

Who Will Step Up?

Young breeders explain their commitment to cattle production and the Hereford breed.

by *Haley Stark*

By 2050 the world's projected population is expected to reach over 9.5 billion. For agriculturalists, another statistic accompanying the exponential population growth is on their minds — less than 2% of the nation's population is farmers and ranchers, a number that is getting smaller every year.

Yet, that 2% provides the country, and the world, a reliable supply of fuel, food and fiber. Today, the average farmer is over 58 years old. As the population continues to expand, the decreasing and aging population of farmers is expected to cultivate the land and to produce commodities to feed the world — a hefty expectation.

Often out of the spotlight, there are young, ambitious cattlemen and women choosing to stay in production who are thriving in their own operations. Although diverse in their goals, management styles and locations, the following six Hereford breeders have all made a unanimous choice to stay involved within production agriculture and to encourage younger generations to remain engaged with the industry.

Like father, like son

Quality and progressive genetics have always been an expectation at Dakitch Hereford Farms, located in northwest Minnesota. Matthew Kitchell, 32, is a fourth-generation farmer and second-generation

Hereford breeder, running and operating the ranch established by his father, David. He currently calves around 200 cows a year and is using embryo technologies on his herd. He also has Angus cattle and a commercial herd.

Matthew has always been passionate about the cattle industry. He briefly attended college but quickly realized his calling was back home on the farm. With his wealth

of knowledge and experience, Matthew's father served as Matthew's greatest role model growing up, and he's thankful for the breeding philosophies David instilled in him.

"The key is to have high quality and draw in new customers," Matthew says. "Dad always stressed good udder quality, good feet and good, thick polled Hereford cattle. That's what I was told and that's how we've always been. That's our philosophy in the Hereford business."

Matthew has taken the reins on managing breeding decisions and improving marketing strategies. He doesn't stray from the priorities established by his father; rather he's enhanced the operation with his ideas. The operation started carcass scanning a few years ago and relies heavily on performance data. Matthew focuses his herd and purchasing cattle around quality and performance to continue to move forward.

"One thing young breeders need to continue is collecting and sending in data. Your herd is built around your records. You need to know what cows are producing in the pasture," he explains.

Matthew is also passionate about utilizing technology to promote his business. He uses Facebook to market his cattle as well as keeps a modern, functional website up-to-date. He believes having a webpage with recent show results and herd sires is essential, using technology frequently and efficiently.

Matthew says the most rewarding aspect of his career is when his genetics do well in other cattlemen's operations, allowing other breeders to find success. However, raising cattle doesn't come without obstacles, and Matthew points out adapting and fighting drastic weather changes and maintaining herd health when weather gets extreme is the most challenging.

He speaks highly of production agriculture and wouldn't trade breeding and raising Hereford cattle for anything else. Today, much like his father, Matthew is on the Minnesota Hereford Breeders board of directors, where he currently serves as vice president. His main goal is to maintain the quality of his operation as he continues to expand and enhance facilities.





Continuing a legacy

Family ties run deep at Candy Meadow Farms, located in Lexington, Tenn. The farm was founded in 1952 by the late Max Helms. Max and his wife had three sons along with one daughter. Their daughter passed at age 3 from multiple sclerosis, and the farm was named in her memory “Candy” Meadow Farms.

After the passing of the farm’s original proprietor, son Rob Helms took over the operation and added Angus and Charolais cattle to their Hereford operation in 1989 and 1990 to diversify their market. Today, Heath Helms, 30, is taking over the operation’s responsibilities with an ambitious attitude.

As for Heath, he always knew raising cattle and managing the operation were exactly what he wanted to do. He still advises younger breeders to get the best education possible. “Not only can receiving an a post-high-school education be very beneficial in your day-to-day operations and management, but it also gives you another option if times get tough,” he says.

Growing up on the farm in Tennessee is what Heath says laid the foundation for the person he’s become, teaching him irreplaceable values and morals. “I absolutely eat, sleep, and breathe cattle. I love every segment of the beef industry,” he adds.

Today, Heath wears numerous hats on Candy Meadow Farms from the day-to-day care of cattle to fixing fences, putting up hay and making breeding decisions. He also handles registrations, transfers and performance records. He heads marketing strategies through catalogs and advertisements.

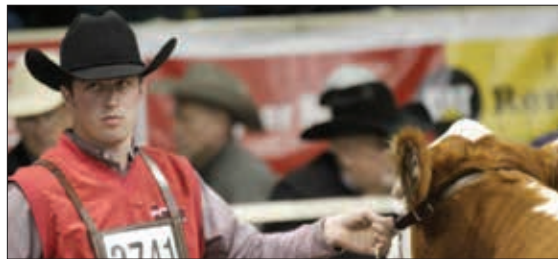
Although dealing with weather changes and locating helpful labor for the farm can be challenging at times, Heath believes the rewards of raising cattle far outweigh the negatives. He’s thankful for the relationships and lifelong friendships he’s developed through this industry.

