

A LASTING IMPACT

Four retiring NJHA board members handed off their maroon jackets at the 25th annual VitaFerm® Junior National Hereford Expo.

by Riley Greiten

The 25th annual VitaFerm® Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE) made history, celebrated juniors and marked the retirement of four National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) directors.

After devoting three years to serving the NJHA membership, Tar Tut, Wesley Denton, Lauren Jones and Hannah Pearson gave their retiring remarks and passed their maroon jackets to four new junior board members.

From the beginning

There weren't many dry eyes in the arena as Tar Tut, Faribault, Minn., retiring NJHA chairman, gave his retiring address. Tut began showing cattle in the fifth grade, exhibiting a Hereford steer at the Minnesota Beef Expo. Since showing that first steer, Herefords have been a mainstay in Tut's barn.

Tut attended his first JNHE in 2016 in Madison, Wis., and from that moment on, he was hooked on the NJHA and the Hereford family. Tut was drawn to the leadership showcased by junior board members at that time.

"Right from the beginning, I fell in love with the Hereford breed and the Hereford community; everyone was so welcoming," Tut says. "I felt right at home. As cliché as it sounds, it felt like I had been there for my entire life."

Serving on another breed association junior board prior to his time on the NJHA board of directors, Tut was hesitant at first to run, not knowing what the voting delegates might think. He credits former NJHA board member, Bailey Morrell, with giving him a 'push' to run.

"As my time was dwindling on my previous junior board, I had one of the Hereford junior board members

approach me and say, 'I think you would be a great candidate for the junior board,'" Tut says. "I just jumped at the opportunity to go and apply for the NJHA board of directors, and that was a summer full of emotions."

Throughout the past three years serving the NJHA, Tut often thinks back to that moment with Morrell, and how her words impacted the director he wanted to be.

"My goal as a director was to be there for those kids that didn't believe in themselves and needed that push to step out of their comfort zone to do what they always wanted to do," Tut says. "No different than when Bailey told me to run for the board."

The NJHA and the Hereford breed are often described as the 'Hereford family.' For Tut, this wasn't just a phrase, but rather an indescribable



Retiring NJHA board members received bronze Hereford bulls in recognition of their three years of service. Pictured (l to r) are: Tar Tut, Faribault, Minn.; Lauren Jones, Darlington, Wis.; Hannah Pearson, Oconto, Neb.; and Wesley Denton, Blue Rapids, Kan.

support system that has helped him through his time in the NJHA.

“I don’t even know if there is a word to describe it,” Tut says. “I tell people I really don’t know where I’d be if I didn’t show cattle, but I really don’t know where I’d be if I didn’t have the Hereford family; it’s been one of the greatest support systems I’ve ever had.”

During his final few days wearing the maroon jacket, he was trying to soak in every last moment with the other junior board members. As he moves into his career with Merck Animal Health, Tut feels humbled to have served the NJHA membership.

“I didn’t have to be elected by our delegates to represent and serve them the last three years, but they chose me, and they had so many other options that they could have picked,” Tut says.

Tut leaves the junior board reminded of the advice given to him by American Hereford Association (AHA) audio-visual specialist, Kelsey Vejraska — “Be where your feet are.” He encourages NJHA members to be present in every moment and soak it all in. And to anyone wanting to run for the board, go for it.

“It is literally the best three years of your life,” Tut says. “You get to help form and shape the NJHA and be that positive light for our junior members.”

Fostering family

Retiring vice chairman, Wesley Denton, Blue Rapids, Kan., is no stranger to the Hereford breed or the NJHA. He was born into the breed — his mom, Angie, is a previous AHA staff member, lifelong Hereford breeder and former National Junior Polled Hereford Council member. A fourth-generation Hereford breeder, Denton attended his first JNHE in South Dakota when he was just 6 months old. When the time finally came for him to show at the JNHE in 2009, he entered the ring in Tulsa, Okla., with a heifer bred by his grandma and grandpa.

From a young age, Denton vividly remembers the young men and women in the maroon jackets, helping him through his peewee years and

navigating the showring. It wasn’t until he was a little bit older that he realized the full extent of what those junior board members do.

“As I began to grow up, I learned what they do and their influence within the association and the impact that they have on the juniors,” Denton says. “That is when I truly knew that I wanted to run for the national junior Hereford board.”

Throughout his three years on the board, there were many memories made in the maroon jacket.

He laughs as he reminisces on one of his fondest memories — a trip to Faces of Leadership in Billings, Mont. After a long week of taking in Montana, meeting breeders and connecting with other junior members, Denton and about 10 other attendees’ flights were cancelled. After Denton and Ralston Ripp, former NJHA board member, got everyone’s flights rebooked it was too late for them to get a new flight. So, the duo secured the only rental car left in Billings, a 2023 Ford Mustang, and made the 16 hour-long drive back to the Midwest.

“It was an awesome trip; Faces of Leadership was just a lot of fun,” Denton says. “The breeders we got to go visit and see, their operations were just incredible.”

As Denton retired his maroon jacket during the 2024 JNHE, he urged juniors to get involved and step outside of their comfort zones. He recalled how much he has changed since he was elected to the board three years ago and how this experience has helped shape him.

“Push your boundaries; step outside of your comfort zone,” Denton says. “I wasn’t always the most outgoing junior before I joined the junior board, and it has definitely shaped and molded me into who I am today.”

When asked how he would describe his past three years on the board, Denton summed it up with one word: family.

“Family — I think the people I have had the opportunity to serve with and the people I have met through this

opportunity, I’ve come to consider as family,” Denton says.

