

UNFORGETTABLE



PHOTO BY CARRIE HEITMAN

Honoring the life and legacy of NJAB Chairman Jonathan Cory Watt.

by *Jena McReil*, digital editor

Cory Watt left an impression difficult to shake. Almost in an instant, his personality was revealed by a contagious smile, deep-felt laughter and an obvious strength impossible to measure.

At 22 he had faced more hardship than

most do in a lifetime. For more than a third of his life, Cory fought an unrelenting battle with cancer. Through multiple surgeries and radiation treatments for weeks on end, he trusted his faith and family to see him through.

His parents, Jody and Rebecca, and sister,

Carly, were his constant caretakers and helped Cory find the strength to live every moment to the fullest.

“Any time the bad news would come, Cory wouldn’t get upset. He stayed calm and would always smile,” Rebecca said. “That was his thing, he had that beautiful smile.”

At 1:16 p.m. Feb. 19, 2015, National Junior Angus Board (NJAB) Chairman Jonathan Cory Watt passed away at the family’s home near Iva, S.C.

While hearts ache across the Angus community at the loss of its young leader, we also pay tribute to Cory’s legacy as a passionate Angus breeder and member of the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) — an organization richly blessed by his influence.

“There wasn’t one way Cory made an impact, there were a million,” said Shane Kerner, NJAB vice chairman from Weiser, Idaho. “He was selfless and always put others first. He was passionate not only for the junior program and the board, but also its members and how we could make a better experience for kids through the NJAA.”

Life unexpected

Cory’s 11th birthday was one to remember.

July 18, 2003, landed toward the end of the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) in Louisville, Ky. It was his first junior nationals, and best friend Daniel Jarrard traveled with him to the Kentucky Exposition Center, which was a thrilling playground for two young boys who lived for showing cattle.

Daniel and Cory grew up together in the rural Grove community of South Carolina, not far from the Georgia state line. Cory was the fifth generation on the Watt farm, where his family still resides in the historic home built by Jody’s great-grandfather in the early 1900s. Growing up in the South meant there was plenty of duck hunting to do, fish to catch and backwoods to explore. Cory, Daniel and their families traveled many miles with a truck and trailer to exhibit cattle at local, state and regional shows.

The boys were all business in the showing. Serious and ready to compete, they made sure they presented their animals to the best of their ability. Back in the barn, Cory and Daniel never met a stranger. They would toss the football and play with other exhibitors up and down the aisles, and quickly acquired a large group of friends from throughout the country. Something about them seemed to stick with people.

At the 2003 NJAS, Cory and Daniel saw their first glimpse of the green coats worn by the NJAB. They left Louisville, Ky., with dreams of serving on the prestigious junior board.

For one of them, that dream was cut short.

Early one rainy morning in May 2007, Daniel was killed in a tragic car accident. He was 16.

Cory grieved deeply for his friend, and the entire community saw quickly that life could be unpredictable and far, far too short.

Just a few months later, Cory began having terrible headaches.

The doctor urged Rebecca to give it a few more days before worrying too seriously, attributing the headaches to the stress of losing a friend and watching his cousin begin cancer treatments for Hodgkin's lymphoma over the summer.

As Cory would say: Mama knew better.

A longtime X-ray technician, Rebecca thought her son needed to be examined more closely. On the way down the elevator that day, she saw a woman who worked in the radiology department.

"That was my sign," Rebecca remembers.

"I flagged her down and asked if we could get Cory in for a CAT scan that afternoon."

It's a good thing they did. The results showed a large mass in Cory's brain.

After the initial scan, they did an MRI and then took him to a specialist in Greenville, S.C., about an hour north of Iva. The doctor there confirmed the family's fears; it was a tumor that needed to be removed as soon as possible. Surgery was scheduled for the following Monday.

The doctor's advice was to let Cory do normal activities over the weekend to keep his nerves at bay. So on Sunday afternoon, he was out on the tractor baling hay with his daddy.

Cory loved being outside working on the farm, which consists of about 100 acres of pasture and 30 head of cattle. Jody grew up raising Herefords, but now their herd is mostly black thanks to the Angus cattle that Cory and Carly showed through the years.

Cory Watt Memorial Scholarship

To honor Cory's memory, the Watt family has established the Cory Watt Memorial Scholarship through the Angus Foundation. The first \$1,500 scholarship will be awarded at the 2015 National Junior Angus Show in Tulsa, Okla., and will be given to support an outstanding Angus junior in their quest for higher education.

