

Faith, **Family** & **Friends**

Jerry Turner chooses to walk in the light even as darkness surrounds him. His life is an extraordinary example of how courage, dignity and faith can sustain you in the face of dire circumstances.

BY
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“Make the most of your life.”

“Seize the moment.”

We hear these phrases and quickly set them aside for the more mundane aspects of our everyday lives.

You will not easily set aside the take-home message of this story about Indiana Angus breeder and veterinarian Jerry Turner. This is a story about a man who always has lived his life full bore and who is now seizing every moment that he is given.

Jerry Turner loves hard work and achievement. “It was a big objective for me to have a successful farm and a successful veterinary practice,” Turner told me in a mid-October interview. The Richmond native achieved both with the help and enthusiasm of his wife, Cathy.

“Jerry always wanted our cattle to survive as well west of the Mississippi as they did east,” said Cathy.



JULIE GRIMES-ALBERTSON PHOTO

Since Jerry was diagnosed as having amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or “Lou Gehrig’s Disease,” Indiana Angus producers Jerry and Cathy Turner have found strength in family, friends and their faith in each other.

The Turners paid attention to keeping costs down while still using superior genetics. “I always said we had white-collar genetics in a blue-collar world,” said Jerry. They focused on raising high-quality cattle without the frills. Turner cattle had everything they needed but nothing extra. That strategy impressed commercial and purebred buyers alike.

In the Angus business since 1978, the Turners planned for the future. “Throughout the ‘90s we did everything to prepare for a comfortable retirement,” said Jerry. They made extensive improvements

to their 1829 Federalist home and farm.

But the Turners’ successful and well-planned world came to an abrupt and gut-wrenching halt in August 1998 with his diagnosis of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

“Because of the rapid progression of ALS, I realized that Cathy and I were never going to be a team again,” Jerry explained haltingly. The heartbreaking story of this Angus family was becoming clear as I watched Cathy’s eyes turn cloudy while she listened to Jerry talk about their life together.

■ Jerry’s diagnosis

For five years Jerry’s family doctor had been treating him for leg cramps. The leg cramps progressed to foot drop in Jerry’s right foot by April 1998. At this point his neurologist spent four months trying to find out what was wrong. The doctor took extra caution before giving a diagnosis because there are many diseases, some of which are treatable, that have some of the same symptoms as ALS.

It was clear by August that Jerry had ALS, a fatal neurological disorder characterized by progressive

degeneration of motor-neuron cells in the spinal cord and brain. ALS is often referred to as “Lou Gehrig’s Disease.”

People suffering from ALS experience a gradual increase in muscle weakness, especially in the arms and legs, speech, swallowing and breathing. At our interview in mid-October, Jerry was confined to a wheelchair, having lost strength in his arms and legs. His voice, however, was strong, and he was willing to tell his story.

“My goal is to get the most out of life that I can, for as long as I can without life support. That’s what I really want to do,” Jerry confided.

His positive attitude is unwavering, but the statistics are sobering. Half of all ALS patients live three or more years after diagnosis; 20% live five years or more; and up to 10% will survive more than 10 years. Doctors can’t predict how long a patient will live.

“When you’re faced with these things, you just have to reach back and find all the strength that you can. We feel like we’ve been able to do that,” said Jerry.

Their strength comes from family, friends and their faith in each other. “I’ve always been a Christian. I’ve tried to live by the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule,” said Jerry. Attending the church of his childhood with his mother during the past two years has also given Jerry comfort.

■ Lessons of ALS

Looking at life through the eyes of a terminally ill person changes your perspective.

“ALS has made me realize how much I loved all four seasons. I loved the spring for the calving. I loved the summer for filling the barns with straw and hay and watching the cattle graze in the evenings. I just loved that,” said Jerry. “I loved getting up early and checking for heats, to be there right when the cows are getting up, to see who was in heat.

“In the fall I loved weaning and weighing calves, and in the



More than 1,000 Angus breeders and friends attended the Turners’ dispersal sale. Association Regional Manager Jerry Cassady describes it as “the biggest crowd I’ve seen at any Angus event outside of a show like Denver or Louisville.”

winter nothing made me happier than to have the cows bedded down in fresh straw. Watching them run in the straw and settle down, I’d go in the house knowing that the cows all had a nice clean place to lay down and have their babies. It gave me an inner feeling of comfort to know the cattle had

“We’d go out and look at cattle at 10 o’clock in the evening, spend half the night talking about the Angus business, and Jerry would be ready to go again the next day before dawn.

“I’ve never met a more upbeat, enthusiastic man. It didn’t matter if he was in the middle of a drought or if his

“With ALS, unless there’s a silver bullet or a miracle cure — and I won’t give up hope until there’s no hope — I’ll make the most of all the friendships we’ve made because they’re so cherished,” Jerry said.

■ Time to sell

As much as Jerry and Cathy loved the cattle business, it became obvious to both by late spring of 1999 that continuing was impossible.

“We’ve always done this together. But Cathy couldn’t do the work of both of us on the farm plus take care of me,” explained Jerry. “I hated to say it, but I knew we needed to think about getting out of the business. There’s more that could go wrong than right.”

Within a two-week period in June the Turners bought a one-story house down the road from their farm, and they contracted for an August sale of their cattle and farm. The Turners had 150 head to get ready to sell.

“Our neighbors, our friends and our family literally came to the rescue,” said Cathy.

Two people who played a critical role in making it happen were neighbor and Hereford

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their needs met,” Turner said.

The Turners have cherished the friendships they have made over the years in the Angus business.

