

# Three Decades in the Making

*David Gazda, Association regional manager, was recently inducted into the Georgia Angus Hall of Fame.*

*by Ali Luety, American Angus Association*

Veteran American Angus Association Regional Manager David Gazda was inducted into the Georgia Angus Hall of Fame in March. The honor caught him by surprise, but it was a special moment.

Gazda's involvement with the Georgia Angus Association stems back to when he was in his early 20s. It wasn't until he was finishing high school that his father purchased some cattle. Soon enough, registered Angus cattle roamed the Gazda family's acreage, and the father and son became members of the Georgia Angus Association.

When Gazda entered the University of Georgia in 1978, he became heavily involved in agriculture and animal science activities. With a degree in agricultural economics under his belt, Gazda took a job with Stephen F. Austin (SFA) State University in Nacogdoches, Texas, to run the beef cattle unit. After his wife, Carolyn, finished her master's degree at SFA, the couple headed back home to Georgia, where the two worked on a Limousin operation south of Atlanta.

"In 1988, I had the opportunity to apply for the regional manager's position and began work as a



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*Regional Manager David Gazda May 1 celebrated 30 years of service to the American Angus Association and its members.*

regional manager (RM) on May 1 of 1988," Gazda says. Three decades later, he's currently the Association's longest-serving active RM. It wasn't always smooth sailing.

## The first year

His first year was pretty rocky, he recalls. It was a trying time for Gazda. His territory at the time included Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina, and he had to adjust to frequent travel. The job also had a substantial learning curve.

He had accepted the position with a condition. Dick Spader, Association executive vice president at the time, told Gazda he needed to stick with the position for five years. He gave Spader his word, but about six months in, Gazda questioned

whether he was cut out for the job.

"I remember traveling with Richard Dyer (RM for Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama), and we were going to Mississippi to make herd visits and maybe even work a few sales," Gazda recalls. "I was a bit 'woe is me' to Richard, complaining about this and complaining about that. I just remember Richard pulling the car off

to the side of the road and he said, 'Hey, you need to make up your mind. If you're going to do it, you need to commit yourself to it. If not, you need to tell Dick Spader that you're just not cut out for the job, and you just need to go ahead and quit and do something different.'"

That heart-to-heart left a lasting impression on Gazda. He admits it wasn't what he wanted to hear, but it was what he needed to hear.

"I've never quit at anything in my life, and when Richard said that to me, it just really made me think, 'What is it I want to do?'" Gazda says. "I decided I was going to stick it out and give it my best effort and try to be the best regional manager I possibly could. I had too much respect for Dick Spader and didn't

want to disappoint him.”

Thirty years later, Gazda has proven he is a man of his word.

There were some bright spots during his first year as a regional manager, too. Gazda’s first “real” trip as a regional manager took him to the Florida Cattleman’s Convention in Southwest Florida.

He got to the Atlanta airport and checked his bags to fly to Fort Myers, where he planned to rent a car to drive to Marco Island.

“We’d been in the air for an hour and a half or so, and it’s about an hour and a half flight down there,” Gazda recalls. “I was looking at the sun, which direction it was coming up, and I thought, ‘nothing seems right about this.’”

When the flight attendant announced the plane’s descent into Baltimore, Md., Gazda’s fear was confirmed. Luckily, he was able to turn around and make it to the convention, even if he was a bit late.

Gazda jokes, “That was one of those moments you’d just as soon forget about.”

## Trying times

To Gazda and his wife, Carolyn, the American Angus Association has become like a second family. In his 30 years of service to the organization, he has faced some trying times. In October 2011, his life was completely uprooted when he was diagnosed with Stage IIIC melanoma. He elected to get treatment at Houston-based MD Anderson cancer center, one of the most highly regarded cancer institutes in the country.



*David Gazda was inducted into the Georgia Angus Association Hall of Fame. Pictured are (from left) Zeb and Katie Duvall; and David and Carolyn Gazda.*

Since then, he’s made upward of 50 trips to Texas for treatment.