Visit www.angusfoundation.org to contribute to the fund.



PHOTO BY JENA MCRELL

► Clemson University was Cory's paradise. He became a Clemson Tiger in the fall of 2010 and never took a moment for granted.

"For me, cutting hay was just something to get done," Jody said, "but Cory loved it. He said he liked doing something where he could see the progress happening right behind him."

The 15-year-old Cory dealing with his first brain tumor was a far cry from the 22-year-old who faced nearly every adversity with a positive attitude and fierce determination. The young Cory was terrified of what might happen next.

"When Cory was a kid, he worried about everything," Rebecca said, adding that he would get so nervous before school that it would make him sick. What changed? It goes back to that Sunday on the tractor, hours before his first brain surgery.

"As I was driving along on the tractor, I'll never forget a feeling coming over me. It's a feeling I can't explain," Cory said during a testimony to his church in February 2012. "But I know it was the Lord telling me that everything is going to be okay. And from that moment on, I haven't worried since."

Cory's surgery went well, and he was able to go home the next day. Soon after, he started the 29 rounds of radiation treatments that kicked the cancer from his body, and the family breathed a deep sigh of relief.

When he returned to school, the doctors warned that Cory's academics might struggle as he recovered from the radiation. He didn't let that slow him down. He went on to graduate fourth in his class of 162 from Crescent High School. He grew 6 inches after his tumor was removed, and lived a typical high-school life filled with

his favorite activities: duck hunting and showing Angus cattle.

Living in paradise

In February 2010, Cory received a giant envelope in the mail embossed with the Clemson University logo. Since he was a little boy, he had hoped to become a Clemson Tiger. When it came time to apply for college, he only submitted one application. He and longtime Angus friend Drake Yon of Ridge Spring, S.C., had already decided they would be college roommates.

"I remember we were all sitting in the dining room when Cory got his acceptance letter," Carly said. "He was so excited and had such a big grin on his face. To share in that moment with him, and many more once he got to Clemson, was really special for me."

Always quick to make friends, Cory was instantly comfortable on the Clemson campus. He and his buddies would go fishing on the nearby lake, hang out downtown where their friend would play music, attend football and baseball games, and meet new people at every turn.

"Cory knew everybody's name that he ever met. He wasn't shy at all, but he definitely could not sing or dance," Drake recalls fondly. "It got to the point where I would turn off the radio when we were driving down the road, just so I didn't have to hear him sing along."

Drake and his siblings, Sally and Corbin, shared many road trips with Cory and the Watt family, traveling to Angus shows and

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NJAA leadership conferences throughout the country. They competed together at Clemson, in the showring and as part of contest teams at the NJAS. The Yons were more like family than friends.

“Cory didn’t like being the center of attention,” Drake said. “He liked being in leadership positions, and he was a good leader, but he didn’t want to be at the center of attention. For Cory, it wasn’t about him; it was about what he was doing.”

During Cory’s time on campus, he served as the vice president of Block & Bridle and was a member of the Collegiate Cattleman’s Association and the Ducks Unlimited Club, among other activities.

“When he would leave our house to go back to school, it was always, ‘Mama, I am going to paradise,’” Rebecca said. “He sure loved Clemson.”

Drake will never forget one night in their freshman dorm, Johnstone Hall.

They had been up late studying for an animal science exam early the next morning, and Cory woke him up about 4 a.m. His left arm was completely numb, his tongue felt large in his throat, and he was completely nauseous.

Drake did what most any college student would do and looked up Cory’s symptoms online. Maybe not the most likely diagnosis, but he said, “Cory, I think you are having a stroke.”

“You think so?” Cory responded. “What should I do about it?”

“Call your mama, drink a Gatorade and go back to bed,” Drake advised.

So that’s what Cory did.

That story was one of Cory’s favorites to share when speaking in front of a group. The crowd would erupt with laughter when Cory would say, “Don’t worry, Drake isn’t going to be a doctor any time soon.”

After Cory finished the animal science

exam, Rebecca picked him up and they went straight to the doctor’s office. On that October day — three years to the month since they found the first tumor — results showed another growth on the side of his brain.

Cory had his second surgery during Christmas break of his freshman year at Clemson. Like before, he was able to return home the next day. A few weeks later, he had a special type of radiation surgery and began the process of beating the cancer once again. He only missed about two weeks of school.

