



In the flash of a moment, a semi caused a chain-reaction accident, drastically altering two Indiana families' 2019 JNHE experience.

Blessings from the Wreckage

Two Indiana Hereford families faced the greatest fear of any show family, yet through the trauma arose incredible blessings.

by Christy Couch Lee

One moment they were westbound on Interstate 70, less than an hour left on their 16-plus hour journey to the 2019 Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE) in Denver. The sun was shining, excitement filled the cabs of their trucks and the peaks of the Rockies were slowly coming into focus.

And one instant changed it all.

Dave and Lisa Dixon, Rensselaer, Ind., and their three children – Luke (16), Libby (14), Eli (11) – and Rob and Kristie McFatrige, Otterbein, Ind., and their two children – Kylie (19) and Logan (17) – found themselves in the most fearful situation of any long haul – an accident involving their trucks and trailers, cattle and families.

It is the last thing anyone in the show cattle world ever hopes to experience. Despite the

horrific scene, a renewed faith in people arose from the wreckage – and most definitely a faith in Hereford people.

The journey

The Dixons began a small herd of Hereford cattle in the mid-2000s, when the children began showing. They now participate in local and state shows and the JNHE each year.

The McFatrighes have been involved in the Hereford industry for many years. Rob has raised Herefords since his 4-H years, and the couple now raises Herefords, as well as club calves, steers and heifers. Kylie and Logan have shown at the JNHE since 2010, as well as at many local and state shows throughout Indiana. Kristie has also served for five years as an Indiana Junior Hereford Association advisor.

In case of a truck or trailer problem, and simply for safety, the Dixon and McFtridge families decided to travel to the 2019 JNHE together and left for Denver at midnight Friday, July 5. Dave Dixon says the long trip was not necessarily an exciting prospect.

"I was dreading the trip, as it was going to be 16-20 hours on the road," Dave says. "But it was actually going really well. One of the reasons we show is that we have the whole family in the truck, and we have those hours together that we don't get anywhere else. We were really enjoying it."

Kristie says they made great time and were driving carefully. The trip was going well and the midafternoon sun was shining. It was smooth sailing until they were about 50 miles east of Denver. That is when the trip took a turn for the worse.

The McFtridges were leading when the two vehicles approached stopped traffic on the interstate. Dave says they had just come to a stop when the accident happened.

"We had just gotten stopped, and about that time we felt an impact from the rear. That's when we realized we had been hit, and our junior nationals were going to change a little bit," he says. "Then, we got hit again. It pushed our rig into the back of the McFtridges' trailer, and it was a chain reaction from there."

Kristie will never forget that moment.

"We weren't sitting long, and we heard a huge 'boom,'" she recalls. "I closed my eyes and said, 'No, no no.' Rob looked back and saw an explosion of stuff flying through the air — like a scene from a movie."

A semi failed to stop. The semi hit an RV which then was pushed into the Dixon rig which then was pushed into the McFtridges' truck and trailer.

"After the impact, I looked over and saw the RV driver in his vehicle, right outside my window," Kristie says. "Miraculously, our daughter was able to get unbuckled and hopped into our son's seat, just before the RV hit her door."

As with many families on cross-country show trips, the McFtridge passengers were in their socks — comfortable and enjoying the ride.

"We ran out onto the interstate in our socks to check on the animals right away," she recalls. "All of our doors had been jammed in, but the animals were standing. There were bloody noses, but they were all alive."

Immediately, the McFtridges ran back to the Dixons.

"All of their airbags had deployed," Kristie says. "Dave was a bit out of sorts, and we helped him out of the truck. His daughter, Libby, ran to me and I gave her a big hug. We couldn't see Lisa, so one of us ran to make sure she was okay. And when we found her, Libby ran to her."

It was bad. But, Dave says, it could have been worse.

"We are thankful our trailer stayed hooked up," he notes. "Our trailer looked like a pop can had been split wide open. The nose broke off the trailer, but the



An RV came within inches of the McFtridge family's cab. Both involved families say they are extremely thankful things weren't worse.



