

Making the Data Make Sense

Retallick-Riley to lead Angus Genetics Inc.

by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor

It's unusual for spontaneous applause to break out in the office building at 3201 Frederick Avenue — especially in the Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI) wing.

“We’re not a very loud group. We’re usually heads down, answering phones and helping members,” says Kelli Retallick-Riley.

But when the email went out that she was being promoted to president of AGI, the audible show of support from those in the green room — the customer service area — was a statement. That belief in her is both humbling and motivating.

“It makes certain that you want to do a good job every day, because there’s a lot of people believing in you,” Retallick-Riley says.

She took the helm in late June, when then AGI President Joel Cowley moved on to the role of chief executive officer of the Calgary Stampede.

Retallick-Riley has been a lifelong member of the Angus family, growing up near Glen Haven, Wis., on her family’s registered Angus farm. She knows both the joy and struggle it is to be a breeder. She’s also spent her fair share of time with a show stick in hand.

When someone calls with a problem, Retallick-Riley puts herself in the cattleman’s shoes.

“It really just helps you walk through, ‘What do they need from me today, and how can AGI create a solution for them?’” she says.



Retallick-Riley is a scientist first, but practicing in the area of applied science allows her and her team to find answers and then make sense of them to breeders.

“We love the research. We love mining the data,” she says. “The hard part is to answer the question, ‘OK, now how do we bridge that back to the people who need to implement it and use it every day?’”

That down-to-earth ability to connect with membership has been a boon in Retallick-Riley’s most recent role as AGI’s genetic and genomic programs director.

“Kelli has a unique ability to share complex animal breeding and genetics topics with cattlemen in an understandable way,” says Mark McCully, CEO for the American Angus Association. “She listens to the needs of the breeders, and always

makes their success the focal point of her work.”

By 2009, genomics were becoming more common in the Angus world, and by the time this story prints, the Association will have hit the one millionth genotype in the database.

“That’s a testament to the team here being able to help producers get DNA samples in and get the genotypes back and implemented into EPD (expected progeny difference) predictions efficiently,” Retallick-Riley says. “But it’s also a testament to our breeders. They’re so forward-thinking, so cutting edge.”

The “why” she does it, combined with the internal working knowledge of how to do it and her vision for the future, made Retallick-Riley a natural choice for the post, McCully says.

“We are excited to have her



Kelli Retallick-Riley still gets calls from people who remember when she was a budding Angus breeder herself. She's pictured here with Beauty, her very first Angus heifer of her own.

progressive, energetic mind leading our research and innovation," he says. "The Association and AGI have a 'hand in glove' relationship. The Board has tremendous confidence in Kelli's ability to keep our organizations on the leading edge while always staying focused on the overall mission of keeping Angus breeders in business. The future of AGI is in good hands."

The company has led genetic improvement in the beef industry since its inception, but change happens more rapidly today. Computations that used to happen every six months are now delivered weekly, and there are more data points to manage.

"I am fortunate to have a really great team of geneticists and customer service representatives that make both the big implementations and day-to-day things run really smoothly," Retallick-Riley says.

It's all in an ever-growing quest to give breeders the tools to keep making improvements, from environmental adaptability to reproductive efficiency.

"We are governed by the AGI Board of Directors, and we really

lean on them to bring back what our membership needs," Retallick-Riley says. "Because their priority is really our priority."

Growing up, she was on the National Junior Angus Association Board of Directors (NJAB), and she currently serves on the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) board and presents at numerous industry conferences each year.

Retallick-Riley earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, followed by a master's in animal breeding from Kansas State University (K-State), where she is also in the final stages of completing her doctoral program. It's a demanding schedule but worth it, she says.

Lists keep her organized, but the longterm game keeps her going.

"I want to look back and say, 'What I did kept independently-owned family farming and ranching operations in business,'" she says. "It's allowing them to continue to raise their families in the industry that I grew up in as a young child."

With a Scotch comb in hand, that little girl groomed many an animal for the Wisconsin State Fair. She showed on the green chips and put on the green jacket.