“Sometimes I’d go out there, I’d be gone for 24 hours. Sometimes I may be gone for four days when I’ve had surgeries,” Gazda said. “So to work with an organization that was that supportive, that understanding, and put my well-being above the organization, was pretty special.”

Gazda noted that both the Association and breeders have been supportive since his diagnosis. Today, he’s off treatments, but he still visits the cancer center every three months



*Jeff Mafi and David Gazda compare notes during an event at the National Western Stock Show.*

to meet with doctors and get regular scans.

“I don’t know if you’re ever cancer-free, but it’s something I don’t think about,” Gazda said. “It’s been pretty special to have that kind of support and be able to continue to do what you love to do and not [worry about whether you’ll have a job or benefits to continue

treatments]. That never was up for consideration.”

Gazda hasn’t had a recurrence in three years, and since his diagnosis, he’s raised awareness about skin cancer. In a 2014 *Angus Journal* article (see [http://www.angusjournal.com/articlepdf/skin-hazard-10\\_14-aj.pdf](http://www.angusjournal.com/articlepdf/skin-hazard-10_14-aj.pdf)), he encouraged farmers and ranchers to protect their skin from the sun.

## Focus on family

As a regional manager, Gazda doesn’t have to punch a time clock. His work schedule is pretty unique. Often times, his “weekend” falls in the middle of the week, and on a Friday night, he’s packing the car to head to a sale, show or other Angus events through the weekend.

“I was generally able to set my schedule to where I could go to piano recitals, I could go to basketball games, I could go to their softball games, I could go when they had a livestock show to go to. I’ve gotten to see a lot of the things my kids did growing up, which a lot of parents don’t have that opportunity,” Gazda says. “That was really important to them, and it was very important to me.”

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Sometimes that meant having to drive through the night to get home for a family event, but it was always worth it.

“I was always appreciative of having the flexibility in that job to be able to do that. I was always encouraged by the leaders there at the Association to do that,” he says.

The American Angus Association knows the importance of family. Gazda recalls leadership stressing how important it was, and still is, to spend time with family whenever possible. It helped that Gazda’s two daughters, Taylor and Katie, started showing livestock at a young age. For the Gazda family, attending livestock shows became a family affair.

“At the end of the day, in addition to getting to do what I love, the great thing about this job was just the opportunity to spend time with your family when you needed to,” Gazda said.

## Hall of fame

Gazda was inducted into the Georgia Angus Hall of Fame during the state association annual meeting and banquet March 3. When he was called up to accept the honor, he had a hard time putting his thanks into words. His transformation into a skilled and experienced regional manager was made possible in part by support from the Georgia Angus Association and its members.

“When I became regional manager, I didn’t have the background that most people would have going into a position like this,” Gazda said, referencing his suburban upbringing. “They were very understanding of that. They allowed me to grow into the position and were very forgiving of somebody who had very little background or experience.”

When selecting this year’s inductee, Doug Williams, president

of the Georgia Angus Association said it was a no-brainer.

“David’s been pretty much the only regional manager I’ve known in Georgia. Part of the criteria was contributing not just locally, but nationally, and David certainly has done that,” Williams said. “I couldn’t have been happier to be a part of having David receive this award.”

It was 30 years in the making, but his induction into the Georgia Angus Hall of Fame was something Gazda won’t forget.

“I was honored and humbled to be inducted into the Hall of Fame,” Gazda concludes. “It was very special to be recognized by that group just knowing the people who had been inducted prior to me and what their contributions had been to the Angus breed in the state.” **AJ**

*Editor’s Note: Ali Luety is a communications specialist for the American Angus Association.*



*Pictured at youngest daughter Taylor’s wedding are (from left) David Gazda, Athens, Ga.; Anna Shackelford, Snellville, Ga.; Carolyn Gazda, Athens, Ga.; Taylor Stipe, Hudson Stipe and Garrett Stipe, Stillwater, Okla.; Katie Duvall and Zeb Duvall, Buckhead, Ga.; and Lola Gazda and George Gazda, Athens, Ga.*