

# INDESCRIBABLE

NJHA retiring board members reflect on their past three years in the maroon jacket.

by Riley Greiten

Joyful, grateful tears filled the arena as JW Cox, Lauren McMillan, Ralston Ripp and Libby Rushton retired from the National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) board at the 2023 VitaFerm® Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE).

“You kind of have a perspective of what being on the board is going to be like, and then you get on it, and it’s all of that plus so much more,” Ripp explains.

The four retiring board members were elected to three-year terms in 2020. They shared the opportunities and challenges in their retiring addresses.

### Full-circle moments

Libby Rushton, Waverly, Tenn., was 11 years old, attending her first JNHE at Grand Island, Neb., when she knew she wanted to wear the maroon jacket as an NJHA board member.

“Whenever you figure out you want to be a junior board member, whatever age that is, it’s like every step you take is leading you to getting a maroon jacket,” Rushton says.

She describes her entire NJHA experience as a full-circle moment. What started as having one commercial Hereford heifer evolved into a lifestyle dedicated to the breed and Hereford juniors.

“I’m so thankful for all those moments and all of the memories I have,” Rushton says of the many friendships made and lessons learned.

She explains one of the most vital lifelong lessons was learning how to listen and then having the courage to take action, which were constant requirements when representing NJHA members.

“Always be willing to listen to them, and then don’t be afraid to take steps and make changes to make the organization better,” Rushton advises future board members. “As you go

throughout your life, people tell you how important it is to listen, but that’s sometimes easier said than done. In a situation like this, you have to.”

Leaving the maroon jacket and her position on the board, Rushton encourages juniors to never take the moments they are living in for granted.

“At the BOLD Conference this year, Kelsey Vejraska said, ‘Be where your feet are,’” Rushton explains. She reflected frequently on that advice during her final JNHE.

“Whether you’re

7 years old and it’s your first junior nationals, or you’re 20 and you only have one year left, really focus on all of the moments, cultivate your friendships and don’t take this time for granted,” Rushton says.

“We always use ‘Hereford family,’ but it is so true. Not only is it good cattle, but the people are truly what back it up.”

— Ralston Ripp



Retiring NJHA board members received bronze Hereford bulls in recognition of their service. Here, they are flanked by NJHA board advisors.



Four NJHA board members are elected each year, forming a unique leadership class and forging a unique bond as they receive their maroon jackets, serve three-year terms and then retire at the same time.

Lauren McMillan receiving congratulations after giving her retiring address.

### Living in leadership

Lauren McMillan, Tiskilwa, Ill., is a fourth-generation Hereford breeder. She has attended the JNHE for 14 years and doesn't plan to miss one anytime soon. She walks confidently through the showing now, but things were quite different when she first stepped into one at the age of 7.

"I remember being in the ring and being really nervous," McMillan says. "I was showing this big heifer and didn't know what I was supposed to do in that big ring, and I remember seeing junior board members in the maroon jackets that were helping guide me through."

From that moment on, she dedicated herself to the breed and the junior organization.

"I was so engulfed in the junior association," McMillan explains. "I was there for everything."

Being an NJHA board member for the past three years, McMillan says she has been able to grow her Hereford family and help make the association the best it can be. She smiles when saying she has tried each day to be the best she can be to help those around her be the best they can be.

McMillan, a self-proclaimed 'leadership geek,' says one of her favorite parts of being a board



Libby Rushton shares a hug with other retiring NJHA board members.



Retiring vice chairman, Ralston Ripp, waves to the crowd during her final awards ceremony as an NJHA board member.



JW Cox, retiring chairman, clearly enjoyed helping out in the JNHE showing.

member was impacting youth through leadership. She believes the future of the Hereford breed is bright because of the outstanding young people who are a part of the NJHA.

"There are very few organizations that I have been a part of or heard of that have the leadership impact that the Hereford breed has on all of its juniors," McMillan says.

