

# NATURE'S WILL

*Two National Junior Angus Association members on wildfires, tragedy and loss.*

*by Faye Smith, editorial intern*

The rolling hills of dry prairie grasses blew in the winter wind while a perfect western Kansas sunset painted the sky orange and deep blue. It was a cool evening as ranchers fed and checked cattle.

This moment, however, was quickly ruined by nature's will.

The "Four County Wildfire" left miles of the Russell, Ellis, Osborne and Rooks counties in Kansas as scorched earth. A fire that began Dec. 15, 2021, with an electrical spark took off due to dry conditions and 70-mph sustained winds.

What once was a paradise for ranchers now sat a burned livelihood. Two National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) members of Paradise, Kan., recall the tragedy and the months that followed.

## THE DICKERSON FAMILY

### *In the line of fire*

"It wasn't like a tornado, but it was really eerie like that all day," says Stephanie Dickerson, Jayce's mother.

The Dickerson family spent their morning on Bar S Ranch, paying little attention to the high wind warnings. It was nothing they hadn't seen before.

Jayce; his father, David; Stephanie; and his roommate, Austin Clock, dealt with the wind all day. Eventually each gust started lifting the roof from the rafters of the barn.

Around 2 p.m., family friends, Craig and Jolene Lawson, called. They needed a trailer to evacuate their horses.

The Dickersons and Clock took two pickups and trailers to the Lawsons'. A 10- to 15-minute drive became 30, Stephanie recalls. The Lawsons chose to let their horses run free because of the delayed arrival, so the trucks were pointed back home.

High winds blew both trailers and one of the trucks into the ditch, and the family was forced to

pile into one vehicle. When smoke began to appear, they were all thinking what David vocalized: "We need get out of here."

Taking refuge in Chris and Susan Pelton's driveway, fire rushed across the road where they once sat. All they could do was drive through it.

"We took the ditch and drove through what seemed like forever of flames coming, shooting across between the hood of our pickup, up over the top of the windshield," Stephanie says. "The plastic side mirrors were literally like a cartoon. You could just watch it slowly melt down the side of the pickup."

The fire forced them to abandon the road home, and they met volunteer firefighters on their way back to the Lawson's. They couldn't go west or south, and no roads headed north; so that left only one option — go back east and find a place to ride it out.

Back into the line of fire, rolling into a green wheat field, two firetrucks and a water tank truck

PHOTO BY GOOGLE, COURTESY OF STEPHANIE DICKERSON



sat with the family's vehicle. Water was low in the tank, so they were forced to wait for the fires to get close before they used their supply.

Today, tears fill Stephanie's eyes as she describes the near-death experience.

"The fire came all the way up within 10 feet of the truck. That's when they started spraying water over the top of us," she says. "The only thing that wasn't burnt was a perfect circle of where our vehicles had been parked in the middle of the field."

When the winds switched, Stephanie says everything around them was on fire. After making it back to their property, they found their home and barn burning.

"It's almost surreal at first," Stephanie remembers.

It wasn't until they were safely at a friend's house in Russell, Kan., that Stephanie realized her family had lost everything. She wanted to brush her teeth but didn't even have a toothbrush.

The afternoon after the fire, the Dickersons saw the destruction for the first time.

"It's the worst feeling ever," Stephanie says of losing not only their livelihood, but also a legacy built during the last 140 years.

### *Forging ahead*

Moving forward, Jayce made the decision to have a positive outlook.

"If you just sit around, it's just going to put you in a hole and then you're going to try to dig out of that hole forever," he says.

Jayce found support in his friends and family. People from all around helped with whatever they could. Numerous breeders from across the country reached out to help the Dickersons — from monetary donations to feed for the livestock and even their own hands as assistance with physical labor.

"It feels good when you have people behind you that would literally do anything for you," he says.

Chris and Sharee Sankey took in the show cattle, and the rest went to Nebraska and Southeast Kansas. With calving season in full swing, Jayce and Clock took the spring semester off from Butler Community College to care for the 200 head.

"We had to step up a lot, because no one else could really go down there and do it," Jayce says. "I think there's



*Stephanie, Grady, Jayce and David Dickerson*



Since the fire, growth has become a theme for the family. The disaster amplified Jayce Dickerson's passion for cattle and industry peers, and as a new green coat, he hopes to share this love with Angus juniors.

a point where you have to know what's right and do stuff for the animals that are going to be there for your future."