“Meeting someone for the first time as a kid, knowing they bought Hereford bulls from my granddad, then their kids buy bulls here, and in some cases their grandkids — that’s special to me,” Heath says.

Heath stresses the importance of young people returning to cattle production. He believes seedstock producers are responsible for keeping

up with the evolving technology. “We, as young people, are the future of the industry,” he says. “In the blink of an eye, we’ll be depending on the next generation and if we don’t stay in production then we can’t expect our kids to do the same.”

Committed to educating and engaging younger generations, Heath makes interacting with young cattle producers a priority. When he’s not helping young Hereford breeders, Heath spends his time talking with others, sharing ideas and building relationships. In terms of Candy Meadow Farms, Heath strives to continue a legacy that began 65 years ago. His goal is to leave the cattle and land better than the day before while carrying on the honesty and integrity of the Helms family for generations to come.



Branded by hard work

Located in central Nebraska, 27-year-old Grady McMahon is one of the owners of MCM Polled Herefords. The operation, founded approximately 70 years ago, has nearly 100 registered Hereford cows. Grady grew up on the ranch, showing alongside his three siblings and helping the men who laid the foundation for the business. He attended Fort Hayes State University as an animal science major.

Grady always knew he wanted to be involved in the family farm. “It has been and always will be a family operation,” he says. Five years ago Grady’s uncle wanted to retire from the family operation and offered Grady an opportunity too perfect to pass up — he offered to sell out his part of the operation to Grady.

Almost immediately, Grady saw the benefit of his college degree from the knowledge he gained in business and genetics courses. More importantly, attending college taught him to step out of his comfort zone, to interact with new people and to develop relationships — skills that are essential to thrive in the cattle industry.

Grady credits his hands-on knowledge and work ethic to his father, uncle and grandfather. His grandfather taught Grady the importance of efficiency and using common sense to simplify tedious farm tasks, and his father showed him how to use breeding tools and how to make decisions.

Managing an operation poses some challenges, but Grady willingly tackles those obstacles to maintain the life he’s passionate about. “If you enjoy what you’re doing, it’s easy to look over the

continued on page 44...

more challenging parts,” he says. Attending shows like the Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE), where Grady can help youth exhibitors and see all the hard work they’ve poured into MCM cattle is the most rewarding. Calving season is also one of Grady’s favorite times of the year because he gets to see if his breeding decisions paid off.

Grady, too, reiterated the necessity for younger agriculturalists to invest in cattle production. “If we don’t have kids returning to production, when retiring ranchers go to sell out, they don’t have anyone to pass the ranch on to,” he explains.

He understands it’s challenging for someone to start his or her own operation or to gain hands-on experience. For that reason, Grady and his family stay actively involved in the Nebraska Hereford Association and give back to youth through 4-H and FFA. Grady also spends his time traveling to junior shows to help exhibitors that purchased cattle from their operation.

Grady advises any prospective breeders not to be intimidated by the hard work involved with raising cattle. He mentions that although the lifestyle requires dedication, ultimately it’s rewarding. He encourages younger breeders to always focus on moving forward.

Off the beaten path

Five generations of steadfast cattlemen have owned and operated Powell Ranches, headquartered in Fort McKavett, Texas. Powell Ranches has expanded from when it first started running cattle in the 1950s to now include a Hereford herd, a commercial cattle herd and a Rambouillet sheep operation. Today, a few hundred head of cattle reside at Powell Ranches and approximately 100 bulls are sold annually through the ranch’s registered Hereford bull sale.

James Uhl, the 25-year-old grandson of Jimmy Powell, currently works at Powell Ranches and has become an essential component to the operation’s success, yet his journey to his career is nontraditional, compared to most. His mother grew up on the ranch and met and married James’ father, an attorney. They moved to San Antonio to raise a family.

As James grew up in San Antonio, his agricultural experience came strictly through his

summer and winter breaks spent working at his grandfather’s ranch. He never showed Hereford cattle at JNHE or was part of an FFA chapter, yet he always knew he had an underlying passion for agriculture, specifically raising cattle. “In college I knew it was something I wanted to be involved with,” he explains. “The way I see it, it’s up to myself and my siblings to continue the operation, and really, it was a natural decision.”

After graduating from the University of Texas with a bachelor’s degree in economics and business, James decided to work at Powell Ranches. In addition to working on the ranch, James also helps out with accounting and business management. More recently, James has been leading a business restructuring to make the ranch more efficient. His goal is to make the operation more profitable at the end of the day.

James credits his business skillset to his college education but also realizes he further developed it through real-life experiences on the ranch.

