



Journey of Faith

In a lifestyle marked with routine and schedules, two Tennessee Hereford breeders rely on faith in their journey with autism.

by *Christy Couch Lee*

It begins as a routine dinner out as a family of three. Mom, dad and son, settling into their seats at the table, reviewing the menus, and placing their orders.

Then, a server's tray drops. That loud noise triggers a response in the 15-year-old son. He begins to cry and scream. He is inconsolable. The

family pays for a dinner they will not eat and leaves before ever receiving their food.

This is real, everyday life for Mitch and Kathryn Ingram, owners of Notchey Creek Farm, Madisonville, Tenn. "We couldn't even estimate the number of times that's happened," Mitch says. "We don't want to create a huge disruption. We've even left hotel rooms in the middle of the night when he's gotten too loud. That's just the life you live with autism."

Although daily life is still "normal," relative to other families, the two agriculture teachers face challenges many parents could not imagine. Maintaining faith is the priority, and they work together to create routines, redefining "normal" along the way.

The diagnosis

The Ingrams did not know much about autism until Johnny joined their family 15 years ago.

"We both have had many autistic students in our classrooms through the years, but we really didn't understand all it entails until it happened in our family," Mitch says. "It's such a broad thing. I say, 'When you meet one person with autism, you've met one person with autism.' It's so different. It's definitely not 'one size fits all.'"

The couple first noticed signs of regression in their 18-month-old son following his hospitalization for a staph infection that resulted from a minor surgery. Johnny gave up communicating and reverted to crawling from walking, something his parents thought was part of the recovery process.

"We were attending a vacation Bible school and noticed that Johnny was disassociating himself from other classmates," Mitch says. "He was doing the very-typical arranging objects into a straight line — both were red flags. This moment was when we realized, 'We've got a situation here.'"

After several evaluations through the University of Tennessee (UT) Medical Center, they received the diagnosis and began the process of researching and learning how to help their son.

"It was somewhat of a relief to have a name for it, but it was terrifying because we knew so little about what to expect," Kathryn recalls. "There is a grieving process to go through. You have to accept that dreams and expectations have changed."

According to Autism Speaks, autism, or autism spectrum disorder, can be marked with challenges in social skills, repetitive behaviors, and verbal and nonverbal behaviors. The condition takes many forms, depending on genetic and environmental influences. The autism spectrum reflects a wide range of challenges and strengths possessed by individuals affected with the condition.

Johnny's autism is considered "severe," his parents say.

"He can speak some, but cannot communicate clearly," Mitch says. "In many ways, he's like a 3-year-old. But then, he can turn around and use Google Maps to navigate us to South Carolina. There's a communication barrier, but he does understand some things."

Hometown kids

Mitch and Kathryn planted roots a few hundred feet from Mitch's Madisonville, childhood farm. The two Madisonville High School graduates both attended local Hiwassee College and continued on to UT. Mitch earned bachelor's and master's degrees in agricultural education as did Kathryn, who also double majored in animal science as an undergraduate.

Both share a Hereford background. Mitch's family raised a horned herd in his younger years but transitioned to a commercial herd as he entered high school. Kathryn was born into a registered polled operation, started by her parents Johnny L. and Theresa Stephens.

"I grew up showing at the local and state level, at all of the eastern Tennessee county fairs and the state shows," Kathryn says. "I loved cattle and I loved kids, and showing Herefords helped me to discover my passion for agricultural education."

Kathryn has spent 19 years as an agriculture teacher at the high school in Tellico Plains, Tenn. Mitch began teaching agricultural education at UT and then, in 2015, moved to



Johnny, Kathryn and Mitch work as a team to overcome the challenges of autism.

Cleveland State Community College, teaching agriculture and agribusiness.

Although Mitch and Kathryn met in kindergarten, they did not begin dating until Kathryn was Mitch's student teacher. They wed in 2000, "and we now have had our happily ever after," Mitch says with a smile.

Shortly before the marriage, Kathryn's father passed away. Mitch and Kathryn inherited the herd and purchased more of the operation from her mother as time passed. As newlyweds, the couple reinvested into purebred Hereford genetics.

"Our goal was to build a herd of functional cattle with an emphasis on structural correctness and udder quality," Kathryn says. "We hoped to market our cattle through private treaty and regional consignment sales."

They often consign to sales in Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. Additionally they participate in a lease program with the local FFA and 4-H, where several calves are shown at local and regional levels each year.

At one time the Ingrams had more than 100 cows in their registered herd. Today, they manage about 35 momma cows, along with a few herd bulls and replacement heifers. The reduction in herd size is due, in large part, to the additional care needed for Johnny.

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When Johnny leaves the school system in five to six years, the Ingrams hope to rebuild their herd to 50 registered cows and at least 35 Hereford-influenced commercial cows.



Mitch and Kathryn work tirelessly to gain acceptance for autistic children like Johnny.

Life with autism

Mitch and Kathryn eventually plan to rebuild their registered and commercial cow herds with hopes of showing cattle again. But with community commitments and caring for their son, that has taken a backseat for a bit.

In the meantime, routine and schedules tend to help calm Johnny and reduce the incidents of meltdowns.

“We live by pictures, schedules and calendars,”

Mitch says. “Each day’s routine

is on a dry-erase board with magnets. Breakfast, school, afternoon, bath time, bedtime. [Johnny] is very aware of the calendar and what day of the week it is, and as long as it’s on the calendar, he can understand that.”

Although they can work to reduce triggers for Johnny’s autism, Kathryn says, they simply cannot be eliminated.

