



Helping Hands

Firmly anchored in the background, veterinarian Mike McDonald never tires of serving his community and the breed.

by *Bruce Derksen*

Heroes do not have to be spandex clad, flashy and outspoken like the movies love to portray them. Not all heroes run into burning buildings with axes, face bad guys with a shield or crawl over foreign hilltops with a machine gun to protect their country. Some heroes stay home and work in the background with their nose to the ground. Instead of capes, they wear lab coats or coveralls accessorized with plastic and latex gloves. They strive to protect and to build up their country and its citizens by almost exclusively devoting their time and energy to helping others be successful.

Mike McDonald, DVM, of Lost Creek, W.Va., is such a person. He took over the daily operations

of McDonald Polled Herefords of Lost Creek in 1988, and the generational farm is now home to 70 purebred cows.

Behind-the-scenes handiwork

As we began our conversation about his veterinarian and livestock experiences, I could quickly hear the suspicion flooding through the phone line. “You want to make me a celebrity?” he questions. I envisioned his finger poised over the red button of his cell phone as he awaited my answer. It was obvious, McDonald was not interested in tooting his own horn. Fortunately for me, I caught him at a time when he seemed to have nothing on the calendar, as he was under his own doctor’s orders — stuck at home recovering from a recent hernia surgery.

“When we purchased the farm, it was one of the few that had Herefords,” he finally says. “My dad and grandfather decided they liked their docility and easy keeping nature and gradually faded out the commercial herds they had before. We just kind of developed into a purebred Hereford operation.”

I took a chance and repeated my earlier question.

“If we must talk about this, I like to help the local state breeders get their Hereford cattle marketed with a premium price if I can. We’ve sent a pot load of feeders to the Kentucky Certified Hereford Beef feeder sale for the last few years. This year we got two loads together and sent the second to an Illinois sale.” He described how the breeders work together to background the steers and to have them reach an optimum weight before sending them to the sales.

He recounted how he and some of his buddies travel to the Mile High Night Sale in Denver every year and help put the sale ring together. “I was stapling down the carpet on the very first sale ring at the Bank Arena and the auctioneer actually got into the box. They were ready to start, and we



McDonald Polled Herefords celebrated 50 years in 2018 and the family was recognized as Golden Breeders by the American Hereford Association. Pictured (l to r) are: Stephanie Hawkins, Mike McDonald, Kora and Kenzie Hawkins and Becky Cronin.

were still putting the ring together,” he says with a laugh. “They only gave us two hours. Nowadays, we have a lot of help come out. That has to be our highlight of the year.”

McDonald talked fondly about showing their family’s Hereford cattle with his grandchildren at local and state fairs and the Junior Nationals Hereford Expo (JNHE). “Some of those heifers we raised and some we bought. We’re not a national name by any means, but we’re competitive. We enjoy showing even if we only have three or four females each time.”

He related the story of one of their home-raised heifers placing third at the JNHE. “I don’t remember specific highlights, and it doesn’t sound like a big event, but it was for us,” he says. “Those classes are tough. I was standing by the ring watching and thinking, ‘Wow, we’re up to fifth,’ and then we were up to third! The lady behind me commented how nice it was to see someone so excited. It was a big win for us.”

A rewarding practice

Besides the polled Hereford farm, McDonald is also the founder and owner of Good Hope Animal Hospital. After completing veterinarian school at “The Ohio State University,” he returned home, purchased the local animal hospital and developed it into the mixed practice it is today.

“It’s just me,” he says. “Being able to take care of the local farmers’ animals and help provide veterinary care for their pets is important to me.”

From a young age, he wanted to pursue a profession in agriculture. That urge led him to vet school. “I always liked working with cattle and enjoyed helping the veterinarian when he came to our place,” he says. “When I bought this clinic, I expanded it to include large animals. I guess you could call me a dinosaur. I’m a dying breed because we do a little bit of everything.”

The soft-spoken veterinarian enjoys attending Nascar races when he is not helping his family, clients, friends or neighbors. “For actual fun, we like to go to at least two races per year. I’m a big Matt Kenseth fan!” he proclaims.

But the conversation quickly returned to the reality of helping others, just as I expected it might.

While he does not do embryo transfers at his hospital, he enjoys helping the local farmers with theirs. “I think it’s exciting when you can get a good pregnancy rate. There are too many days when you get 20-30%. It’s nice when I can help them get 70 or 80. Those are rewarding days.”

He shared a story from his practice of when he found 15 800-pound steers all lying dead under a big tree. “It was a humbling experience,” he says. “Makes you realize how important life really is. You know it can go fast. Time just seems to go faster as

we go along. You grow up thinking things will slow down as you get older, but the years seem to take off faster and faster now.”

The good doctor’s time, thoughts and energies seem to focus on helping his kids and extended family whenever he is able. Or his grandchildren with showing the Hereford cattle they raise with care. Or helping other state breeders by arranging cattle liner loads to secure better prices.

“It’s nice to see the young folks just starting out and being able to help them,” McDonald says. “It seems like there is going to be fewer of them coming along.”

“There are people in this world who are talkers and there are people who are doers. Dr. McDonald is a doer.”

— Dr. Lowell Midla

The ‘pancake maker’

While it is clear McDonald will never speak a boastful word, Nancy and Les Midla of Flat Stone Lick in Marianna, Pa., offer praise to their close friend.

“Mike is a very astute professional with really good clinical judgement. He is a darn good vet,” Les says.

“We feel we could not have a better or more loyal friend and fellow Hereford breeder,” Nancy says. The couple describes how McDonald works late into the night and early hours of the morning to balance his practice and his own farm. All the while, he puts family first. Every Sunday he can be found making pancakes for his grandchildren before church — a tradition that has earned him the title “pancake maker.”

As Nancy points out, even with superheroes, things do not always go as planned. She recounts a time when McDonald was treating a patient’s cow and watched his vet truck go over a hill and into a pond. “He takes every situation in stride and makes it work,” she says.

There will be no capes or protective shields for Dr. Mike McDonald. Instead of the limelight, his helping hands are firmly anchored in the shadows of the background. “I’m too old to expand my vet clinic in the future or take on more work or more doctors,” he admits. But he certainly has proved he is not too old to dedicate his time to the betterment of others.

“There are people in this world who are talkers and there are people who are doers. Dr. McDonald is a doer,” says friend and colleague Lowell Midla, VMD, MS. “He devotes a great deal of his time, talent, and treasure to improving and promoting the Hereford breed.” **HW**