“A lot of people we went to school with never knew he had cancer,” Drake said. “They would find out and be really shocked. That’s a credit to how positive he was about it. He didn’t want it to hold him back.”

By the next summer, Cory’s cancer was in remission again, and he was headed for one of his favorite places on Earth: Whitestone Farm in Aldie, Va., with his uncle Mark Duffell.

A true cattleman

Tucked within the rolling hills of northern Virginia, Whitestone Farm is more than 500 miles from Cory’s South Carolina home. He spent three summers there, working alongside the Whitestone team and caring for their 1,000-plus head of registered-Angus cattle.

He would spend his time cutting hay, feeding cows, fixing fence and getting the show string ready for the next competition. The hours were long, and the work was labor-intensive, but Cory lived for those days.

“Cory was in his heaven here,” Mark said. “He would work from sunup to sundown, and his work ethic was incredible. He looked at me as the boss, just like all the other boys did. He didn’t want any special treatment. So, he was real astute about everything he did. He wanted to do it to the best of his ability.”

From an early age, Cory wanted to be just like his uncle Mark, Whitestone general manager with more than 35 years in the Angus business. He was glued to his side every chance he was able to go with him to an Angus sale or show, and Cory paid close attention to how he interacted with people.

“Jody was Cory’s best friend, and Mark was his hero, I’d say,” Drake said. “He was very tight with his family.”

It was Jody who helped Cory prepare for his first show as a tiny 3-year-old leading a Hereford heifer, and it was uncle Mark who got Cory started raising Angus cattle.

Cory bought his first registered-Angus heifer, Blackbird Blossom of Whitestone, from Whitestone when he was about 8 years old. She was a green heifer at the time, Mark



A leader’s impact

“Cory taught me that attitude is everything, and there’s a silver lining in every situation. He taught me not to worry about the little things and to value a good laugh.”

— *Shane Kerner, NJAB vice chairman, Weiser, Idaho.*

“Cory had the drive to accomplish whatever he had his heart set on, and that drive gave us the inspiration that we could do the same,”

— *Jessica Radcliffe, NJAB leadership director, Weston, Wis.*

“I will always remember Cory for how he listened and made each junior feel like they belonged. He truly wanted everyone to succeed at what they wanted to do.”

— *Lindsay Upperman, NJAB membership director, Chambersburg, Pa.*

“Cory had this amazing way of bringing people together. He always kept us grounded and reminded us to have faith.”

— *Tylee Jo Williams, NJAB communications director, Rio Vista, Texas*

“The impression Cory left on the junior membership and our board was unprecedented. I look forward to seeing how his legacy will continue to shape the lives he touched.”

— *Will Fiske, NJAB Foundation director, Greenville, Va.*

remembers, and at the first place they showed her, she did not do well.

"I told Cory I didn't want him to start off winning," Mark said. "I wanted him to learn how to be humble and understand what losing meant. That would give him the inspiration to do his best and work hard. When he did win, he would relish that time well spent."

By the end of the show season, Cory was winning about everywhere with that heifer. The focused and determined showman would enter the ring with a serious demeanor, and exit with a grin.

He and Carly both developed a true passion for Angus cattle and the NJAA. Like most siblings, they were extremely competitive, but still found joy in each other's successes.

"He was always happy for me when I won at a show," Carly said. "He would give me a big hug and a big grin and say, 'You've done it again!'"

At the end of his showing career, Cory had a lengthy list of accomplishments and endless show ribbons, a collection of belt buckles and several championship banners that are still on display in the Watts' home.

He showed the champion cow-calf pair at the 2012 Eastern Regional Junior Angus Show in Timonium, Md., and the reserve champion cow-calf pair at the 2012 NJAS in Louisville, Ky. Cory represented the state of South Carolina in the showmanship competition at the 2013 NJAS in Kansas City, Mo., and earned the elite Gold Award from the NJAA.

The NJAA provided many positive memories during a time otherwise fraught with recurring health battles.

Faith unshakeable

"For the last seven years, it was like, you go to the doctor and you get good news and you were up here on top," Jody said, lifting his hand high in the air. "Then all of a sudden, you are back in the valley again."

It seemed to happen like clockwork; when they thought they'd won the battle, a new obstacle emerged.

"October to December were our worst



► On show day, Cory traded his usual fun-loving attitude for a more serious and competitive disposition. He loved fitting cattle and leading them into the showing looking their best.

times," Rebecca said. "We hated to see that time of the year come, because that's always when we would get the bad news."

