

**S**tardom. It's recognition for being among the best at something. Those who reach that level are called *stars* because, like the celestial guideposts followed by navigators of old, people look up to them.

Some are easy to find. They have fan clubs, and their names are up in lights along the boulevards of fame and fortune. Others keep a lower profile. They're found down dusty country roads. Preferring to avoid the limelight, these hard-working folks provide worthy examples with their feet firmly on the ground.

One of those rural routes leads to McCook County, S.D., where few people fail to recognize K.C. Gregg.

Although he wouldn't burst onto a scene like his Hollywood namesake (his full name, Kayhill Charles, comes from a John Wayne character and his father's name), K.C. is a certifiable star at age 22.

Each year the National FFA Organization (formerly the Future Farmers of America) names four finalists for each of its two most prestigious awards, the American Star Farmer and the American Star in Agribusiness. While they may not be household names, these young people demonstrate outstanding talent in establishing agricultural careers.

K.C. stood among the stars in agribusiness at last year's FFA convention in Kansas City, Mo. As an American FFA Degree recipient, he already was among the top 3% of the national organization's membership, but his degree application had caught the judges' attention, garnering him that added distinction.

Although his name wasn't called at the finale of the "Stars Over America" pageant, he already knew what it was like to be in the winner's circle. In 1996 K.C. stood on that stage as the winner of the national placement in beef production proficiency award. That was a year after receiving his State FFA Degree and being his district's star in agribusiness.

In and of themselves, these highlights make for an impressive resumé, but they're even more inspiring when you know about the efforts that earned those stars.

#### ■ Taking root

The first part of K.C.'s life was spent near Highmore, S.D., where his extended family was involved in the commercial cattle business. There he learned the value of hard work and started to develop his cow savvy.

"Both of my grandpas were big cowboy-type ranchers," he says in an unmistakable Dakotan accent. "I learned to work hard before play."

About the time he started fourth grade,

# Star Quality

*Former NJAA member K.C. Gregg became a star in the FFA, but his hard work was for more than recognition, awards or money. It was about his future and that of his family.*

BY BRAD PARKER



BRAD PARKER PHOTOS

Following his mother's death during his senior year of high school, K.C. Gregg put on hold his dream of attending South Dakota State University so he could help support his family. Now he's back to his original plan and will receive his degree in agricultural education this spring.

his parents, Charles and Sandy, moved their five children about 115 miles southeast to Salem when his dad took a job at Bon-View Farms outside Canova. There, as K.C. grew, so did his desire to work with cattle.

"When my dad and mom moved to

town, I realized just how much I missed it, so I looked for any possible way to stay involved in agriculture," he says.

Many weekends were spent back at his grandparents' working with their herds, which used Angus genetics. When K.C. was



Working at Red Rock Ranch not only earned him honors in the FFA, it taught K.C. valuable lessons about seedstock production and helped him to start his own purebred herd.

13, his grandfather taught him how to artificially inseminate (AI) a cow. About the same time, the youngest cattleman in the family took out a junior livestock loan from the South Dakota Department of Agriculture to purchase six bred cows.

Later his dad went to work at Red Rock Ranch, a registered-Angus operation outside Spencer, S.D., and K.C. sometimes tagged along with him. The younger Gregg did odd jobs for Calvin and Gloria Heitzman, Red Rock's owners, while listening to the adults, absorbing all he could about the beef business.

He says he enjoyed observing Calvin's dealings with bull buyers. With a herd of 500, Red Rock marketed about 140 2-year-old bulls each year. "I didn't even know what an EPD was," K.C. admits, but he learned. He also grew in his respect for the Angus breed.

While living in Highmore, he was active in 4-H, judging livestock and showing Angus heifers. His involvement continued in Salem. The experience wasn't the only reason he participated. "I was in it because of the people you'd meet," he explains.

When he started high school at McCook Central in Salem, K.C. enrolled in agricultural education under the instruction of Terry Rieckman, who had been his

peewee wrestling coach when he first moved to the area. His was a talented class, and they pushed each other to excel in the components of agricultural education — classroom instruction, FFA and supervised agricultural experience (SAE) programs.

SAE programs can be whatever the students want, whether businesses of their own or placement in a job using agriculturally related skills. This work-based learning includes the hands-on application of classroom learning, allowing students,

parents, teachers and employers to work together to achieve educational and career goals.

Just before his freshman year, K.C. had taken a more active role at Red Rock. Among that, his own livestock investments and a job opening at the local cooperative, he had several choices of

what his SAE could have been.

With his lifelong ambition to someday manage a purebred cattle herd, he chose to use his employment with the Heitzmans as a placement program in beef production.

