

Christ, Community and Cows

The ZumBrunnen family discusses how their third-generation Angus operation continues to stand the test of time.

by Savanna Simmons

In all their endeavors, Jason and Shirley ZumBrunnen and their four children unfailingly put forth their utmost effort. In their cattle business they rely on data and research, versus hopes and speculations. Within their church family, they build relationships and are involved in camps, childcare and missions abroad. In their community, they help build new cattle businesses and educate others on the importance of ranching and beef.

Model business

ZumBrunnen Angus, just miles north of Lusk, Wyo., looks nearly the same as when it was settled in 1900 by Jason's great-great-grandfather Jacob, but the operation

itself is as different as it can be while still being in the cattle business.

Three generations, Mel and Lola ZumBrunnen, Jason and Shirley, and their four kids, still work the ranch, but with some major tweaks to how cattle are developed.

Jason relies on concrete data and his own research to develop a better product and animal continually, always with the customer and consumer in mind.

While ZumBrunnen Angus is primarily a registered Angus cow-calf operation, the ZumBrunnens have purchased a few of their own cattle back to finish out, resulting in the ability to collect data. They have also started finishing out some of their bulls that don't sell in the name of research.

"I want to prove that we are selling what we say we're selling," Jason says. "That's why we feed out our own stuff and hopefully continue to build and buy our customers' cattle."

As an engineer, Jason seeks physical evidence to improve his lineage and eliminate lines that don't build on his goals. Embryo transfer (ET) has been

utilized more in the past few years to further strengthen the influence of their favorite cows. All this is done to produce the best for their customers.

"We work very hard at what we do, every rancher does, and if you can get more for your cattle at the end of the day just by buying better genetics, and it may not cost more, then why not?" Jason says. "We don't have huge dollar amounts paid for bulls or anything like that, but if you can put a better product on the plate for a few dollars more, because you can market them a certain way, I think it's fantastic."

All cattle on their ranch are DNA-tested and pulmonary arterial pressure (PAP)-scored, even though the ranch is at about 5,000 feet in elevation. ZumBrunnen's cattle could be going to a higher elevation, so they gather the data to accrue a better understanding of what they have to offer.

At the forefront of important traits in their cattle, however, is docility. Given how involved their children are with the family business, a wild or mean cow isn't tolerated, which is evident upon walking through their herds.

Family first

One reason Jason and Shirley are able to accomplish as much as they do within their business is their four built-in hired hands. Their two oldest daughters, Melody (14) and Gracie (13) school online



The ZumBrunnen family consists of, from left, 14-year-old Melody, Jason, 10-year-old Emily, Shirley, 6-year-old Levi, and 13-year-old Gracie.

from home through the Wyoming Virtual Academy. The younger two children, Emily (10) and Levi (6), are traditionally homeschooled for now.

While Melody and Gracie are still required to adhere to a schedule with their schooling in terms of online meetings with their teachers, schooling from home allows them to be incredibly involved on the ranch, as are Emily and Levi.

“Our older kids can do almost everything on this ranch, and they’re girls,” Jason says, chuckling. “They help work the bulls. They’re my main hands, and it empowers them and builds a lot of confidence.”

Emily and Levi aren’t far behind their older sisters. Both are assets on the ranch.

If the older kids will miss school to help during an important workday such as videoing or semen-testing bulls, they can check in with their teachers to make up their schooling later. If the younger two want to miss school, they, of course, just need to clear it with mom.

“I love how it’s truly a family business, and we’re all working together,” Shirley says. “Having the freedom to be able to do our online schooling, yet do whatever Jason needs to do that day and watch each other grow while being together, I absolutely love that.”

Building community

Shirley didn’t grow up in the ranching industry, or even in a rural setting. In fact, she rarely even ate beef growing up. Living on the Puget Sound in Washington state meant she often dined on fresh fish and chicken. While living on the ranch with Jason was always a possibility, early on in their marriage, she often considered life on the ranch as “cute” and “quaint,” she says. Now, she



wouldn’t trade it for anything.

“I thought everything was perfect before we moved here,” she says. “I didn’t realize how rich, and I don’t mean financially, and good life is out here on a ranch. It’s so good.”

Jason took a break from the ranch out of college by working as an engineer for a large construction company in Nebraska and across the nation. When his parents decided it was time to slow down, Jason returned with Shirley and the then 7-year-old Melody and 6-year-old Gracie.

In their eight years since returning, the ZumBrunnens have created deep roots in their community and within their church home at Prairie Hills Community Church in Lusk.

This winter, Jason and Melody, along with their pastor, Ty DesEnfants, his oldest daughter Adelle, and several other church members, traveled to the Philippines to conduct mission work while spreading God’s word. The ZumBrunnens also feel strongly about spreading His love and word throughout their own community.

“God gives us what we have, and we are stewards of his land, of his cattle, and of his children as well,” Jason says. “When Shirley and I moved here, we said we wanted to build community. Hopefully our

business helps us do that.”

As evidence of this, Jason and Shirley decided to give a heifer to one of the youth at their bull sale earlier this year, which they plan to do annually. Of the 30 children’s names thrown into the hat, the name pulled was randomly, but divinely, chosen. Heidi DesEnfants, the 11-year-old daughter of their pastor, Ty, was the heifer recipient.

“We had a great sale, but I think, out of everything, the best moment was giving that heifer away,” Jason says. “It would have been great to have it go to any of those kids, but it was pretty special that Heidi got it.”

Locally, the ZumBrunnen family has hosted elementary students from Niobrara County Elementary School out on the ranch and Ag in the Classroom, and Jason helped reestablish FFA as a school board member of Niobrara County High School.

“We want to promote ag and promote kids getting interested in ag, because we love the lifestyle and the community that it can be,” Jason says. “Ultimately, beyond everything, that is what we want to do is build community with God as the foundation.” **AJ**

Editor’s note: Savanna Simmons is a freelance writer from Lusk, Wyo.