On Christmas Eve 2011, Cory had a seizure and was airlifted to the hospital in Greenville, S.C. He was wearing a green, long-sleeve polo shirt, which Rebecca threw away immediately afterward. She did the same with every other shirt Cory was wearing when a negative diagnosis was announced.

The seizure was triggered by yet another tumor growing at the top of Cory's head.

Still, he never lost his spirit.

"Once when he was starting chemo, we went to Clemson to pick him up and when he got in the car he said, 'Whoop, show time! Today's the last day of this cancer,'" Jody recalled.

Through the ups and downs, Cory remained a steady anchor for his family. No matter what information the doctors threw his way, he was calm and collected. The same peace that came to him that day on the tractor remained in his heart through each trial and every tribulation.

"I have never seen a young man that could

accept what he had, even though he didn't want it," said Rev. Gray, the Watts' pastor at Iva First Baptist Church. "I never saw him bitter. I saw him maybe doubt and question a couple times why God wouldn't do what we all wanted him to do, which was heal the cancer. But he never got mad at God."

Cory was baptized when he was 8 years old at Starr Baptist Church near his family's home. That's also his final resting place, right next to his grandpa Marshall Watt.

Philippians 4:13 was his favorite verse: "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." He ingrained it in his mind, over and over again. It was a mantra that could overcome whatever struggle was yet to appear.

He lived his faith out loud and never took a moment for granted. He loved his friends and family deeply, and he knew that his trust in the Lord would overcome even cancer's worst days. A glimpse into Cory's life struggles, and the confident way he responded to each mounting challenge, was enough to make a person curious where this young South Carolina man found his strength.

Accomplishing dreams

Cory was about as worried as he could be at the 2013 NJAS in Kansas City, Mo.

A decade since he and Daniel first saw the green coats, Cory was campaigning for a spot on the NJAB. It was a chance to fulfill his childhood aspirations and honor the life of his best friend.



PHOTO BY JENA MCRELL

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By that time, Cory had already been through three brain surgeries, three different sets of radiation treatments, and a seemingly constant stream of chemotherapy medication and treatments. That didn't seem to make him anxious, but running for the NJAB had him worried sick.

He prepared the best way he knew how, and used his humble, authentic character to win over the crowd.

"Cory would never write anything down for his speeches," Jody said. "He said if you write something down it sounds too rehearsed when you say it. It's not coming from the heart."

So he spoke from the heart, and people responded.

Sitting in the bleachers of the American Royal Complex in Kansas City, Rebecca remembers being in a panic after the first few names were announced as new members of the NJAB.

Fourth person, fifth person, and then finally, the last name announced — from South Carolina, . . .

"When she said that, I just started screaming," Rebecca said. "My baby's on the board! I ran down to the arena and was pushing people out of the way to get to him. I grabbed him and started crying."

The next year, in July 2014, Cory was named chairman of the NJAB he so dearly loved. In a text to his parents, he said, "I just got chairman. God's got big plans for me, y'all. Just hang in there, everything is going to be okay."

Cory was the example of a servant leader during his time spent with the NJAB and

NJAA members from all over the United States. His fellow NJAB leaders say Cory will be best remembered for his enduring spirit, friendly attitude and sincere interest in helping junior members.

"Cory's presence made this organization better because of the connection and impact he had with our juniors," said Jessica Radcliffe, NJAB leadership director. "Cory always knew how to make you feel welcome; he was always there with open arms."

Between being elected to the NJAB and being named chairman, Cory was battling yet another growing tumor, but this time, it was different. Instead of being in his brain, a cancerous growth appeared on the outside of his neck. The type of tumors he had, called ependymoma, were only supposed to grow inside the brain stem or in the spinal cord.

Cory's was only the sixth case in the world where it moved outside the brain.

He continued to undergo radiation treatments throughout the fall of 2014, and had to miss a few Angus shows and events along the way. He focused all his strength on preparing to be at the 2014 National Angus Convention & Trade Show in Kansas City, Mo., and delivering a special address



► With his parents and sister cheering him on, Cory graduated from Clemson University in December 2014. Later, he was named an outstanding senior in animal and veterinary science.

to attendees at the Angus Foundation's Supporter Recognition Event.

In a moving speech, Cory shared how the Angus Foundation helped fuel his dream of graduating from Clemson University. Over the course of his undergraduate education, he received \$13,000, thanks to generous investments from Angus Foundation donors.

Cory expressed his sincere appreciation for all the support, and brought the entire crowd to its feet.

