grower for a larger nursery and Walker Nursery was introduced to re-wholesalers in a large portion of the country from the Midwest to the East Coast. In 1986 Eric joined the family business full-time after graduating from Middle Tennessee State University with a degree in agricultural economics and a minor in marketing.

In February 1988, Eric took charge of day-to-day operations at the nursery. The company has grown exponentially since. After acquiring an additional 215 acres, Walker Nursery grows trees and shrubs on 500 acres of highly fertile soil and raises container-grown plants on an additional 10 acres. It grows many varieties of shade trees, ornamental and flowering trees, and many other plants from roses to grasses to numerous types of flowering and evergreen shrubs.

Today, Walker Nursery ships products to 20-25 states a year, primarily east of Kansas City and Dallas, to garden centers, re-wholesalers and landscapers. Walker Nursery was one of the suppliers of trees for a memorial in rural Pennsylvania where Flight 93 crashed on 9/11.

Eric says the two businesses overlap at times. "The busy time for the nursery is in the spring when we're harvesting and also transplanting a new crop," he explains. "Of course that's during calving and breeding season. We're stretched pretty far February through April."

However, the main area where the two are similar is that Eric volunteers his time in both industries. He has served as president of the Tennessee Nursery and Landscape Association and is also a member of the Southern Nursery Association and the Middle Tennessee Nursery Association. In addition to being this year's American Hereford Association president, Eric is a member of the Middle and East Tennessee Hereford Associations as well as a member of the Tennessee and Warren County Cattlemen's Associations. He has also been a director and president of the Tennessee Polled Hereford Association.

"Being a member of associations and serving on boards has helped me grow as a person and to make lifelong friendships with other members," he says. "It's helped me be able to know how associations work and it's let me grow and become a better person."

Not surprisingly, Eric also says cattle business and nursery business strategies are similar. "The biggest thing is to make sure that we produce a quality product that our customers will keep coming back and wanting more of," he says. "As long as we keep producing a better product, they'll want more of that product." **HW**

Q&A with AHA President Eric Walker



What do you consider to be the five highlights of fiscal year 2015?

For me this year's highlights include hiring Jack Ward as the new American Hereford Association (AHA) executive vice president; launching a new national ad campaign; marking increases in registrations, transfers and membership; hosting a record-breaking Junior National Hereford Expo in Grand Island, Neb.; and having the opportunity to bring the Board to my home state of Tennessee for its summer meeting.

What do we need to work on as a breed?

As a breed we need to continue to strive to produce better cattle. As seedstock producers, we need to pay attention to what commercial cattlemen are looking for in bulls and replacement females. We must breed cattle that are structurally correct and have good feed conversion and mothering ability. We cannot use single trait selection. And to gain market share, we must breed better cattle and take care of new and old customers.

What are some of your favorite memories from your time on the Board?

Probably the most favorite memory I have is making lifetime friendships with other Board members and Hereford breeders. It has been educational to travel around and see how other breeders deal with different environments and challenges.

When you were elected to the Board, what were your goals for the Association? How has that changed?

My main goal was to make Hereford a better breed and to have a stronger organization. I certainly think this has been accomplished by the increase in registrations, transfers and memberships.

I don't think this goal should change for future Boards. If we work together as a membership and breed we will continue to grow and gain more market share.

How would you summarize your tenure on the Board?

My tenure on the Board has been very enlightening. As a Board member, a person finds out the real innerworkings of the Association. There is so much work being done behind the scenes to make the Association better. I would encourage breeders to get involved in the Association whether it be on a local, state or national level. Most of the time the benefits and rewards outweigh the work that is put into time spent working on the Board.

What are your thoughts about serving as the 2015 AHA president?

It has been an honor and a privilege to serve as the 2015 AHA president. The breed is seeing growth and prosperity. The Board of Directors have been a very good group to work with. We have faced some tough challenges and made decisions that I feel will continue to move the Hereford breed forward. **HW**

Serving the breed

Eric had similar goals for the AHA as he joined the board of directors in 2011. "My main goal was to make Hereford a better breed and to have a stronger organization," he says.

He describes his time on the Board as an enlightening experience. "I've gotten meet and know many fellow breeders that I would not have been able to meet otherwise and have made strong friendships with several current and former board members," he says. "This has made me grow as a person to be more about the membership and not about one single breeder or person. This board has tried to be that way and to look at the whole picture."

During his time on the AHA Board, Eric has served on the Executive, financial, member service and the Hall of Fame committees and chaired the marketing committee in 2013-14.

Eric says, as a board member, he found out what goes on behind the scenes. "With this Association I have realized how [the staff members] are compassionate and care about the membership," he explains. "The employees are honest and hardworking and they look out for the membership and they want everybody to get what they need. People that work for the AHA are true, down-to-earth individuals."

While he described his year as president as a trying year, he is proud of the work he and the Board accomplished. "This Board has come together and everyone had to get involved and take a role and they have done that," Eric says. "Every Board member stepped up to the plate and everyone has had input. It's been a really great year."

It has also been a year of change for the AHA. "We've instituted some new programs and we have a new executive vice president, but it's all been for the good of the organization," he says. "With everything that transpired, it made the Board closer. We gelled as a Board and worked together to accomplish what was put before us. I want to personally thank the Board for all the hard work they did."

One of the biggest challenges for the Board this year, Eric says, was filling the executive vice president position. "We took our time to make a sound decision, and I'm proud of the way the Board worked together with the search committee in place to hire Jack Ward."

As a former chair of the marketing committee, Eric was pleased the Board approved a new national ad campaign. "We've been challenged for a couple of years for a new ad campaign and I was glad to get that in place and moving forward," he says. "With the new ad campaign and new exec we are taking strides to keep the Association moving to the top. It was also a challenge to increase membership, registrations and transfers and we did that."

Eric says his term as president is not marked by this year; it will be marked down the road. "If the Hereford breed continues to grow and gain market share, that will tell how good this tenure was. I think we will. We've tried to put things in place for the members and the Association to make it grow and the membership to know that this Association is strong and has a future ahead of itself." **HW**