



The Maroon Legacy

Mason Blinson, Steven Green, Brooke Jensen and Bailey McKay conclude three-year terms on the NJHA board of directors.

by **Brooke Roberts**

Their story began in 2015 in Grand Island, Neb., when four ambitious National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) board candidates each slid their arms into the sleeves of a maroon jacket for the first time. In the three years following, Mason Blinson, Steven Green, Brooke Jensen and Bailey McKay have traveled the country serving one special group of young people — the Hereford enthusiasts that make up the NJHA membership.

Their journey has taken them to regional and state shows, working rings across the country, attending conferences and participating in meetings and conference calls. That journey came to a conclusion at the 2018 Vitaferm® Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE), in the very same arena where their names were called three years earlier. The four retiring directors shared final remarks with the membership, passed their jackets on to four enthusiastic new board members, and gently closed the door on their careers as NJHA directors and officers.

Although their time on the board is over, these four young people are just beginning a lifetime of involvement with the Hereford breed and the Hereford family. While unique journeys and ties have brought each of them together, not one has plans to depart anytime soon.

Lighting the spark

From Kansas to Kentucky and down into North Carolina, Bailey, Brooke, Mason and Steven each inherited or acquired an admiration for the Hereford breed and the people associated with their beloved red-and-white cattle at a young age.

In Courtland, Kan., a time-honored tradition of raising Herefords runs in the veins of the Jensen family. With parents who grew up in the Hereford business and a lifetime of experiences in the industry, Brooke has lived and breathed Herefords since day one. “All my friends are Hereford folks, and I’ve always wanted to be involved,” she explains.

The 2014 National Hereford Queen clearly remembers her first JNHE experience in Indianapolis, Ind. “I had my heifer, Kay Baby,” Brooke recalls. “It was raining on show day, and we had to sprint across parking lots and through different barns, trying to get to the showing and not get wet.”

Bailey McKay also recalls that rainy JNHE in Indianapolis in 2003 as her first year competing at junior nationals, although that certainly was not her first time in attendance. The 22-year-old and her parents run GLM Herefords in Marysville, Kan., and the third generation Hereford breeder’s first junior national experience was technically in Tulsa, Okla., in 2000. “It was hotter than blazes, and I kept



screaming,” Bailey laughs. “So my grandpa just put me in a water bucket — apparently I stopped crying.”

In North Carolina, the daughter of a past NJHA board member and a National Hereford Women director found her way to her first JNHE in Louisville, Ky. in 2006.

“I had a little heifer named Finesse, and she was as big I was — so pretty tiny,” Mason says with a smile. “Whenever we entered the ring onto those green shavings, she went one way and I went the other.” The two eventually were reunited and got to show, but Mason described the experience as a “chaotic first little junior national.” In the years since, Mason has enjoyed exhibiting cattle from her family operation which prides itself in exhibiting primarily bred-and-owned stock.

Meanwhile, a young boy from a 100-head cow-calf and hay operation was busy showing crossbred steers at county fairs in south central Kentucky. In 2008, Steven Green says he experienced ‘love at first sight.’

“I saw the Herefords roll off the trailer and really loved the people, loved the cattle, and I knew they were the breed for me from day one,” he explains.

Two years later, he attended his first junior national in Indianapolis. “To be honest with you,” Steven says,



Brooke Jensen received her bronze bull for time spent serving the NJHA. Also pictured (l to r) are NJHA Advisors Betsy and Andy Beck, Bainbridge, Ind.; Kyle Pérez, Nara Visa, N.M.; and Max Stotz, Skiatook, Okla.



A bronze bull was awarded to Bailey McKay for her work serving the NJHA.

“I had no clue what we were coming to.” The quality and quantity of cattle simultaneously shocked and amazed him. “After that week, I promised myself I would focus on my Hereford cattle and make them the best they could be.”

He admits the overwhelming activity during his first junior national kept himself from really noticing the impact of the junior board until his second year attending the JNHE in Kansas City, Mo.

“Kansas City was the time that I found the board and really realized what they were doing,” Steven says. “The junior board was really that set of individuals I looked up to. I saw they were working, I saw they were involved with the juniors, and I was pretty well bitten at that point.”

“The board members were always there with a smile and a reaching hand,” Brooke agrees. “For 14 years I watched the folks in the maroon jacket meet others, inspire others and teach others. I knew that I wanted to be the person in the maroon jacket that touched the lives and shaped the youth of this industry.”

Inspired and driven

After individually experiencing and admiring the work of those in the maroon jackets during their initial JNHE experiences, a flame was ignited in the hearts of these four Hereford enthusiasts.

Board members and candidates alike inspired Mason to consider running for the board. “I saw how hard all of them worked and how passionate they were,” she says. “It inspired me to want to be involved.”

