

Seeding Success

Ranch internships foster labor and life skills.

by Elizabeth Rosson, editorial intern

Ranching offers more than just a way of life. It also presents invaluable opportunities for young individuals. Through ranch internships, up-and-coming cattle producers learn by hands-on experiences, develop practical skills, gain industry insight and forge lasting connections.

Finding dependable and hard-working individuals to take on these internship positions can be challenging; but it's well worth the effort. There's opportunity to learn on both ends, and when the right people water the right seeds, the next generation of agriculture can truly bloom.

Cultivating the future

Building personal and professional relationships that last a lifetime is a goal shared by ranchers like Bob Sitz, operator of Sitz Angus Ranch in Harrison, Mont.

"Our program's mission is to teach and promote the cattle industry, agriculture, and the Western way of life to young agricultural leaders," Sitz explains.

To ensure the success of interns, Sitz Angus Ranch provides thorough on-the-job training and support. Sitz says they adopt a "see one and do one" approach, allowing young ranchers to learn by actively participating in tasks.

In Hico, Texas, Van Percy has the same emphasis on hands-on learning for his interns. As the president of Percy Angus Ranch, he likes budding



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cattlemen to leave his operation with a sense of experience and purpose. Similar to Sitz, he enjoys helping the younger generation find their voice and purpose in the industry.

Percy has discovered a unique way of ensuring he's succeeding in that mission.

"The most memorable experience has to be what we hear and learn from the intern in the closing interview," he explains.

Engaging in one-on-one conversations with interns allows Percy to discover the most influential moments of their summer. These interactions aid Percy in developing an effective program by fostering an understanding of what resonates and what contributes to their growth.

"Watching the interns develop and learn the real-life beef seedstock business is very fulfilling, knowing

that our operation has positively influenced the next generation," he explains. "Dependable, hard-working individuals are sometimes difficult to find; and at the end of the day, we're not sure we could turn someone into a hard worker — they either have it or they don't."

The definition of "hard worker," however, doesn't imply an ag background. That's a truth Jeff Van Beek knows well. At his operation in Mobridge, S.D., Van Beek says he's hired youth for the summer who hadn't yet been introduced to the lifestyle of a farm or ranch.

"At Van Beek Angus, it's all about learning by doing," he says. "We really try to teach them what raising cattle entails and how to apply skills like organization and time management to ranching."

With the right encouragement and a good learning environment, Van

Beek says inexperienced interns can transform, becoming comfortable around livestock and equipment in just a few short months. The opportunity to watch them blossom has become his favorite part of hosting interns, he says.

Dedication, integrity, reliability and teamwork are attributes interns hopefully leave the ranch with, no matter what part of the country they found themselves in. Sitz says his programs are all designed to teach the upcoming generation what they're capable of.

"A statement we often hear from our interns after their internship is that they did so many things that they didn't know they could do," the Montana cattleman explains. "We work hard to instill in our interns a sense of capability that comes from working independently and problem-solving, as well as a sense of ownership over tasks."

Van Beek says he finds it fulfilling to know that the lessons taught in the pasture can be applied beyond an internship. Youth he's hosted in the past have gone on to find success outside the cattle industry as they've employed the same skills and mindset he taught them.

There's more to hosting an intern than just having a full heart after they leave the ranch and succeed in their careers. Percy finds himself learning just as much as the young people he mentors.

"Having an intern program makes you better at your job, and it helps you learn and pay attention to important details that help make a difference in the success of your own operation," he says.

In Sitz's mind, there's a lot to be said for knowing he and his team are playing a positive role in the lives of others.

"It brings us so much pride and joy to see our interns progress in their future personal and professional careers, and to be a small part in their journey," he says.

Pearcy echoes Sitz's statement, adding that any chance to water where the seeds of success are sown is good for the entire farming and ranching community.

"Bringing in interns allows us to make a positive difference in these young future ag industry leaders and in their lives in general," Percy says.

Rooted in opportunity

Having grown up on a commercial cow operation in South Carolina, Grayson Lee is no stranger to the industry. A desire to expand his network pushed Lee to apply for and accept an intern position at Percy Angus Ranch this past summer.

"Everyone has a different way of doing things, so it's been fun finding my fit and learning different perspectives," he says. "Learning how to be adaptable regardless of how I've done things in the past has been an

important aspect of this summer."

During the early days of his new role, Lee helped take on the big task of flushing cows, but since has tackled hay production, sorting calves and prepping future sale lots for pictures.

His personal growth has gone far beyond the everyday tasks of a rancher. He's learned the importance of having a good attitude and loving what you do.