After being part of the NJHA for so long, he does not plan on leaving the Hereford family anytime soon. Denton says he is looking forward to attending the JNHE in a different role now that his time on the board has passed.

“I look forward to seeing where this association goes,” Denton says. “I think there is a bright future.”

Continuing the tradition

A JNHE attendee since 2005, retiring communications chair, Lauren Jones, Darlington, Wis., has been a fan of bald-faced red cattle from the start. Jones was born into the cattle industry; her father founded Wildcat Cattle Co. years before she was born. One of six children, all of Jones’ siblings have been or are currently NJHA members.

From as young as 3 years old, Jones remembers waiting eagerly outside of the showring, wanting to be on the inside exhibiting cattle alongside her older siblings. This passion for showing only continued to grow as she became older.

“Even when I was 3 and 4, I wanted to be the one showing, but I had to wait until I was 7, so I have always had a passion for trying to get in the showring,” Jones says.

Her time finally came to enter the ring at the 2011 JNHE, “Kickin’ it in Kansas.” Jones didn’t stop at competing in the ring, however. She recalls competing in the countless contests at the JNHE and credits them for creating foundational life skills.

“I’ve done pretty much every single contest ever, including Hereford Idol and three-on-three basketball. I really got involved in everything I could,” Jones says. “I like to think that the Hereford association has built my foundation for everything — my leadership skills, my communication skills, my work ethic. Everything was built here, because of those contests.”

Being in the showing and contest rooms, Jones knew she wanted a maroon jacket someday. All of the contests she competed in and events she attended were in pursuit of a spot



on the board. Jones explains how she had many role models on the board, like other Wisconsin juniors and her sister, Bailey.

“I always knew that I wanted a maroon jacket,” Jones says. “I felt like everything I did was in preparation to run for the board, so I started my campaign when I was a child.”

In 2021 her dream came true, and Jones was voted onto the NJHA board of directors. Three years of serving the NJHA membership, developing her leadership skills and connecting with industry leaders prompted Jones to experience some major personal growth.

“I like to think that I am a completely different person now than I was three years ago when I got on the junior board,” Jones says. “The personal growth that has happened from that point to now is crazy.”

Moving forward and looking back at the last three years, she recalls one of her dad’s favorite sayings, “Work hard and dream big.” Jones wants NJHA members to remember this as they continue to chase their dreams inside and outside of the showing.

With tears in her eyes, Jones spoke about how although she is passing along her maroon jacket, this is not the end of her journey in the bald-faced breed.

“I’m looking forward to being a part of the association for the rest of my life because my journey in the Hereford breed doesn’t stop here, and it won’t stop with my junior membership ending next year,” Jones says. “I am going to be involved for a very long time.”

Looking at leadership

Hannah Pearson, retiring leadership chair, from Oconto, Neb., started her journey in the Hereford breed with Bunny, her first Hereford heifer in 2007. After a trip to the Cornhusker Classic Futurity Sale with the goal of buying a Hereford heifer for her brother, the Pearson family headed home with two heifers in the trailer and one happy daughter.

Pearson attended her first JNHE in 2012, in Grand Island, Neb., and retired her maroon jacket 12 years later

in the same arena. The 2012 JNHE kicked off her national show career, and retiring her jacket in her home state brought her back to the beginning.

“It’s kind of a full circle moment; it’s really bittersweet,” Pearson says. “This is where my national career began, and this is where it ended.”

Running for the board was something Pearson knew she wanted to do as she got older and became more active in her state association. Other Nebraska juniors who served on the NJHA board of directors encouraged her to chase her dream. She saw the impact they were making and wanted to continue in their footsteps.

“What made me want to run was watching Hannah Williams and Ralston Ripp run and be active on the board,” Pearson says. “Seeing how much it benefitted them and how much they got to benefit the breed, I thought, ‘You know, maybe I can do that.’”

Although this was a dream Pearson accomplished, she had her doubts through the candidacy period.

Pearson encourages association members to try to accomplish their goals, despite the outcome. She explained how taking the first step is crucial when chasing dreams.

“Just try. You never know what is going to happen. I really didn’t think I would ever make it on the board,” Pearson says. “It took a lot for me to talk to those candidates, but I tried my best, and I made it on.”

The memories in the maroon jacket are endless and carry many laughs. Pearson, like one of her ‘oldie’ counterparts, Denton, remembers the Faces of Leadership airport fiasco in Billings.

Aside from spending hours in the Billings airport, and even an extra day in Montana due to travel delays, this trip was one of her favorites, from getting to know other junior members better to seeing the Montana mountains.

“It was just an awesome trip. A lot of great people got to see a lot of cool cows and a lot of cool ranches,” Pearson says. “Coming from the

Sandhills, I’ve seen a big ranch, but not like the mountain ranches.”

Through the past three years on the junior board, Pearson says she has learned, grown and made connections with many different people. Leadership is a major component of the board, and for Pearson, the past three years have helped her find her leadership niche. She credits Cheryl Mitchell, motivational speaker and leadership coach, in helping develop her leadership skills.

“I think being on the board truly fine-tuned my leadership skills and brought a different light to my leadership.”

Giving thanks

Amongst three years of memories, laughs and many miles, all four retiring board members thank the association and its staff for the continuous support.

“Amy, Bailey and Chloé are great mentors to look up to; they’ve done outstanding things with this association ...” Pearson says. “I’m so thankful that the AHA and the NJHA have such an awesome staff that works hard to provide Hereford kids with the best opportunities.” **HW**



The retiring NJHA board of directors embrace after Tut completed his retiring address and handed off his maroon jacket.