

A photograph showing two students from the back, wearing blue jackets with the Wildorado logo. They are looking towards a yellow school bus in a dusty outdoor setting. The bus is partially obscured by a sign that reads 'PIONEERS OF THEIR GENERATION'.

PIONEERS OF THEIR GENERATION

Dust swirls behind a yellow school bus as it passes under the Gray Ranch sign in Wildorado, Texas. A sunny Saturday in late December sets the scene for 23 high schoolers to process their first crop of Angus calves out of their very own cow-calf herd.

*Story by Lindsay King, assistant editor
Photos by Angelica Esparza, Wildorado High School*

Starting a cow-calf operation from scratch is unheard of in today's cattle industry. Someone forgot to tell the students of Wildorado ISD that as they continue building the foundation for a growing cattle herd in the Texas panhandle.

The Wildorado Elementary School has been a staple in the community of barely 400 people for generations. The community decided they wanted to watch their kids graduate with a Wildorado diploma and quickly began the process for building a new school.

"After we passed a bond to build, the school board knew we needed to stay rooted in what built our community," says Wildorado ISD superintendent Troy Duck. "We are staying the same while also reinventing ourselves as we begin to include high school students at our school."

Fan the flame

The brand new, state-of-the-art building opened in 2016, but the first freshman class to walk the halls of Wildorado ISD would not come until the next year. Consequently, the first Wildorado FFA chapter was comprised of those 15 freshman. A year later,

the school still boasts 100% participation in their ag program. Although, now it consists of 23 students making up the freshman and sophomore classes. The man behind the wheel of this magic school bus is Cody Bonds.

"The biggest role I have played in the ag program is hiring the right person and being smart enough to give him the support he needs," Duck says as the FFA program Bonds runs is almost as old as the school itself. It's a major draw for students out of surrounding towns such as Amarillo and Bushland.

Last fall an interrupted horse judging practice sparked an idea, the kind most categorize as a wild, impossible dream.

"Mr. Bonds and I were talking about starting a cattle program on our way home from practice," says Kade Flowers, a sophomore from Bushland and one of the founding members of the seedstock herd program. "I was all for it. When I presented the idea to our ag class, they all jumped in too."

Jumping in with both feet is a typical trait for the Wildorado FFA class. Though Bonds acts as a guiding hand, the ideas and work behind starting a cattle herd as a class all come from the students.

“We have kids that had no clue about cattle that are now leaders for the business. You just have to prove to them there is a place for everyone in agriculture.” – Cody Bonds

“It was easy to get behind because the students did all the leg work,” Duck says about the impressively comprehensive presentation students gave to the school board. “They came to the school board with the idea. Our board is full of progressive thinkers. They have always understood the importance of working agriculture back into the school somehow.”

A grassroots movement driven by the students themselves was just the ticket to get the green light.

One of a kind

FFA programs across the country are known for finding innovative ways to teach classes with hands-on experiences.

“The executive president of the Texas FFA has not found any other school doing the same thing we are,” says Bonds, Wildorado FFA advisor and ag teacher. “There is nobody to ask if we have questions, we just have to look in the mirror and answer them for ourselves.”

This is both exciting yet challenging as they have no road map.

“We have not had to recruit kids for this, the challenge has been staying ahead of them because they have high expectations for it,” Bonds says. He’s the boots on the ground for this one-of-a-kind seedstock operation. However, he made it abundantly clear that the students were responsible for moving the program forward. From the daily checks to building a business plan, it’s all in the hands of the students. Most of whom are barely old enough to drive.

“Schools always want to have real-world, hands-on learning experiences,” Bonds says, “here it is. They are out there branding, preg checking, feeding, doctoring, everything.”

Seeking advice from every rancher within a 100-mile radius proved these students were on the right track. Conversations with industry leaders such as Mike Smith and Minnie Lou Bradley instilled confidence in a seemingly impossible undertaking.

“There is nothing deadlier than a group of kids that have their minds set on something,” says Benson McAlister, a sophomore from Bushland and one of the founding students.

Jess Merrell, another founding member and sophomore from Hereford, revealed the motto of the program “We are not just raising cows, we are raising kids,” to illustrate the significance of the program for current and future generations.

“We are trying to teach kids that if you have an idea and a work ethic to match, you can accomplish anything,” she adds.

The plan

“This is not an ordinary school — we are held to high standards,” McAlister explains of the unspoken expectation that each student will give their best every day, no matter the task. He cracks a knowing smile as other founding members of the Wildorado herd nod in agreement.

It’s hard to believe they are only high school sophomores as they discuss the development, future plans and benefits of their program at such a sophisticated level.

They understand the gravity of the successful business they have started and are now operating. It’s these same high standards that set the bar for the type of cattle selected for this unique herd.

“We looked at several breeds, but we kept coming back to Angus because of what they are in the industry and this part of Texas,” Merrell says, “the Business Breed.”

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Angus is synonymous with beef. It's what people look for when they seek quality in a grocery store aisle, she adds. The students wanted to build a successful program, and that meant knowing what their consumer wanted.

"We wanted our program to be impressive, for people to do a double take when we told them we built it from nothing," Merrell says about how they want people to immediately think registered Angus cattle when their program is discussed. "We trust the breed and the genetics. We have high standards and expect a lot out of our cattle."