“There will be so much pressure put on producers to become more efficient in the way they produce — an educational background will support an aggressive advancement of the industry and of specific operations,” he explains. Yet, James is quick to point out that college isn’t the only staple to a successful business. He notes critically analyzing and setting goals is a simple strategy any breeder can implement. He gained most of his knowledge from his grandfather and ranch manager David Neal.

James also considers his father one of his greatest mentors for pushing him to succeed and providing him with the opportunity to return to agriculture. He too became involved on the ranch and participates within the operation’s business side without having an agricultural background himself. “He more or less ushered me into the role I’m in today,” James says.

With James’ own story, he recognizes young people without production agriculture experience have difficulty becoming engaged in the industry. James says there are numerous industry professionals, breeders and Hereford families willing to share their experience and knowledge with others. Getting more young people involved and having older generations mentor them should ultimately get those people more comfortable and confident in their abilities within production agriculture.

With the unique circumstances that landed James in cattle production, he is even more motivated to advocate for the industry. He values the opportunity to work with livestock and to be outside every day while working alongside other people that share similar values. For James it’s rewarding to see commodities produced as a result of something that his loves.



Dynamic duo

Lou Ellen Harr and her daughter, Keayla, lead J&L Cattle Services, Jeromesville, Ohio. Lou Ellen, who manages the operation, grew up on a polled Hereford operation in southern Missouri.

Shortly after college, Lou Ellen moved to the East Coast, where she was hired to manage a small polled Hereford herd at Triple J Farms in Richmond, Va. At that time, women managing a farm were kind of an oddity, but Lou Ellen didn't let that deter her from improving the farm over the span of five years.

Later, friends recommend she apply for a management position in Ohio on Big T Ranch. Out of curiosity, she interviewed without much hope of the interview leading anywhere. Lou Ellen remembers not only being impressed by the area but also appreciating the enthusiasm of the owner. She was surprised when she received the phone call offering her a job.

Over the next eight years, Lou Ellen took on a crucial role at Big T Ranch, serving as show cattle manager and working on heifer development. The ranch dispersed in 1996, the same year she discovered she and her husband were expecting their first child, Keayla.

Lou Ellen and her husband purchased all the land, barns and house previously owned by Big T Ranch at public auction. As soon as the auction concluded, the Harrs received a standing ovation from their neighbors and fellow farmers and were immediately approached by a breeder friend who wanted to do business with them if Lou Ellen intended to stay in cattle production and the Hereford breed. The answer was an easy "yes."

Lou Ellen established a diverse cattle business. She managed clients' donor cows, created a fitting service business and custom flushed donor cows while raising and exhibiting competitive seedstock at shows across the country. "I feel very honored to be a female in agriculture," Lou Ellen says. "Reputable breeders have asked me to buy cattle for them over the years, and I feel humbled they trust me, a woman, to handle that responsibility."

Keayla Harr, 20, says she grew up living and breathing cattle production. While she was a young child, her parents were still hauling 26 head of Hereford cattle to national shows. Keayla embraced the lifestyle and was integrated into the day-to-day tasks around the farm.

Keayla evolved from being a helping hand to having a majority of the cattle responsibility when her parents need it. After high school, Keayla attend Casper College for two years as an animal



science major. Her distance and time away from home allowed her to appreciate her operation back in Ohio as well as made her realize she ultimately wanted to take over J&L Cattle Services one day.

Today, Keayla is a junior at Kansas State University and is pursuing an animal science degree with the goal of becoming a ruminant nutritionist. She hopes to work within the industry for a few years before returning home to own and operate her family's cattle business.

Both Lou Ellen and Keayla confidently say the most rewarding aspect of raising Hereford cattle is the connections they've made.

Lou Ellen believes women will find a niche within the industry. "Women's attention to detail will be a huge attribute in production as we have more governmental regulations over land use and animal care," Lou Ellen explains. "And they're personable when it comes to telling their agricultural story and promoting an operation."

J&L Cattle Services has evolved over the years. After renting more ground, their cow herd has grown to about 80 cows. They still do some custom work; they custom calve higher risk cows for clients and do embryo transfer work. They have hosted a production sale every other year since 2005 and hope to expand and to diversify their herd, to increase their acreage over the next few years and to offer a production sale annually. Keayla aspires to have a feedlot so her family can analyze carcass data and performance to enhance carcass merit.

To inspire and mentor younger generations, Keayla and her mom work tirelessly to bring new, inexperienced exhibitors to JNHE and cattle shows. By providing them helpful tools and wisdom, they hope to bring those kids closer to cattle production and to leave a lasting impression on their future goals.

A powerful example

A life in production agriculture, especially one raising and managing cattle, isn't always glorious, but it's a rewarding, raw lifestyle each of these Hereford breeders proudly represents. Their experiences within the Hereford breed have provided them countless connections and lifelong friendships.

As the average farmer gets older, the more pressure there will be on the agricultural industry to sustain production. Soon breeders will turn to younger generations to take the reins on the nation's backbone industry. **HW**