

2021

NATIONAL JUNIOR ANGUS SHOW

The Work Goes On

Work-from-home takes on a new meaning for parents during NJAS.

by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor

The fans hummed. A faint whir of blowers in the background combined with the chatter of young friends on a crowded show box, and there just off the main alley sat Eric Walker with a makeshift drafting table. His laptop was perched on a director's chair.

In the neighboring barn, Melody McCurry certified crop insurance numbers for the July 15 deadline.

Up the street, Susan Rhode took conference calls from her hotel room and sent corporate news releases across the country.

When the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) happens each July, the rest of the world goes on. For many parents, that means their work must go on, too.

Ag doesn't stop

"You know, agriculture is 24/7, things don't stop," says Rhode, director of marketing for *Farm Journal* and Angus producer from Stewartville, Mo. "If I take time off,

there's not somebody else to pick up my responsibility. There are people who can cover for a short amount, but I'm trying to keep the day-to-day things moving."

She generally spent mornings in the hotel, planning for upcoming

a remote desktop and "work from home" privileges to the road wherever his kids might be showing. The Prairie Grove, Ark., breeder is also a commercial bricklayer. He has a good crew at the main office, but being a business owner with



Eric Walker, Prairie Grove, Ark., has spent many summer days in his "remote office" through the years.

80 employees counting on him also means, "I never really get to leave work."

Walker sent three bids from his stall-side cubicle in Grand Island, Neb.

"I get pretty focused," he says, with little concern about the busy environment around him. "It's kind of like in life, you've got to

industry meetings and setting next year's strategy, before joining her family by afternoon.

"I used to bring my computer to the barn, but my boys can come out here and handle it themselves now," she says, a perk of them growing up.

Always in charge

Walker is the boss. That means he can pick up and leave, bringing

learn to focus on what you're doing and not get distracted by the noise around you. And honestly, I really love my job. I love building things."

A deadline is a deadline

For McCurry, a crop insurance agent from Burrton, Kan., the trickiness was all about the timing. Crop acreage reports were due to the

Farm Service Agency in the middle of NJAS week, which was also the middle of wheat harvest for many of her farmers.

“Lots of calls back and forth; emails, as much as we can email; and lots of text messages back and forth. ‘Hey, this guy’s coming in. Here’s what you need to have ready,’ that type of thing,” McCurry says. “It’s been a roller coaster of a week, prior to leaving to get everything done or get initiated.”

She worked before everyone else woke up and carted her laptop and cell phone to take calls and messages throughout the day or when farmers were home in the evenings.

“Is mom going to have a lot of work when she gets home? Yes. Still worth it? Yes,” McCurry says.

They’re not the only ones.

Without a doubt

In between barn chores, keeping the family fed, and making sure all kids and critters are show ring ready, there are sales to close, clients who need help or ads to build. There’s

no way to tally the business that goes on from the barns, but onlookers see the evidence of the great juggle throughout the fairgrounds.

Perhaps nobody sees it as intimately as their own children, however.

“Not just at national shows, my boys see both their dad and I making our job a priority, but also making them a priority. The fact that we’re here means they’re the top priority,” Rhode says.

It’s also a chance to model what it looks like to keep commitments.

“You’ve got to manage your time and make things happen when they need to happen. Life is a juggling act,” she says.

Showing cattle is a lot of work, and now that her boys are 15 and 18, she views it through the lens of a seasoned show mom.

“There’s never been a moment of doubt,” Rhode says.

She’s right where she needs to be.



McCurry and her husband both grew up showing cattle, but they are continually impressed by what their 10-year-old daughter and the other young members are learning.

“Being able to work with people, dealing with whether you win or lose, working with people you don’t know,” she says. “You’re their teammate, pull your weight. Get the job done.”

Her children have gained confidence speaking in front of a crowd and carrying themselves, she says. With an even younger daughter and son, the family is invested in the experience for the long haul. McCurry will keep learning how to make the balance work.

On the other end of the continuum, Walker watched his daughter Whitney compete for the last time and his son has already aged out, a bittersweet reminder to the parents of younger children that it goes fast, he says.

“For me, it was about getting my kids involved in something that they learn the work ethic. They learn the value of winning and losing, and I think there’s value in both,” he says. “I want my kids to learn how to win, because in life if you don’t learn how to win and strive to win, then you’ll



Susan Rhode, Stewartsville, Mo., says it’s a juggle when careers collide with a stock show schedule, but it’s worth it.

Continued on page 150

2021

NATIONAL JUNIOR ANGUS SHOW


never be successful. But sometimes the best way to win is to lose.”

He misses his big desk, dual monitors and other office comforts, but wouldn't dream of staying home.

“It's easy to sacrifice though,” Walker says. “It's easy for us to sacrifice because I know regardless of where in the United States my daughter is traveling, if she broke down, I bet you money within an hour somebody from all these years of showing, I could call and say, ‘Hey, Whitney's got car trouble. Can you go help her?’ And they'd go in a heartbeat regardless.”

Friendships are an oft-cited intangible that trump any banners or awards, Walker says. Cattle and equipment take a cash flow, Walker jokes, but the real motivation is keeping his work moving forward while helping his kids find success.

“This is their sport,” he says, noting his youngest daughter is competitive with horses. “This is what they love. This is what they do. I want to support my kids in whatever they do.”

Then, with that, he made another phone call and landed the job. He'll lay bricks across the border in Missouri this fall. 

Tips for working from the show

Susan Rhode has advice for other working parents: don't take her story for your story.

The marketing director worked half days from NJAS this year, but she says, “It depends on your job. It depends on your family. It depends on how many head you bring.”

When Rhode's boys were younger, it looked different than it does now that they are teenagers who can handle the animals themselves. Still, after several years of trying to balance both work and stock show life, she has a few tips:

- **Make it feel like home.** “I try to bring as many things as I can that I have at home,” Rhode says. A full-size keyboard and a personal hotspot, in case of hotel connection problems, top her list.
- **Communication is key.** Rhode lets her family know blocks of time she is generally unavailable and does the same for her coworkers. “They know I can keep moving projects, but I don't want to be on a four-hour conference call that week,” Rhode says. When her husband and sons leave the hotel in the morning, “I tell them, ‘I have calls at this time or this time, and I'll be out to the barn at this time. Text me what to bring.’”
- **Take show day off.** There will still be times to step completely away from work, so take a vacation day without feeling guilty, she says. Rhode's teammates covered for her, knowing she'd do the same for them down the road, she says.