Dave Dixon says their family's trailer "looked like a pop can had been split wide open" following the accident. Two of their three heifers were standing and relatively unharmed. The third had to be put down on the interstate. This view is from the rear of what was once the Dixon rig.

trailer didn't pop loose from the ball. It came within about an inch or two from the cab, where the kids were. But we were all okay. We feel very fortunate."

Incredibly, only one heifer was critically injured in the accident.

"We had three head, one per kid," Dave says. "I really didn't want to walk to the back of the trailer, because I knew it couldn't have been good. But when we walked back, two heifers were just standing there. The heifer at the back of the trailer broke her femur and it couldn't be repaired. She had to be put down on the interstate."

The aftermath

Soon after the impact, the emergency responders arrived. The accident had closed down the interstate

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The chain-reaction accident left Logan McFtridge (l) and Libby Dixon (r) and their families in a state of shock. Both rigs were totaled following the collision, but no people were injured.

which many other Hereford families were traveling to the JNHE.

“I began to get texts saying, ‘If we can get to you, we can help you,’” Dave says.

Within minutes of the accident, friends within the Hereford family were jumping into action. Families stopped to offer any open trailer space for the families’ tack. A showbox here. A chute there.

“They would say, ‘We have room for one heifer.’ ‘We can take some tack.’ And we unpacked those trailers we had carefully packed, and just handed off items — not knowing who was even taking them,” she says. “The firemen had to remove the back door of the trailer, because we couldn’t get the cattle out through the slider door. It was too jammed. The cattle were too scared to come off the trailer, initially. But we got them off, and then walked them on the interstate, through wreckage, to get them to trailers of folks who had room for them.”

And the most incredible part? To this day, the Dixons and McFtridges still do not know everyone who helped. People just stepped up and did it — without acknowledgement, without praise. Still to this day, Dave does not know who hauled his cattle.

“I realized at one point that our heifers were gone, the police had led them to a trailer up the line,” he says. “Dale Kottkamp had been rerouted around the scene and texted me from Denver. Our heifers were in tie-outs and were fed and watered. Somehow they had gotten there, and someone had taken care of them. To this day, I don’t have any idea who did it.”

In fact, the Dixons even sent Libby with a family they did not know until that moment.

“The Reeds of Ohio had room for Libby, and we sent her to help unload tack and keep things sorted out as well as she could,” Dave says. “I was telling my pastor about this later, and he laughed and said, ‘If you think about it, you sent your daughter with a complete stranger on the interstate.’ But we didn’t consider them strangers. They had Hereford cattle on board, so we knew they were good to go.”

The McFtridges did the same.

“We knew our truck wasn’t drivable, so we sent Logan with a family from Oklahoma who offered to help. We didn’t know them before that time, but it was the Jamison family,” McFtridge says. “They came up to us and said, laughing, ‘You’re those good Hereford Bowl kids from Indiana, aren’t you? We aren’t sure we want to help you, you’re our competition!’ But they did, and they were wonderful. They kept Logan laughing on that drive and kept his mind off of the situation. Libby and her heifer also caught a ride with another great family.”

McFtridge says the Ferguson family from Missouri and the Trowbridge family from Kentucky were also early on the scene and offered to help in any way they could.

Once the cattle and tack were again on their way to Denver, the Dixons and McFtridges were left alongside the interstate with two totaled rigs. The police could not transport the families, so Joe Rickabaugh, American Hereford Association director of seedstock marketing, stepped in. He drove his vehicle from Denver to pick up the families and then offered it for them to use throughout the week.

To show or not to show

After evaluation, the Dixons decided their cattle and the kids were not in shape to show. Kyle Schrader offered to haul the heifers to Magness Land and Cattle in Colorado for the week, where Austin Gotschalk cared for them. After the JNHE ended, Schrader hauled the Dixons’ cattle to Jeff Cook’s farm, and Cook hauled the cattle back to the Dixons’ place in Indiana.

After much discussion and deliberation, the McFtridges decided to stay for the week of the JNHE.