When he wasn't in school; participating in 4-H, FFA or church activities; earning all-conference honors on the gridiron; or working his way to a state placing on the wrestling mat, he was at Red Rock developing his skills in cattle breeding,

nutrition, health and management.

"He was young and had a lot going for him," Calvin Heitzman says, adding that K.C.'s experiences from his family's operation helped him fit into the range-calving operation at Red Rock.

The long hours were mostly enjoyable, K.C. says, because he was doing what he wanted. To an extent, though, they became a necessity.

#### ■ Growing up fast

Toward the beginning of his sophomore year, K.C.'s mom was diagnosed with cancer, and she became too ill to work. His father had been battling a chronic illness of his own and was in and out of the hospital. With four younger siblings to help support, K.C. found himself working for more than the fun and experience.

Some late nights at the ranch turned into early mornings, and there were days when he went to school on four hours of sleep. The sense of responsibility to his family was a great motivator, but there was more. "I put a lot of hours in, but I wouldn't have done it if I didn't enjoy it. It was a dream come true," he says. He was in the purebred-cattle business.

His mother passed away in March 1995, just before he graduated, and K.C. had to evaluate his future. "When my mom passed away, I felt obligated to be there for my family, being the oldest," he says.

He decided to give up his dream of going to South Dakota State University (SDSU) and earning a spot on the livestock-judging team — something he'd wanted since starting to judge in 4-H. With Brookings and Salem too far apart to allow commuting, he opted to attend Mitchell Technical Institute in Mitchell, S.D., about 20 miles away.

Heitzman says the decision was characteristic of the young man. "He learned to cope with life at an early age — he's resilient," his former employer says. "He's a take-hold kind of guy when it comes to his family."

"It wasn't a bad change of plan," K.C. says of his decision to enroll in the production agriculture program at Mitchell Tech.

If it hadn't been for outside sources, the faculty of the technical school may never have known about K.C.'s situation. "I respect him for the position that he took in many instances," says Myron Sonne, an instructor at the school and operator of Sunshine Angus near Letcher, S.D. "In the disadvantage he was at, he never played that part."

**"You've got to make the most of your opportunities when you're younger."**

K.C. became involved with the Postsecondary Agriculture Student (PAS) organization at Mitchell Tech, earning recognition as the school's top livestock judge and taking an active part in other activities.

"He had a way to draw the other students in with him and get a group functioning," Sonne says. "When K.C. was in charge of something, he caught fire and made sure it was done."

All the while he was attending technical school, K.C. lived on one of the Heitzmans' acreages and worked full-time at Red Rock to continue helping his family, who had moved to Spencer after his mom died. He worked hard to set a positive example for his siblings during that time, Rieckman says.

Sonne observed the same behavior. "He acted sometimes as a father figure in leading and helping with their projects," he explains.

It wasn't always easy for K.C., his postsecondary instructor believes. "Sometimes he maybe grabbed onto more things than what he could handle," Sonne says. "Sometimes that was a disadvantage to him, but he never complained and was always optimistic about things."

After finishing his two-year program, K.C. kept working at the Angus ranch. He spent another year there before deciding to return to his original plan. In the fall of 1998 he enrolled in the agricultural education program at SDSU.

Looking back helped him make the fateful decision. "You'll have all the time in the world to work when you're older, so you've got to make the most of your opportunities when you're younger," K.C. explains. "I passed up a lot of opportunities through high school because I worked so much."

#### ■ Finding opportunity

All that work may have cost him some opportunities, but it created others. In particular, he was able to couple his family's situation with the chance to develop an SAE program.

"I tied the two together and set my goals, and the long hours were beneficial," he explains. "My award wasn't because I had 50 or 60 cows and sold all these dollars worth. Mine was because of all the hours I put in."

Those hours, more than 5,400 logged while he was in high school, were more than any of the other 43 proficiency-award winners at the '96 national FFA convention. His American degree application included more than 10,000 working hours during his



Though his numbers are down since starting at SDSU, K.C. still has 11 cows and two bulls. He sells about three bulls each year and hopes to someday raise one good enough to go to stud.

six years as an FFA member.

Of added importance, K.C. believes, was that his income went to help his family. "I think that was the biggest thing: the hours I put in and the reason I put them in," he says of his successes.

The young entrepreneur encourages others who find themselves wanting for large numbers in the early days of their programs to find something they enjoy and to get involved. "It doesn't have to be owning 100 cows of your own," he emphasizes. "You can take it to the placement level and work for somebody."