Once the campaign process began, Mason was hooked. Between meeting

board members, other candidates, state delegates and numerous juniors, she simply put herself out there and got to really know and embrace the Hereford family.

For Brooke, campaigning with just five candidates made for a unique experience. “The five of us got really close,” she says. “Because there were only five of us, we got thrown into all the activities of the week.”

The experience provided a sneak peek into what life on the junior board is like. “I saw firsthand how much work they put into it, and all the things you never think about that goes on behind the scenes,” she adds.

In place of goodies or free promotional items, Brooke centered her campaign on showcasing her individual leadership qualities. She simply focused on meeting people and letting them know who she was, and what kind of leader she could be.

One role model in particular inspired Bailey to run for the board. In her eyes, her journey toward the maroon jacket began the day her brother passed away in a car accident during her senior year of high school. Left with a desire to influence the lives of others in the ways he had, Bailey



knew what she wanted to do. “We didn’t realize how many lives he had touched, just by being himself,” she says. “That really made me want to run for the board and be a role model and touch people’s lives.”

Even so, each year only four board members are elected. The unfortunate fact of the matter is that each year, one or more board candidates go home without the much-anticipated maroon jacket. For Steven, that feeling is all too

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Mason Blinson received her bronze bull for time spent serving the NJHA.



familiar — but also something he has grown to appreciate.

“I did run twice,” Steven says. “The first time was a little bit of a learning curve. As a candidate, you apply every lesson you have ever learned. You put everything on the line for one of four spots, and even yet you may go home empty-handed.”

Self-described as a shy and reserved person by nature, it would take Steven a bit of time — and a second year of campaigning — to break out of his shell. Looking back, Steven describes his first unsuccessful campaign as a blessing in disguise. Persistent mentors pushed the timid teenager to run for the board again.

“The moment I lost, those same individuals were right there back in my ear telling me that I better get on the saddle and go again, because that’s what it was meant to be,” he says.

Back to the beginning

Déjà vu may have been a reality for the four retiring board members as they overlooked a showring containing 13 nervous board candidates at this year’s awards ceremony on the evening of July 5. Just three short years ago, they were seated amongst their family, friends and fellow juniors, trying to contain their own emotions.

That year, all four retiring members dispersed into the crowd at the same time to hand their jackets to the four newest board members. Nerves and a flurry of activity distracted Bailey from keeping an eye on all four retiring directors. “In all the chaos, I kind of lost track of Jason May,” she says. “He came up behind me and tapped me on the shoulder and it was a surprise.”

That day was one Mason had dreamed about for years, particularly because her father and sister are past junior board members. “I really wanted to get that jacket and follow in their footsteps,” she explains.

She recalls seeing the emotions play out on her fellow candidates’ faces. “I had gotten to make great friends with the people I was running with, and as we were getting those maroon jackets we were looking over at each other and excited for each other.”

Brooke remembers struggling to reign in her emotions. “My brother was chairman at the time, and I remember I was already crying during his farewell speech,” she says. “So I’m already sobbing and he walked over and handed me his maroon jacket. It was a pretty special moment.”

Knowing good and well there was a chance he may go home without a

jacket, Steven was sitting on the edge of his seat until the moment he could not stop thinking about suddenly happened. “I was speechless as I put on the maroon jacket for the first time,” he describes.

Dynamic directors

While Steven admits to initially being unaware of the caliber of responsibility NJHA directors hold, he and his three other new board members were quick to dig in, discuss and to make decisions that would extend well beyond the short term. “My goal as a director was to be the very best I could be for the NJHA, to spend three years putting forth 110 percent for the youth who drive our industry,” he explains.

Conference calls and long meetings facilitate the decision-making process for a board with members from across the country, an opportunity Brooke appreciates. “They let us make decisions, which is awesome because we truly can impact how [the JNHE] goes,” she explains.

After one particularly long board meeting, Mason remembers an impactful moment when one of the board advisers said he was very proud of her. “It reassured me that our board was doing great things,” she says.

Mason had her sights set on accomplishing a particular goal during her time on the board — reestablishing and expanding the mentor-protégé program. “I think it’s a great way to encourage our juniors to get involved, to meet people and to really expand their Hereford family,” she explains. After years of discussion, her goal was accomplished when more than 200 NJHA members participated in the Pen-to-Pen program kickoff at this year’s JNHE.

Bailey prioritized walking around the barns and interacting with juniors. She utilized her time to cultivate new friendships with juniors and to encourage contest participation, which led to rewarding results. “Just watching those kids I’ve gotten to know over the last three or four years compete in contests and in the showring, and then seeing their smiles and their family’s joy — it’s rewarding knowing that you helped push them to reach their goals.”



A bronze bull was awarded to Steven Green for his time spent serving the NJHA.