The first thought of becoming a medical doctor just didn't fit. Today, at the helm of the world's largest Angus database, she feels at home.

Cue the applause. 



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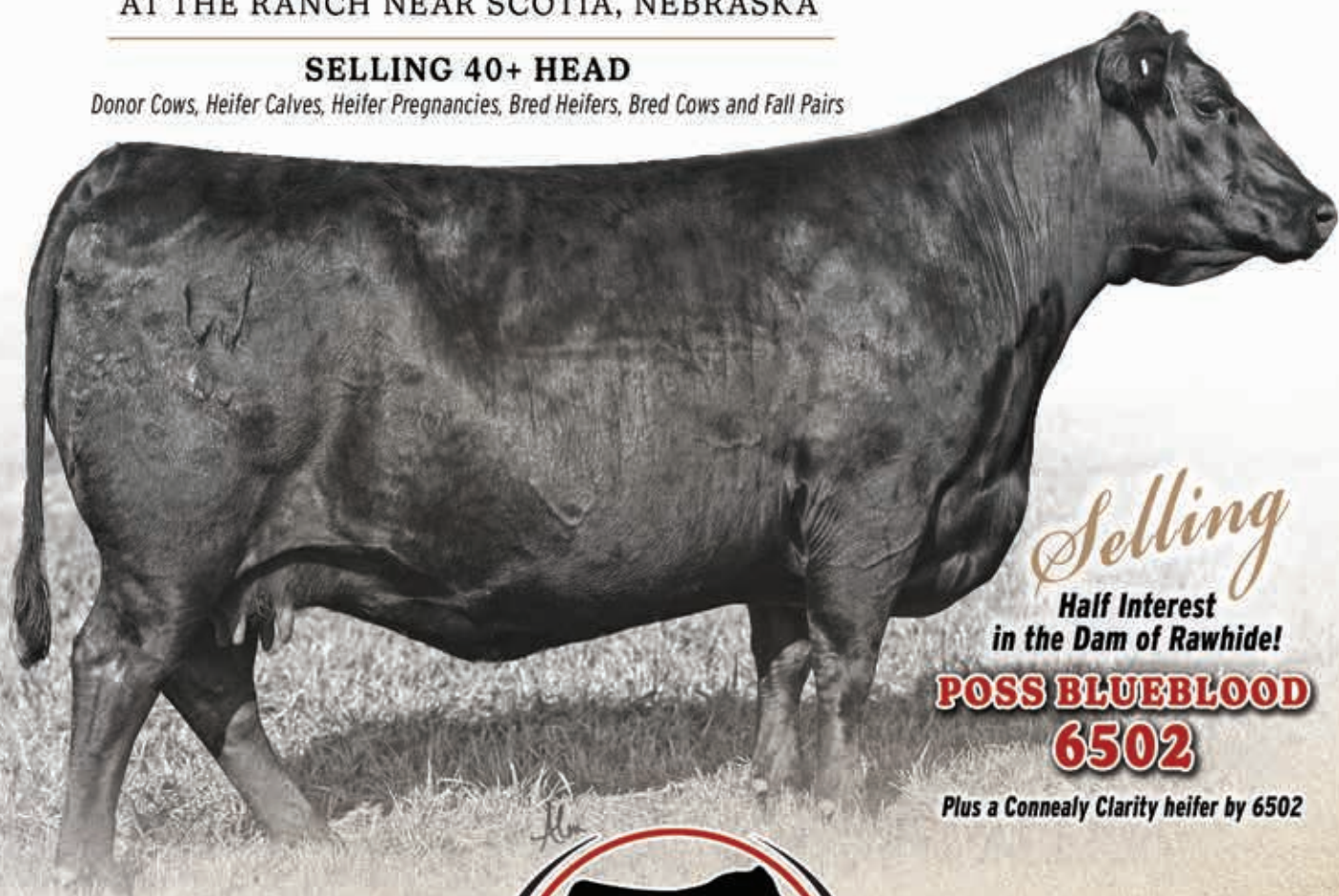
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