Although her time on the junior board has ended, McMillan plans on staying involved in the breed. She hopes NJHA members remember to live in the moment and appreciate where they are.

"If you're constantly looking to the next step, you're going to forget what you're doing right now and the hard work it took you to be here," McMillan says. "It's important to take a moment, look around you and be appreciative of all of the things you've accomplished."

McMillan says it has been an honor to serve the association for the past three years.

### Rooted in history

Ralston Ripp, Kearney, Neb., says her term on the NJHA board was indescribable. She had dreamed about becoming a board member since she

attended her first JNHE 12 years ago in Kansas City, Mo.

“My dream of being on the junior board came from recognizing the tradition and history of Hereford cattle, and also seeing how our junior association is so innovative and so willing to welcome new people, new ideas and new faces, all while we’re rooted in this idea of sustaining our legacy,” Ripp explains.

Ripp ran for the board on the foundation of, “Here to serve the membership.”

“I’m super grateful to say I know that I’ve accomplished that in these last three years of serving our membership,” Ripp says.

“We always use ‘Hereford family,’ but it is so true,” Ripp says. “Not only is it good cattle, but the people are truly what back it up.”

Ripp tributes a large portion of where she is today to the people in her life. People helped get her where she is, and they have challenged her along the way.

“People are what have pushed me, challenged me and given me opportunities that I would have never had without them,” Ripp explains.

Ripp says one of the most valuable pieces of advice she received during her time on the board was to find out who you are and stick with it. She is proud of who she is, where she came from,

JNHE in Louisville, Ky. After returning home, the first-generation Hereford breeder knew he wanted to become a junior board member.

“My first junior nationals were in 2017. Prior to that, and even after that, I never attended any Faces of Leadership conferences or other junior nationals until I ran,” Cox explains. “So, when I received that list of delegates and there were eight other people running, I knew it would be tough.”

Since putting on the maroon jacket, Cox has traveled to numerous states and met Hereford enthusiasts across the nation. These trips are memories he will cherish for years to come.

“The places I’ve gone, the people I’ve met and the things I’ve gotten to see have been my favorite parts of being on the board,” Cox explains.

He saw many different showrings and helped many different exhibitors over the past three years. Some of his fondest memories are helping the youth of the association: “Getting to see a smile on all the kids’ faces in and outside of the ring when they see you help them out,” he says.

Cox says there is always something to learn and ways to become more successful. “The road to success is always under construction” is one of his favorite quotes. He hopes the youth of

the organization continue to work hard and learn as much as possible.

“Never stop learning; you can never learn enough,” Cox says.

He laughs when thinking about all the miles he has travelled the past three years, many with his feet.

“Ralston and I joked about this a while ago. We wish we would have counted how many miles we have walked since we’ve been on the board,” Cox says. “Every step of the way has been great, and I’ve loved every minute of it. My time on the board has been nothing but great.” **HW**



All four retiring board members celebrate as Ralston Ripp finishes giving her retiring address.

After slipping on her maroon jacket, one of her goals was to be intentional with her time. She credits the knowledge she gained to her group of board member ‘oldies’ as they helped her navigate her first year on the junior board.

“Their biggest piece of advice was to sit back and listen,” Ripp explains. “They could tell that I really wanted to be intentional and have an impact.”

As a fourth-generation Hereford breeder, Ripp had always heard of the “Hereford family,” but she says she really experienced it while in the maroon jacket.

and she plans to continue sharing her Hereford story. Ripp encourages the juniors of the association to “just do it.” Although earning a maroon jacket once seemed an elusive dream to her, she had the courage to run.

“If you really love something, you’re really dreaming hard about something and you can’t forget it, just do it, or just start,” Ripp says. “Whether you fail or you succeed, at least you can say you did it.”

**Miles in the maroon jacket**

Retiring chairman, JW Cox, Flemingsburg, Ky., attended his first