“It wasn’t unusual for me to visit the Turners after a Miami Valley Angus meeting,” shares Chuck Grove, American Angus Association regional manager.

best cow just died, he has always had such a great attitude. Jerry loved his life as a vet and Angus breeder.”

Jerry speaks matter-of-factly about ALS and his situation. But it becomes much harder for him to discuss the countless people whom he loves and who show him their love.

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breeder Doug Gerber and Rex Sorrell from Eaton, Ohio. "Rex personally took over the entire operation of fitting the cattle and helping design the sale facilities," said Cathy. "He organized all the help, including bringing in friends of ours from other states who worked tirelessly for six weeks."

The auctioneer for the sale, Jerry Lehmann, also went beyond the call of duty for the Turners. "He took it upon himself to provide the tent, the auctioneer's booth, the ring and the bleachers, and he put it all up himself," said Cathy.

Gerber, Sorrell and Lehmann were just three of many generous people who helped get the cattle and the equipment ready to sell. "There were so many people who came wanting to help Doc that we hardly knew what to do with everybody," says Gerber.

One evening before the sale Gerber asked Jerry if he wanted to see the cattle before they sold. Jerry had just been released from the hospital due to a case of pneumonia and was under doctor's orders to stay in the house.

"We brought the Kawasaki Mule up to the patio and Jerry sat in the back. It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, taking Doc to see his cattle for the last time," remembers Gerber.

Sale day came and Jerry asked to be taken out at 6:30 a.m. to see how things were set up and penned.

"Not many people know this, but Jerry spotted an animal with a sore foot, one with an infected navel and another with a runny eye," says Jerry Cassady, regional manager for the American Angus Association. "He was still practicing medicine even though he couldn't treat them himself. He also wanted those problems mentioned when the animals sold."



Letting go of a farm and cattle that have been a part of their lives since their marriage in 1978 was heartbreaking. "But it all works out," says Cathy. "It all works out," Jerry confirms.

To say the Turners had a good turnout at their sale would be an understatement. "I tried to count, but quit at 1,000," says Cassady. "It was truly the biggest crowd I've seen at any Angus event outside of a show like Denver or Louisville. They gave away 600 to 700 buyer numbers. You're usually happy to give out 100."

Cassady believes that the crowd came not just to buy good cattle but because Jerry is so well-respected and well-liked.

■ Doc Turner

Many people who came to the sale were undoubtedly former clients of Jerry's veterinary practice. He graduated from the Purdue School of Veterinary Medicine in 1965 and, along with Dr. Millard Hays, built the present practice, the Grove Veterinary Clinic, in 1975.

As in the Angus business, his attitude as a veterinarian set him apart from most people. "The last thing we wanted to do was to call Jerry out at 1 a.m. to help a cow calve. But he would always arrive chipper and enthusiastic, like it was 1 o'clock



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in the afternoon," says neighbor Doug Gerber.

The great attitude, will and determination that serve Jerry so well as an ALS patient also combined to make him a well-respected veterinarian. He served as president of the Purdue Veterinary Alumni Association in 1996-97 and was awarded the 1999 Distinguished Alumnus Award from the

Purdue veterinary school. He accomplished these feats while maintaining a large Angus herd.

"For 20 years I watched Jerry get home from his practice after dark and just be starting his chores at 8:30 at night," says Gerber. "He was a workhorse."

■ Jerry & Cathy

Letting go of a farm and cattle that have been a part of

their lives since their marriage in 1978 was heartbreaking for Jerry and Cathy, they related in our interview.

"It was strange. The first few nights after the cattle left, I woke up wondering if they had gotten out," said Cathy. "But it all works out. Everything always works out."

"It works out," repeated Jerry. "But it sure wasn't our grand plan."

Their grand plan was living a life full of love, laughter and great friendships. Amazingly, both are determined to maintain all three even in Jerry's decline.

Cathy is the picture of grace and dignity, maintaining a positive outlook as she cares for Jerry. "We want to educate people about ALS. Yes, it's horrid, but it's not the total end of the world. For example, we had to sell everything, but we

still have so much to be thankful for," Cathy declared.

Jerry and Cathy have both been thankful for support they've received via the Internet throughout Jerry's illness.

"ALS support groups have home pages with message boards and chat rooms," said Jerry. "It's nice to read about what other people with this disease are thinking and what they're going through." Cathy has also found helpful ideas from the home pages of other caregivers.

■ Jerry's greatest contribution

In a life full of achievement, Jerry Turner makes clear what has been the priority in his life — his wife and children. Carrie, Mark and Andy Turner are Jerry's adult children, whom he admires and adores.

Jerry is grateful for many

things in his life, but one of his most cherished memories is a hunting trip with his sons.

"Three years ago my sons asked me to go hunting with them in Wyoming. I told them I was just going to be too busy. But at the last minute I decided to go, and we had a great time.

"I went again last fall after I'd been diagnosed. I had one particular day when my youngest son, Andy, and I went fishing on the Otter Creek basin. It was a perfect scene. The sky was blue; cottonwoods surrounded us where the Otter Creek comes out of the Big Horn Mountains. We caught enough fish for the whole camp. I wouldn't trade that day for anything."

Initially Jerry had decided he would put off the trip until 2000. "I thought I would have more time to go then. But I'm so thankful that we went. You

just never know what the future holds. It just meant a lot to be there and do those things with my boys."

The legendary football coach, Vince Lombardi, said the following:

"I firmly believe that any man's finest hour is that moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and is exhausted on the field of battle, victorious."

Jerry has worked his heart out as an Angus breeder, veterinarian and friend. While he's not ready to stop fighting, Jerry has led a victorious life. He has worked with high energy and brilliance and loved the people around him passionately.

He is a victor.