They needed animals to go out on pasture that would last with the constantly changing climate of the panhandle, explains Harris Albracht, a sophomore from Bushland and a founding member.

To put Wildorado on the map through the cow herd, they needed standout animals from the very beginning. The search through a number of highly reputable herds led them to Brad Harris of H Bar V Ranch in New Mexico.

"Harris actually has a closed herd, but he opened it up to us so we could pick out five first-year heifers

and then 15 bred-back pairs to get us started," Albracht explains.

The school board provided a loan for the capital they needed to get off the ground. Since the herd is a business, they have a strict budget to stick to. Like any cattle operation, there is very little, if any, wiggle room within it.

The lasting legacy

Only five months separated the initial idea and hauling the cattle home. It was an amazing feat, one that involved late nights, weekends and more phone calls than the group can count.

Though it's the student's program, the Wildorado community played a significant role in the launch and upkeep.

"We are very lucky that members of the board are involved in agriculture," Merrell explains, adding how the manager of Gray Ranch, Ty Cleavinger, offered the property for lease to house their cattle.

It conveniently has superb working pens and chutes — a true blessing for a herd in its infancy.

Bonds, with a sigh, explains how he does not



know what they would have done if this lease had not been available to them.

“As part of the lease, when we work our cattle we also work his,” Merrell says. “He wanted us to work for it. We love it though. We always ask for more work when we are there.”

It’s this work ethic, eagerness for knowledge and hands-on experience that makes it easy to understand why the main goal is to pay off their loan before 2021. It’s the year the first class will graduate from Wildorado ISD.

“I could not leave this school knowing I left debt for other students to work to pay off,” McAlister says.

Their inaugural sale in March is designed to generate enough revenue to build a budget for the next year while also chipping away at their loan

from the school board.

“I think we will be surprised by the results of the sale,” Albracht explains. “We can only hope we will earn more than we are expecting.”

In addition to their seven yearling bulls in the sale, they are also offering consigned animals from surrounding cattlemen.

On March 2, all 23 students will find themselves at the Amarillo Livestock Auction where they will experience what it takes to work a sale successfully. This process will come full circle.

“This production sale will offer a place for

our neighboring cattlemen to sell animals, which invites some competition,” Bonds says. “It also allows the students to interact with those people

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Every aspect of the Wildorado Cattle Company is student-led, including the communications. This flyer was built by Angelica Esparza, a Wildorado sophomore.



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Find your place, here

"At state [FFA] convention last year, we set some goals and one of those was to welcome new kids with open arms," says Jess Merrell, a sophomore at Wildorado High School. "We have held that standard and gotten a lot of new kids coming into our school specifically for this program."

Two of those students welcomed into the program had no previous experience with cattle before jumping in with both feet. Though Brooke Trayler is from Wildorado, her only previous connection to agriculture was through her dad's background. The freshman has enjoyed trying something completely new to her.

Angelica Esparza, from Amarillo, is a sophomore who didn't plan to enjoy agriculture or the program as much as she has.

"I was nervous because I did not know what I would be able to do to help with the business," Esparza says as she clutches the camera she uses to capture the essence of the program for their marketing scheme.

Both Esparza and Trayler quickly found this was not the type of group that would leave them on the sidelines while others did the hands-on work.

"Everyone jumps in and teaches you what to do," Trayler says. "Everyone is so inviting and wants you to learn and makes you feel like part of the team."

Sophomore Benson McAlister says it best when he addresses how the individual strengths of each team member grows exponentially when they work together cohesively. Though every group will have their conflicts.

"This is a family-based operation and we butt heads, but it always ends up working out," McAlister explains as Merrell adds, with a laugh, that they are all just brutally honest with each other, in a good way.

Growth comes from conflict and discomfort, pushing forward full steam ahead. These students figured out how they only had to embrace this and use it to their advantage.

"We are a tight-knit group," Merrell says. "We love everybody and everyone is welcome."

One subliminal aspect of the program is the advocacy for production agriculture. It might have always been a goal in the back of their mind, but it was never explicitly listed as one.

"Consumers want to know more about what they are eating," says Cody Bonds, Wildorado FFA advisor. "There is no better way to teach them than to grab hold and grow it themselves. It is the best way I can think of to advocate for an industry and lifestyle."



Every animal at Wildorado Cattle Co. receives a brand and a blue ear tag. This makes it easy to identify them in a group.

on a professional level, which you don't always get in the classroom setting."

This is instrumental in reaping the full benefits of a program rooted in tradition and innovation.

Naturally, the first goal was to build a program where students could gain marketable skills for use in their future careers. The next was to make it sustainable.

"Another goal we have added is to generate scholarship funding from the herd," Bonds says. "The time they spend here is valuable academically, but we would like to make it financially beneficial also."

These students are investing in their future academically, physically and economically. Bonds adds the students are earning every inch of it and he wants to reward their effort through these scholarships. Duck profusely agrees.

"At the end of the day, we are raising kids," Bonds says. "The cattle are just a tool to help teach them the same values some of us learned by growing up on the ranch. Those things are not written down, it is something you have to do." **AJ**