

Thousands of young cattle enthusiasts have had many of their best memories through involvement in the National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA). The NJHA hopes to shape young, responsible leaders, and it has done just that. Many NJHA alumni are in the industry now raising Hereford cattle, taking on impressive careers and even bringing their kids back to the Junior National Hereford Expo every summer. Follow this series to read more about just a few past NJHA members who are making a difference in the industry.

A Recipe for Success

*National Junior Hereford Association alumnus Kyle McMillan
journeys from the junior board to a professional career.*

by *Kayla M. Wilkins*

He took off the iconic maroon jacket for the last time as chairman at the 1995 Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE) in Louisville, Ky. Years of hard work and dedication, showing and raising Hereford cattle, had all built up to this moment that Kyle McMillan recalls as one of his fondest memories during his time as a junior in the National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA).

“Leading the membership meeting at the 1995 junior national in Louisville I had the realization of achieving a goal that I set out to accomplish four years prior,” he explains. “The personal sense of satisfaction of not only accomplishing a goal, but then also having the opportunity to lead one of the best youth organizations in the country is a very fond memory.”

McMillan has countless similar memories of his time in the NJHA but presently experiences the organization from a little bit different perspective. Today, he can be found ringside with his wife Jodi, supporting their



Kyle McMillan, past National Junior Hereford Association chairman, now works for Monsanto.

daughter, Lauren, and other youth at cattle shows. Beyond ringside encouragement, McMillan and his family operate Rustic Oaks Farm, Tiskilwa, Ill., a small Hereford operation providing show cattle for youth across the country.

Although McMillan has a profound passion for Hereford cattle, he has also taken his work ethic gained showing cattle as a young boy to another arena. He currently works as an area business

manager at one of the largest agriculture companies in the world — Monsanto.

Hereford roots

McMillan was born in St. Louis, Mo., where his family resided until he was 7 years old. His parents, being from rural backgrounds themselves, knew they wanted to raise their family in the same environment so they relocated near a rural community in Illinois.

The McMillans unloaded their first Hereford heifer at their property in Highland, Ill., in 1986, and that was the start of McMillan's journey. He distinctly remembers the moment he fell in love with the cattle industry at his first Hereford junior national in 1989. As McMillan grew up, he became very active in the NJHA and formed a genuine love for the association and all it stood for.

“I just absolutely loved it,” he says. “The people within the breed, all of the younger members, and really the contests and competitions got me hooked.”

He says the experience there initially sparked his passion for giving back to the Association for all these years.

“Unfortunately, I was 14 years old before I attended my first junior national,” he explains, “and that is one of the reasons why I have such passion right now for helping younger families utilize all the time they have in the junior program and get kids involved at a very young age.”

In addition to the NJHA, McMillan was an active 4-H and FFA member. After much leadership experience in those organizations throughout high school, McMillan embarked on a new role — a NJHA board member. Upon graduating high school in 1993, McMillan was elected to the NJHA Board of Directors.

“The junior national that year was in Perry, Ga.,” he recalls. “I remember distinctly looking up to those junior board members in maroon coats and from that time was always striving to figure out how I could get on the board.”

McMillan became the chairman in 1995, the year before his final JNHE in 1996.

In the meantime, McMillan’s journey as a college student was beginning at the University of Illinois, where he majored in agricultural economics. Upon graduation, he married and began



Kyle, his wife, Jodi, and daughter, Lauren, own and operate their small Hereford operation, Rustic Oaks Farm.

yet another venture to graduate school at Colorado State University. There, he received a master’s in beef industry leadership. After completing the program, McMillan began a journey as a professional in the agriculture industry.

Juniors, listen up

Because of his work ethic and network, McMillan had no trouble landing a job once he graduated. His first job was working as an agriculture chemical representative in southwest Iowa for Novartis Crop Protection. After several years, McMillan and his wife decided to move closer to family so he took a job with BASF Plant Science,

which specialized in nutritionally enhanced corn.