“The night of the accident, Rob got a call,” Kristie says. “Joe Carlson with Carlson Cattle Co. in Royal Center, Ind., was sending a chiropractor to work on our heifers all week. Rob was overwhelmed with gratefulness and teared up. He never cries. That chiropractor worked on the heifers every day and didn’t charge us. We told the kids not to expect the placing we were hoping for — the animals were still sore. But we were just thankful to be there, period.”

Kristie says the National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) board of directors greeted them when they arrived and checked in on the family throughout the week. Sullivan Supply also stepped in that week. Taylor Harrison, Stock Show University manager, enlisted the help of Brownstown, Ind., Hereford exhibitor Payton Farmer to select the supplies the families could use for the week.

Harrison says the experience, as unfortunate as it was, also was a great example of how the Hereford industry rallies in times of need.

“We are here for each other, and the Hereford breed is especially close knit,” she says. “It doesn’t matter where you place or how good your animals

are. Everyone is there for each other, and that's the best thing about the show industry.

"Sullivan Supply cares about the families and the youth of the industry — that's why Sullivan Supply exists," she continues. "We are here for the families in every way we can be."

For Farmer the outpouring of support for the families was not out of the ordinary.

"I think it's really cool that Sullivan took the time to help these families, and they covered every aspect with fans, soap, brushes and the necessities," she says. "I'm not really surprised how the Hereford industry rallied around the Dixons and McFatrriages, though. Even though we are competing against each other, we are all family."

When it was time to head eastbound, the McFatrriage family rented an SUV, and Aaron Glascock of West Virginia hauled their cattle home.

"No one would take any money or accept any payment," Dave says. "Our cattle and our equipment just showed up at our doorstep. It truly was amazing. There are times when we think, 'Why do we show? We don't have to do it. And we don't make a living from it.' But that's why. We are connected to a wonderful group of people. I'm very sad it happened. But maybe I needed it. It has restored my faith."

Moving forward

The Dixons knew their show season was changed following the accident and the loss of Eli's show heifer on the interstate. However, they decided to keep showing at the county and state fairs in 2019.

"They weren't 100%, but we got them shown," Dave says.

But there was also good to be found in those moments. Since Eli did not have another show heifer, Ted Hunt, Hunt Bros. Herefords, Battle Ground, Ind., and Able Acres Polled Herefords, Wingate, Ind., stepped up to help.

"Ted called us up and wanted us to come and pick out a fall calf for Eli to show," Dave says. "They wouldn't accept any payment."

Because it was a special circumstance, the county fair allowed Eli to show the heifer, although she had not been previously entered. The Dixons borrowed a neighbor's truck and trailer and headed to the fair, where Eli and his new heifer were named reserve champion showman and reserve champion Hereford heifer — a first for the young showman.

"All because someone gave him a heifer and another chance," Dave says.

Looking back at the experience, Dave says he will never take a safe haul for granted.

"When we get in the truck and trailer, we don't just take for granted that we're going to get there,"

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— Dave Dixon



Logan, Kylie, Kristie and Rob McFatrriage (l to r), Otterbein, Ind., are thankful to have been able to make some positive memories in the Yards after their accident en route to the 2019 JNHE.

he says. "People always say, 'Have a safe trip.' But that really means something now."

Kristie says she and her family are even more appreciative of what they have following the accident.

"We kept saying all week at JNHE, 'You only live once, so make the most of what you have and try to have fun,'" she says. "I would never wish this on anyone, and it's your worst nightmare pulling out as you go to a show. But it's definitely brought us all closer together. Things are replaceable. People are not."

The Dixons and McFatrriages are forever thankful to the many people, both known and unknown, who helped them regroup and rebuild.

"We couldn't have asked for better people to help us in our time of need," Kristie reflects. "We are thankful and grateful. Even the simplest texts, calls and hugs at the show meant so much. And even more so now. Everyone is held so very close to our hearts."

Dave does have one small request and asks for those unknown volunteers who helped their family to please come forward.

"They have no idea what it has meant to us, how much it has helped us, or what a blessing it's been to us," he says. "I wish I knew who everyone was because I would like to repay them in some way. You were an angel sent from God to help us, and we are grateful. And if you see us at a future JNHE, please stop by and introduce yourself. I would love to thank you personally." **HW**