During the National Angus Convention, Cory represented the NJAA and his NJAB with the grace and professionalism that he exuded in everything he did. He wore his green coat with pride, and his big, beaming smile would sparkle from across the room.

"Cory gave it all so he could be there," Jody said. "He had done all he could do, just to try to make it through that week and act like nothing was wrong."

Soon after he returned home from Kansas City, the doctors told Cory and his family that there wasn't anything else they could do. Tumors began to quickly spread throughout his neck and chest.

On Nov. 16, 2014, the First Baptist Church of Iva hosted a special healing service, where Cory addressed the crowd in his typical, positive way and said, "The doctors told us that there isn't much more we can do, but I know who can. There's nothing bigger than God. With Him, all things are possible."

Nearly 1,000 people flooded the church and surrounded him with love and prayers for more than an hour.

A Clemson grad

On Dec. 18, 2014, Cory walked across the stage in Littlejohn Coliseum at Clemson University to accept his bachelor's degree in



PHOTO BY KASEY BROWN

► A dream since he was 11 years old, Cory was elected to the NJAB in July 2013. Rebecca and Jody rushed to his side once his name — the final one on the list — was announced.

animal and veterinary science. Beaming with pride, he high-stepped across the stage with his trademark smile.

"It was pretty overwhelming and so heartwarming to see that he's finally getting his degree that he wanted," Carly said. "He went through seven years of cancer and never let that stop him. To just see him standing out there would give you cold chills."

When he sat back down after receiving his diploma, Rebecca threw him an "I Love You" hand sign from the crowd. He shook his head and smiled, she said. All his closest friends and family members were there to cheer him on and celebrate another dream he was able to fulfill because of his resilience and dedication.

"I would sit there and watch him, and he was looking around, taking it all in," Jody said. "Probably thinking, 'I've been through two brain surgeries while I was here, cancer is troubling me right now, but I've done it. I am here.'"

The next day, they hosted a graduation party at their home, and Cory's diploma was already in the frame, proudly displayed on the wall.

Finally home

Cory spent the final months of his life at the farm in Iva, S.C. The small community, rooted in loyalty, was where some of Cory's best memories were kept.

Up the road from their house is a small store where farmers would meet each Saturday morning. Cory and his daddy would take a "store break" to grab a breakfast snack and visit for a while.

Down the road is a quiet pond in the cattle pasture, where Cory was known to drop a



PHOTO BY KASEY BROWN

► Cory represented the NJAA with much professionalism during the 2014 National Angus Convention in Kansas City, Mo.

line while out checking cows. He stashed a fishing pole in a tree near the pond, and it's still there today.

"That was his, 'While I am checking cows, I am going to goof off a little bit,'" Jody said with a laugh. "Cory was always able to find fun in everything he did."

His fun-loving spirit overshadowed any negative trace cancer left on his life. He was a loyal friend, fighter to the end, and true example of how to love deeply every moment.

"That's just the way Cory was, you know," said Glenn Simpson, who farms down the road from the Watts. "You could meet him one day and you'd remember him. He was

the kid everyone would have loved to have as their own."

The Saturday before he passed, Cory was determined to write his "Chairman's Perspective" column for the NJAA *Directions* newsletter spring issue. His final words of encouragement and enthusiasm for the Angus breed will continue to inspire for generations.

Cory's legacy is a reflection of his courage, strength, positive outlook, smile and, above all, his faith. He closed every speech in his signature style:

"Thank you, and God bless."



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What Really Matters

As I look back at my last 18 months on the National Junior Angus Board of Directors, there are a lot of things that come to mind. All Angus juniors can relate to the hard work that goes into everything we do. My own unique experience has led me to understand what really matters.

Always live in the moment that you are in at this time. You cannot change what has happened in the past and do not spend time worrying about the future.



Just enjoy where you are right now. Make this moment count.

Always be happy, whether you place first, last or anywhere in between. Happiness is a mental state that always attracts more things to be happy about.

Always be yourself and look to your values of faith, hope and love, with the greatest being love. Identify your values every day and live by them.

Always be true to yourself and true to others. This will allow you to always make the right decisions in life.

Lastly, but most importantly, is your relationship with the Lord. "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?" (Mark 8:36).

So it doesn't matter if you have a national champion or sell a bull or heifer for thousands of dollars; what matters is you have Jesus in your heart. Always do your best, and let God do the rest. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13) Thank you, and God bless.

— by Cory Watt