Although he can't recall how many cattle in his name were lost, one hurt worse than the rest — a June Angus yearling show heifer.

"She was really important to me, and it hit me hard. I thought, 'I can't like sit around and moan about it because there's other show heifers that made it out,'" Jayce says.

The family had a difficult decision: continue showing or not? Most of their show equipment was lost, but Jayce had been looking forward to the major shows.

"If Jayce is all in, we need to be all in," Stephanie explained of their thoughts at the time.

The disaster helped Jayce decide to run for the junior board. He came home from the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) with a green jacket.

"It was always in the back of my mind that I always wanted to run. I feel like this just kind of pushed it just a

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Be **thankful** for what you have. Take a step back every once in a while, and just appreciate what you have, because you never know when it's going to be gone.

— Jayce Dickerson

little bit more," Jayce says. "It felt right for me to run."

The fires created a sense of appreciation he can share with others.

"Be thankful for what you have," he says. "Take a step back every once in a while, and just appreciate what you have, because you never know when it's going to be gone."

### *The next generation*

Close to 300 people came to Bar S Ranch the Thursday morning after the fires. The stream of supporters didn't stop for months; people David and Stephanie hadn't seen in nearly 40 years offered a helping hand.

"We were overwhelmed with support of people," Stephanie says. "Thank you' will never be enough."

Only about 5% of the ranch's original 20,000 acres in Russell County remained unburnt. In addition to their home and four barns, the family lost a house built by Stephanie's great-grandfather.

A herd of 850 Angus, Red Angus, Charolais and commercial cows was cut by nearly 225 head. The only animals that stayed on the property were bull sale calves and yearling replacements. In spite of it all, Bar S still had their annual bull sale March 12, 2022.

"You'll be going along, and you'll think everything's great. Then something will trigger your memory, and you just lose it all over again," Stephanie says. "I've been very proud of how my kids handled this situation. It's not easy."

Stephanie says she's thankful for her family, firefighters and the agriculture community. She's learned to find hope in a hopeless situation after this natural disaster.

A tattered U.S. flag stood alongside the remains of the sale barn days after the fire. As construction is underway, that same flag proudly hangs in their new sale barn kitchen.

PHOTO BY LINDSEY SAWIN, COURTESY OF AMERICAN ANGUS ASSOCIATION



## THE PELTON FAMILY

### *Prayer and perspective*

Clay Pelton was studying for his finals at Kansas State University when a storm system came through Manhattan. He and his Alpha Gamma Rho (AGR) fraternity brothers sat outside to watch the rain. He knew about the high wind and fire advisory out west, but reality hit when his mother, Susan, called.

"You need to go down to the Catholic church and start praying right now."

So he did.

Fires started downwind from their ranch, and all Clay knew was uncertainty.

"Whatever happened, it happened. And it happened for a reason — God always has a plan," he told himself.

Clay sat with his worry for about two hours, before his mom called again. She told him they were staying in Lucas, a town 20 minutes to the east.

"I knew at that point that everybody in the family was okay," he recalls, but they weren't planning on heading back home until the next day.

Clay took his last final and drove home. As he neared the Russell exit off I-70, he saw trailer after trailer bringing hay and other necessities.

"It was a really good sight to see before I laid my eyes up on the blackened earth," Clay says.

He took a detour through Paradise, thinking someone would have been spared.

"But the further I kept driving in either direction, the further the expanse continued," he says.

At his family's ranch, Clay found all that was left was a few piles of soot and the footprint of the shop and cattle facility.

"I looked in these filing cabinets where my dad had kept



45 years of calving records ... It looked like everything was still intact,” Clay says.

As soon as he picked up a spiral-bound book, however, it turned to ash in his hands and just “blew away.”

Only charred foundation remained where his family’s house once stood. Clay recognized a pool table and the space where his room had been. In the remnants of their dishwasher, he found a porcelain blue bowl — his mother’s favorite dish — untouched and still intact.

As for the cattle, Clay lost a large percentage of his herd.

“When I first got back, it really wasn’t about who the cattle were. It was just more about getting the dead buried and the survivors cared for,” he says. “The longer you look at suffering and death, the more you just hurt inside. You never want to see an animal go through anything like that.”

As Clay shares his story today, a paperweight sits on a buffet table in front of him. It’s a small oblong shape of aluminum that once was part of their stock trailer.