Brooke particularly enjoyed helping young people inside the ring, whether they were celebrating their first wins or struggling through a first loss. “Out there, they have no one else to depend on besides themselves, their heifer, and us,” she says.

“The most rewarding thing about being on the board is being able to work in the ring and be amongst incredible cattle and see firsthand what our breed is about,” Mason agrees. “We have created such a good environment at these shows — the trust and the family that we’ve created in these barns is what’s so special about our breed.”

When a young exhibitor at the Indiana State Hereford Preview Show told Steven about his plans to be chairman of the NJHA board one day, Steven commended his enthusiasm. “I believe this young man’s ambition speaks volumes for past and current board members,” he says. “The board is paving the way for inspired and determined individuals to succeed.”

A bittersweet farewell

Looking back, the retiring chairman is proud of the efforts put forth from his fellow board retirees. “This board has put in 110 percent every second that they have been a part of this board of directors,” Steven proudly notes.

Although he will still be showing and connected to the Hereford family, Steven will miss the people the most. His time on the junior board opened doors for friendships and connections that would not have been possible otherwise. “I’m really going to miss being the person that everybody comes to, and I’ll miss being right there beside the board members every step of the way,” Steven says.

Bailey echoes Steven’s bittersweet feelings. “I’ve made countless memories with all of my past and present junior board members, had more fun and traveled more miles in an airplane, on my boots and in a car than I could have ever imagined,” she says. “I’ve met so many amazing youth that make me proud and inspire me with the different things they are doing.”

Mason describes her time on the board as unforgettable, and genuinely cherishes each memory. “It’s not very

often that you could pretty much break down in any state and still be able to call someone,” she remarks. “That is all thanks to my Hereford family.”

The board realizes that their work could not be completed without the support of their advisers, parents, siblings and many others. Brooke mentions Amy Cowan’s 20-year anniversary with the American Hereford Association (AHA) as a prime example of what makes the Hereford breed and the NJHA unique. “The dedication, the family, and the loyalty within this breed is second-to-none,” she says.

The next chapter

Although Bailey, Brooke, Mason and Steven have since passed their maroon jackets on to four new directors, their time with Hereford is just beginning.

In Kentucky, things are rolling full steam ahead. Steven graduated from Western Kentucky University in the spring of 2017, and he and his wife Lauren plan to continue building his Hereford herd. Steven anticipates further involvement within the AHA, and hopes to eventually be a full-time cattleman. “We’re going to be breeding Herefords hopefully for years and years to come,” Steven says with a smile.

Likewise, Brooke hopes to stay involved in the breed forever. She has plans to continue working with her family’s cow herd and to attend national shows, including the JNHE, every year. “I hope that someday my kids get to come here and get to experience everything I did,” she says.

Mason shares Brooke’s desire to hopefully pass on her love of Hereford cattle to children of her own in the future. She plans to pursue a collegiate livestock judging career while completing her degrees in plant and soil science, as well as animal science, at Oklahoma State University. Mason anticipates remaining involved with her family’s herd for years to come.

Bailey’s career pursuits have led her to Billings, Mont., as a production team member with the Western Ag Reporter and Agri-News. She admits to a twinge of sadness brought on by the many miles that separate her career, Hereford youth, and upcoming junior nationals. “It’s not necessarily

a farewell, but more of an ‘I’ll see you down the road,’” she says.

Regardless, Bailey plans to serve as an adviser and to continue mentoring youth in the Hereford breed, in the same way she was guided. Bailey expressed her own thanks to the junior membership in an emotional moment during her retiring address. “Thank you for taking a broken girl from Kansas and enveloping her into the entirety of your family that is literally larger than life,” she says.

No matter where life takes these four young adults, a small maroon thread will always remain in their lives. When their careers demand teamwork and communication, that maroon thread will pull on the lessons learned during their time collaborating and planning events with their fellow board members. Should they find themselves mentoring a young showman, that maroon thread will bring them back to the many hours spent working rings and reassuring nervous young showmen in showrings across the country. Whenever they lay eyes on a Hereford, that maroon thread will tug on their heart ever so gently, and likely bring a smile to their face as they reflect on memories from their experiences as NJHA directors.

Ultimately, that invisible maroon thread seems to bind the entire NJHA membership together — no matter how many miles separate them. The ‘Hereford family’ is truly the best term to describe the close-knit group of breeders, parents and exhibitors that share a passion for these white-faced, red-bodied bovines. “I think you’ll be hard-pressed to find another group of individuals who are as tight and connected as the Hereford breed,” Steven says.

While Bailey, Brooke, Mason and Steven’s time on the board may be over, all four young people are confident this is not the end of their involvement with the breed they each hold so dear. Steven spoke on behalf of entire group in his retiring address when he said, “Although my time on this board is done, my time with the association is not. Lord-willing, we’ll have many years to come.” **HW**