He says there are people in the industry willing to let a young person work into their operations, especially in production agriculture where youth interest is waning. "Put your faith in the operation, treat it as if it were your own, enjoy what you're doing, take time and set challenging goals," he advises. "And don't be afraid to set new goals."

He found that situation at Red Rock, and the obvious reward was gaining knowledge of a large-scale purebred-cattle operation. "The Heitzmans put a lot of responsibilities on my shoulders, but I thoroughly enjoyed it

because it was doing what I loved," he says.

He also was able to continue building his own herd. The Heitzmans gave him a heifer each year as a Christmas bonus, and he was able to save money to buy a few registered cows.

The scholarship moneys and plaques that resulted from his SAE were nice, too, K.C. says; but again, the real reward was meeting people. "The people that you meet are just unreal," he explains. "There were 30 judges last year in Kansas City, and they were all presidents and CEOs of companies. Those are ties you make for a lifetime."

Meeting those people in interview situations helped the mild-mannered Midwesterner sharpen his communication skills and gain confidence, he says. "You think you're going to die, but you learn a lot from it."

The rewards didn't end there. As a proficiency-award winner, K.C. had the opportunity to travel to Europe, but he passed up the chance to stay home and work. But that may have helped put him in the position for another opportunity.

As a star finalist, he was invited to join this summer's proficiency-winners' tour of Costa Rica. Although he wasn't able to go due to problems getting his passport, he may be able to participate next year. "I was fortunate enough to have a second chance," he says.

#### ■ Sharing his fortune

Helping others find their chances is something K.C. enjoys. One of his favorite sayings is "knowledge is useless unless it is shared," so he shares his knowledge whenever he can, especially with those younger than he.

To help provide opportunities in cattle raising to Salem's youth, K.C. proposed a program to the local bank to provide loans to juniors. For a couple of years now, the bank has chosen calves from area producers, the interested members' names have been drawn from a hat, and each has chosen a calf for which to take the loan.

The young people must keep records on their project as part of the deal. "The first year we did it was when corn hit \$5 per bushel," K.C. remembers, "so a lot of kids learned what it's like to be in the red in a hurry."

He has found a way to give back to his FFA chapter, too. Whenever he gets the chance, he works out with the high-school



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL FFA ORGANIZATION

K.C. learned to AI when he was 13. He says the skill has made introducing high-powered genetics into his small herd more cost-effective.

livestock judges. For the past five years he also has chaired the invitational livestock-judging event in Salem, one of South Dakota's largest with 1,000 students from 40 schools.

"He's really good at encouraging the younger students," Rieckman says. "He was really instrumental in increasing our agricultural-education enrollment. He's got a real gift for gab."

#### ■ Planning for the future

K.C. is now a senior at SDSU where he's in the Agricultural Education Club, collegiate 4-H and FFA, and Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity. He's also a member of the livestock-judging team — another dream come true.

His university schedule didn't allow him to continue with Red Rock, but he's still learning about raising purebred cattle through a part-time job with a Simmental operation outside Salem.

He also returns to Highmore often to help his grandparents and to check the progress of his own herd, which he pastures with a neighbor's herd in exchange for labor. Although his numbers are down since starting at SDSU, he still has 11 cows and two bulls of his own. This year he kept back three replacement heifers.

Using the skill his grandfather taught him, he employs AI on his registered cows if he happens to be around at the right time.

"Having the smaller numbers, AI allows me to pick out specific traits that I need to improve," he says. "I can have a lot fewer dollars tied up that way than having a \$3,000 bull that isn't proven yet."

After graduation this spring, K.C. wants to teach high-school agriculture in South Dakota. He plans to keep ranching on the side and to build his herd to 60 purebred Angus and 100 commercial cows. He hopes to become a reliable source of crossbred calves and seedstock heifers while raising a bull good enough to go to stud.

He is well on the way toward his goals. For the last several years he has sold at least three bulls annually. "It's kind of neat being younger than most of the people to whom you sell and being able to talk traits with them," he says. "You're kind of a consultant because they're putting their faith in you."

Sometimes that "consulting" requires some "convincing," and overcoming the generation gap can be a challenge. "It's rewarding when they take one of your ideas," K.C. explains. "Sometimes they don't come out and tell you, but deep down you've got to remember that you're the one who helped convince them."

One person K.C. doesn't need to convince is Rieckman, who is sure of his former student's bright future. "When he becomes an ag teacher, I think you're going to see a program that's pretty well motivated and works hard to achieve a lot of goals," he says. "I know what he was like when he was a student; I can imagine what he's going to be like then."

In an industry looking for a shining example that the future is in good hands, K.C. Gregg is one star rising to lead the way.