Current conversations held by the Peltons around that buffet table focus on topics that put them on the right path moving forward.

“You can’t change the past, but you can change your future,” Clay says.

### *A parent’s point of view*

Angus paperwork was a priority, until Chris Pelton smelled smoke.

Paradise locals received a warning that the wildfires had spread to 7 miles southwest of the town. Given the

wind and trajectory, their ranch was safe, Chris thought.

His wife, Susan, and daughter, Sarah, evacuated, but Chris stayed. He was hosing the house and yard down when the wind suddenly switched.

Susan called, asking Chris to get her engagement ring out of the house. He did as she asked and resumed watering.

“I still didn’t think it was coming,” he says.

But it was already there. Chris drove through smoke and flame, rescuing their dog while the shop began to fall.

“It was so black out with smoke that you couldn’t see your hand in front of your face. It was like the blackest night, no stars, just so black and the wind blowing so hard,” Chris says. “You don’t want to leave because you want to go check cows, but there was nothing you could do. You were putting your own life in jeopardy.”

Paradise was desolate by the time Chris made it out. No one was allowed back on the roads, so the family endured a sleepless night.

5:30 a.m. came early. With a lot of ground to cover, Chris says assessing the damage to the ranch was a “roller coaster ride.”

They passed pastures full of burned cattle, but as the truck drove over the hill, the top breeding females were waiting for them, unscathed.

“It was the hand of God,” Susan says.

A number of head were lost from the



You can’t change the past,  
but you can change your  
*future.* — Clay Pelton



*Chris and Clay Pelton*

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herd in addition to the family's home, shop, cattle facilities and a majority of acreage on the ranch.

"You try not to think the worst," Chris says, but he admits his family found themselves wondering what they would do next.

### *Rebuilding, regrowing*

They began reconstruction a few months after the fire. Neighbors and nearby friends took in cows for the spring. Chris and Susan took the 60-mile round trip twice a day during calving season to check on the calving cows.

A group of stock came back to Paradise in the spring, and the rest of the herd will come home this fall. The Peltons have a closed herd, so Chris says losing genetics hurt. Rebuilding will be difficult, but they will persist.

"We'll continue to build from within our own numbers," he says, "and we'll get our numbers back up as grass allows us to do in the next couple years."

Fencing is being redone, a new ranch facility is upright and plans for a new house are underway. The family is currently living in a home owned by friends in Paradise. That's only a small piece of support people have provided.

Not even hours after the fires hit, without any knowledge of the damage done, Clay had help before he even asked.

"I had people coming by my room at AGR right after it happened while I was studying," Clay says. "I was surrounded by people that were willing to help."

Chris felt the same way. The morning after the fires, up to 25 to 30 people at a time were there to haul water, feed and take care of the cattle.

"What the agricultural community, friends and people showed up and offered and did to help us out has made the difference. It's a big part of what keeps you going," Chris says.

People they never met sent their sympathy, like the \$7 and handwritten note from an Illinois farmer.

"Every little bit adds up to help replace the big stuff lost. It's not much, truthfully it's all I had in dollars in my billfold at the time I read about you on AgTalk," the

Instead of dwelling on devastation, Susan Pelton has looked at this as a second chance for the ranch.

The devil may have brought the fire, but her family sees the hand of God in everything.

PHOTO BY LINSEY SAWIN, COURTESY OF AMERICAN ANGUS ASSOCIATION



script on the notebook paper reads. "Please do not give up. Many people are depending on you. You are alive and so is your family. Rebuild, even if it takes the rest of your life. God spared you for this task."

Having a group of people rally around his family has helped Clay find the strength to keep pushing forward. Even after losing his steer for NJAS in the fire, another NJAA family invited him along to be a part of the show. Everywhere he turned, his Angus family helped him push forward.

"God forbid anything like this happen to anybody else, but if it does, don't be afraid to ask for help," Clay says. "There will be people right around the corner that are perfectly willing and able to help in any way possible to get you through something as catastrophic as this."

Though the land is still recovering, Clay and other ranchers can once again look out on the rolling hills of western Kansas and enjoy the view as they walk amongst their herd.

Young, green prairie grasses blow in the summer breeze while a sunset paints the sky orange and deep blue.

It's a moment Angus breeders know was made by nature's will. **AJ**