He says the change created the perfect career because it married his interest in crops and livestock. However, after 10 years on the job and a daughter growing up quickly, McMillan desired a position that allowed more time to spend with his family. This opened the door to his current role as an area business manager with Monsanto. He says his passion for the position lies in more areas than one.

“It is a great opportunity to lead a team of highly talented individuals as well as represent some of the best products and

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Rustic Oaks Farm raised the 2015 AHA Northeast Region Show Bull of the Year.



Lauren McMillan exhibited the 2010 JNHE champion horned female.

technologies in the industry,” he says.

McMillan says he greatly enjoys his challenging work and looks forward to many more years at Monsanto exploring various leadership roles. McMillan scored a career he loves and attributes much of his foundation in leadership and work ethic to involvement in organizations like NJHA.

“I try to leverage a lot of the things I learned on the junior board just in terms of managing people and successfully leading teams and things like that,” he says.

After a number of years in the professional arena, McMillan not only realizes the skills he gained while in NJHA but also cherishes the network he formed. He stands by the age-old saying, “It’s not always what you know, it’s who you know.”

“The youth program that the AHA has established creates an excellent environment for young people to network with people from all different walks of life,” he explains, “which is an excellent opportunity and building block for a future career.”

Beyond building a solid network during his time in the NJHA, McMillan has some other helpful hints for juniors approaching the end of their show career. He says being heavily involved at junior nationals in contests and competitions beyond the showing is the most vital advice he can present youth.

“They teach you a number of different skills whether it is public speaking, team marketing or

Excellence is never an accident, it is a result of sincere effort, skillful execution and the vision to see obstacles as opportunities.

— *Anonymous*



Lauren McMillan with her first champion at the 2010 JNHE.

livestock judging,” he says. “It is an outstanding way to broaden your horizons and become a more well-rounded individual.”

For the more seasoned showmen approaching the end of their show careers and seeking professional careers, he advises youth to take advantage of valuable internship opportunities.

“The job market is an extremely competitive marketplace and multiple internships will give them a leg up as they look for a career,” he notes, “and oftentimes those internships can turn into full-time employment.”

Lastly, McMillan urges young people to dream and never give up.

“Make sure you dream big, set goals and pour every ounce of your soul into achieving success. And, when you fail,” he says, “make sure that you learn from those mistakes and get up and tackle it again.”

Future in mind

This advice has not gone unheard, as McMillan has been presented with ample opportunity to mentor students involved in the cattle industry. Among some of the most influential times in his life is the one when he and his wife had the opportunity to serve as state junior advisors for two terms.

“We are truly humbled to be able to give back to an organization that gave so much to me and actually be chosen by the young

people that lead that organization,” he explains.

He says he has a genuine passion for the Hereford industry whether it is making breeding decisions on his farm or help in developing youth. He says the target customers at Rustic Oaks Farm are exhibitors looking to show heifers, and he greatly enjoys aiding those youth in a number of ways.

“Whether it’s our daughter or our customers’ children, or the youth that are on the National Junior Hereford Association board,

I get a great sense of purpose and satisfaction by helping those people grow and develop not only as Hereford breeders, but probably more importantly as just good, young adults that will make excellent people in the work force after college,” he says.

The same passion has translated to Lauren, as she has mentioned on several occasions she wants to continue raising Hereford cattle, too. McMillan’s hope, like any father’s, is she will accomplish all she sets out to do, and he will support her both in and out of the ring.

McMillan says regardless of whom he is speaking with, he has one sentiment he has found that truly encompasses his equation for success.

“I found this quote about three years ago and I have used it almost every day ever since,” he says. “Excellence is never an accident, it is a result of sincere effort, skillful execution and the vision to see obstacles as opportunities.’ As I think about young people in the breed, that is what I would ask them to strive for in terms of how they think about, not only today, but their future careers whether it is back on the ranch with their family raising Herefords or if it is out in the world working for a global corporation.” **HW**