“For example, we recently went for Johnny’s annual physical, and two nurses came into the room,” she says. “One was asking me questions, and the other immediately went to check his temperature and blood pressure. He was unsure of what was going on, and things were moving too quickly for him. He had a total meltdown — crying and screaming. The doctor was trying to comfort him by patting him on the back, but at that point, he doesn’t want to be touched, and it only made it worse.”

Building awareness

Because autism is a misunderstood condition — especially the meltdowns that occur as a result — the family is dedicated to raising awareness.

“We hope that autism awareness leads to not only greater understanding, but also to increased training for professionals such as EMTs and police officers,” Kathryn says. “These professionals often meet our children in the worst situations without the skillset to handle them.”

“We are working to achieve more acceptance,” Mitch says. “[Autistic children] are not easily accepted in the public — in restaurants, schools and church settings. Sometimes these children are tagged with the stigma of being ‘unruly,’ and that’s just not the case.”

Mitch and Kathryn write local news articles on the subject, and Kathryn is part of many support groups in eastern Tennessee. They also work with businesses to encourage autistic-friendly environments in their community — as those with autism can sometimes be triggered by loud sounds, fluorescent lighting or the drastic alteration of routines.

“We are seeing a lot of progress toward more autistic-friendly environments,” Mitch says.

“There is a great need for housing and care for adults with disabilities,” Kathryn explains.

“The biggest worry for many parents of children with autism — including us — is what will happen when I die? Our hope is to help Johnny be as independent as possible and find a way to secure his future.”

Giving back

Although their careers, Johnny’s caretaking and their devotion to autism awareness take a great deal of time, the Madisonville natives give back to their community and the Hereford industry in countless ways.

Kathryn is the editor of the Tennessee Hereford Association newsletter and serves on the board. The pair are also involved with the East Tennessee



The Ingrams "make time to find time" to support their community in any capacity their talents allow, like leasing calves to local FFA and 4-H members.



Hereford Association, where Mitch is president and Kathryn, secretary.

Kathryn now manages the East Tennessee Hereford Association consignment sale, something the couple saw a need to bring back to life.

“The association had somewhat gone defunct, and everyone had lost interest — which led to the sale and organization dissolving,” Kathryn says. “Mitch saw a need, and so he helped to start it back up. He sent out newsletters, and he organized a meeting that had about 12 attendees the first time. We got the association put back together in 2006, and the sale restarted in 2008.”

Today, the East Tennessee Hereford Association is flourishing again.

“Many people have now bought in,” Mitch says. “Once the spark was there, the association and sale just kept growing, and the interest kept growing. Today, we have a lot of strong support. It’s great.”

He has also worked in the ministry field his entire career and last August became the pastor at Lakeside Missionary Baptist Church.

In 2014, Mitch added a career of community service to his résumé when he was elected commissioner of Monroe County.

“When I first decided to run for county commissioner, I wanted to be able to help people,” Mitch says. “I sometimes get interesting phone calls, for sure. But people want fresh water and paved roads, and I want to help.” His name is now on the August ballot for the election of the Monroe County mayor.

“I was asked by several in the community to consider running for county mayor,” he continues. “It wasn’t on my radar, at first, and I had to run against the incumbent. But now, I have won the primary, and we look forward to the challenge.”

Making time

Kathryn says their decision to serve their community points to one simple principle:

“If you’re willing to take something, you should always be willing to give back,” she says. “We believe we should help as much as we can with the abilities we’ve been given. Many people have given us the gift of their time and we feel we should give back with some of ours.”

As well, Mitch says, it is a way for each person to make a difference in the community.

“You have the opportunity to exercise your voice by getting involved,” Mitch says. “Many times, I hear complaints and negativity. I ask, ‘Have you tried to make a difference?’ It’s important that stakeholders, whether in county government or the school system or the Hereford associations, realize that taking a leadership role is a way to get things accomplished.”

The couple acknowledges living in a “busy” society makes finding time to serve difficult.

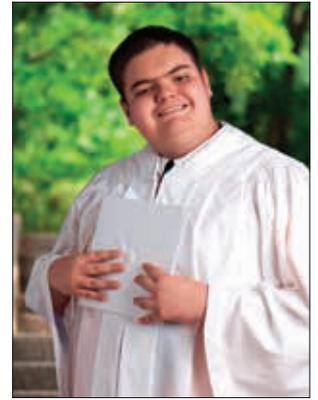
“Still, I challenge anyone who isn’t happy about the results or practices of organizations they care about to do something about it. Get involved,” Mitch says. “As someone told me in church the other day, if we make time, we will find time. We live in a fast-paced and busy society, from daylight to dark. But we can still make time for the priorities in life.”

Having faith and a strong support network has made the journey easier. “We try to remember that we are ‘seeing through a glass, darkly,’” Kathryn says. “There will be hard times, when you feel pulled in a hundred directions. Remember to lean on your faith, family, friends, and community.”

“We have been very blessed — and we rely heavily on faith and family to endure,” Mitch agrees. “There are definite peaks and valleys. Some days are great, and some days are terrible. You have to have a close-knit family and support. And we have been fortunate to have both.”

“The diagnosis has given us a framework of empathy we did not have before,” Kathryn says. “The help and encouragement we have received from support groups, family, church, friends, the Hereford community, and even kind words from strangers have helped us more than they will ever know.”

No, not every day is easy. But through a strong faith, an unbreakable family bond and a determined desire to help others, the Ingrams are bringing hope to those in their community. **HW**



With detailed schedules and strict routines, Johnny lives the most normal life possible.



Mitch preaches at Lakeside Missionary Baptist Church to a congregation with more than 80 members.