"Ranching instills values of persistence and perseverance along with hard work," he says. "You're going to have those days that are bad where everything goes wrong, but you've got to be able to get up and go back at it the next day."

Lee isn't planning to stop ranching anytime soon — time with the Percy team has only reaffirmed his desire to continue on this career path.

"Cattle are my passion," he says. "I love this industry and the lifestyle of ranching."

Although Nicole DeMars didn't start her internship at Van Beek Angus with the experience level Lee had, she left the South Dakota operation with the same sense of appreciation. The opportunity for hands-on work in the beef industry forever changed her perception of the nation's food supply.

"Just being an intern gives you a platform to ask those base-level questions," she explains. "As I got to

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know more about people and their operations by asking those questions, I built my relational skills, which I use in my current career every day.”

As a Farm Credit financial officer, DeMars says she is able to speak on the grit and determination found in members of the agriculture community. Her time at Van Beek allows her to relate to farmers and ranchers. It wasn't her background in finance that got her the job — it was the familiarity she had with clients that secured the position.

DeMars says no matter the prior agricultural experience, ranch internships provide a valuable opportunity to gain new perspectives in both the specific operation and in the broader context of ranching.

“With these kinds of opportunities, what you put into it is what you will get out of it,” DeMars adds. “Asking those questions and creating understanding for why ranchers do the things they do is such a valuable learning experience.”

A childhood spent in southeast Iowa proved the perfect landscape for crops and cattle for Chase Brinegar, but an internship at Sitz Angus operation was the perfect opportunity to ask those hard questions to dive deeper into topics that sparked his interest.

Brinegar didn't know at the time that his curiosity about Angus genetics would help him in his career today at People's State Bank. He still farms with his family, but knowledge gained from time at that Montana ranch still helps him relate to customers today.

“It really provided kind of a vast variety [of knowledge,]” he explains. “I know the value of bulls, I know the value of cattle. I understand what kind of hay is coming from what part of the country. Being in

Crafting an Effective Ranch Internship Program

Tips for ranchers starting their own.

For producers interested in launching their own college internship program, here are some tips when building your program.

Define the purpose. Van Percy of Percy Angus Ranch advocates for ranchers to clearly outline the objectives and goals of their internship program. He says it's vital to determine what skills and experiences you want to provide to interns and how those align with your ranching operation's needs.

Develop a structured program. Percy offers interns a structured experience, with a monthly work calendar outlining activities. Interns actively participate by attending daily briefings and bimonthly team meetings, contributing to ranch operations. Bob Sitz, a Montana rancher, highlights the importance of aligning seasonal demands and tasks to provide interns with a comprehensive experience. He suggests organizing multiple internship seasons annually, each offering consistent yet diverse tasks and projects.

Provide training and orientation. Sitz recommends conducting an initial orientation session to familiarize interns with the ranch, its operations and safety protocols. Offer on-the-job training to guide them through various tasks, and ensure they understand expectations and procedures.

Assign mentors. To ensure interns receive a comprehensive experience, Percy suggests having a team of experienced individuals with the patience needed to work with and help educate young people. It is beneficial to designate experienced staff members as mentors for interns. These mentors can offer guidance, answer questions and provide support throughout the internship period.

Encourage hands-on learning. According to Jeff Van Beek, owner of Van Beek Angus in Mobridge, S.D., prioritizing trust with interns is essential, followed by providing feedback. He recognizes the value of hands-on experience in tasks such as branding, cattle registration and calving, which greatly benefits interns.

Foster independence and problem-solving. Promote independent thinking and problem-solving among interns, allowing them to find solutions to challenges they face. Sitz emphasizes the importance of clearly defining desired results and potential pitfalls, enabling interns to think critically, solve problems and take ownership of tasks or projects.

Build relationships. Encourage networking opportunities and facilitate connections within the agricultural community. Sitz highlights that efforts should be made to assist interns in forging connections for potential career opportunities or future positions within the ranch.

Evaluate and provide feedback. Regularly assess interns' progress and provide constructive feedback on their performance. Percy has found success conducting exit interviews to gather their insights and suggestions for improving the internship program.

that cattle industry, it really helps connect with the customer and they feel like you understand what they're going through and what they're talking about.”

Taking the leap into new opportunities can seem intimidating, but Brinegar says it pays off in the future.

“Just do it,” he says. “You never know what kind of opportunities an internship like this can bring you down the road.”

Despite having unique experiences, Brinegar, Lee and DeMars all drive home the same point — hands-on learning is incomparable. With the right mindset, a fresh perspective can secure a positive future for this generation of agriculture and the next. **AJ**