



# Agriculture's Advocate

*North Carolina Angus farm earns 2018 CAB Ambassador Award.*

*Story and photos by Laura Conaway, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

Joe Hampton bought his first set of heifers before he had a farm.

There was no calling, no written-in-the-stars, can't-escape-it destiny that drove the purchase. Joe just liked cows, so he got some.

"We are probably the epitome of opposites attract," Robin Hampton says of their 37-year marriage and partnership. "He's the sunny, everything is good optimist and I guess I'm more of a realist."

A long career with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) culminated into a district director position with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) causing Robin to look for cash flow in a pending decision.

"After you've been in the lending business you tend to go, 'Ok, I see what you're saying and this sounds like a good idea, but is it going to be worth the expense we put in?'"

In 1981, that was a tough call.

Interest rates had leapt and 9-5 jobs kept the couple away, but Robin knew the man she married.

"I don't think Joe would ever be happy – as long as he's taking a breath – without cattle."

His day job as superintendent of North Carolina's Piedmont Agriculture Research Station would continue for 14 years, building up a positive, problem-solving approach to just about everything.

For their combination of sunny realism with an outpouring of education and hospitality, the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand honored Back Creek Angus LLC with the 2018 CAB Ambassador Award.

"I don't think our story is unique," Joe says, typically passing off any credit headed his way. "I think we're just uniquely positioned to share our story with a lot of people."

A triangle town, Mt. Ulla, N.C. is

a safe place to land. Nestled inside the three-point sketch of I-40, I-77 and I-85, she gets winters that aren't too severe and summers that are just right. To her west, livestock roam the mountains and to the east, crops line the coast. The Hamptons reside in the middle, within what's known as the Piedmont region, "where cattle and crops interface."

It's an ideal spot, which may explain why nearly 8 million people surround them.

"If you look at the numbers, somewhere like 1% of the population is producing food for the other 99%," Joe says. "That means 99% of the people in this country no longer have a connection to a farm."

It doesn't sit well, and understandably so.

Recalling the early days of their marriage when you could bump into a farmer at the grocery store in town,

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*"No money and not much sense." That's how Robin remembers newlyweds milking cows at a relatives' dairy for grocery money. But for Joe it was an adventure. Life would always be that way.*

CAB  
Ambassador  
Award

2018

it was decided: “Today’s consumers need to make connections with the people producing their food.”

So the Hamptons would volunteer and make those “bumps” happen more often.

“At times we’d rather live somewhere where there aren’t so many people,” Joe says, “But we realize there’s a value to the industry if people like us open up our operation and share with folks what we do every day.”

“We’ll never be able to sell hundreds of bulls here, but we can sure share information.”

## Open doors

Information has long been Joe’s strong suit; education, his love language.

Shake his hearty hand and it’s evident the guy’s never met a stranger. He’s jolly, warm and welcoming, and he and Robin together exude an approachability that’s natural, not forced.

From chefs-in-training to kids, the press and moms, everyone’s welcome at Back Creek to wonder, explore and inquire.

“Some of the questions we get asked are sort of scary,” Joe admits. “It’s OK for a third grader to not understand where their food comes from, but when their teachers and parents don’t either, it’s important to let people in and be honest about what we do.”

The Hamptons take it a step further, says Kara Lee, CAB’s production manager.

In a world where those in the food business are becoming more curious about the people behind their protein, Lee says education is

is about community between our licensed partners and our producers, and Joe and Robin embody that core value effortlessly.”

Lee recounts numerous times the Hamptons hosted groups at the brand’s request. It’s their sincere hospitality, she says, and their pride for the Angus business where “customers who visit Back Creek Angus start out their tour as guests, yet go home as friends.”

To Joe and Robin, those “friends” determine the future of the industry they love and have committed to help stand strong.

## Angus the answer

“It wouldn’t have happened if it was just one of us, and it wouldn’t have happened if it was any other breed than Angus,” Joe says.

He’s talking about how he and Robin managed to balance cattle and careers.

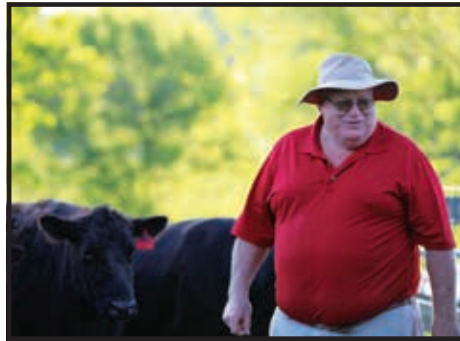
“From Monday through Friday, the cows were on their own,” Joe says. Breeding set for Thanksgiving, “we farmed on holidays and weekends.”

The black cows

made it work.

First-generation farmers, “we have Angus cattle not because of tradition,” Joe says. “We have Angus cattle because of the data the breed has” and the flexibility they allow.

## Open to all



It’s his staple of sorts, Joe Hampton’s smile. Bright and outstretching, it mimics his nature and mirrors his efforts. Fifth in a line of six kids, the military man’s son grew up with a sense of order and place.

A 36-year stint at the North Carolina Department of Agriculture put his talents to good use. In charge of a 1,000-acre research station, he oversaw a team that allotted grants and determined funding, all while increasing knowledge and dispelling false assumptions.

Peanuts or Christmas trees, the commodity made no difference to Joe; he was in it for the big picture, an advocate for agriculture.

That outlook got him elected to the American Angus Association Board of Directors in 2003, including a stint on the CAB Board. In 2011, he served as Association president to nearly 25,000 Angus ranchers looking his direction.

“CAB and the Association, they just want what’s good for the cattle industry,” Joe says. He owned that simple vision, too, which is why he took on the responsibilities and managed to excel in those roles along with a full-time career.

indeed important, but relationships are priceless.

“It’s hard to put a value on the kind of impact someone like Joe has on a licensee or potential customer who has the opportunity to spend a day with him,” Lee says. “The CAB brand

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They're pre-built for success. "We took our careers very seriously, but the farm, that's where we could decompress and come together. It's our golf."

It was an ideal partnership: the cattle, Joe and Robin.

The couple met at North Carolina State and married soon after.

"No money and not much sense." That's how Robin remembers newlyweds milking cows at a relative's dairy for grocery money. But for Joe it was an adventure, a chance to build character and relationships around the milk stools that soon turned to leather chairs in a big office with A.C.

"It's really been a good ride with my life partner," Robin says. She was there when he purchased those first

heifers. She's been there for the big and little decisions since.

"To work with the animals, care for them and make some money, too," she continues with a smile.



*"We'll never be able to sell hundreds of bulls here, but we can sure share information," says Joe Hampton.*

Decisions and decades stored away for safe keeping, gone are the days of driving two hours one way to breed a cow and back again the next.

Retirement has the Hamptons settled into a big, brick house on Withrows Creek Lane.

Mt. Ulla, N.C., where the cattle always were, is now home to full-time farmers, finally.

"I just love the animals and I love Joe so it's worked out for us to continue that," Robin says.

With a cold Dr. Pepper and a shotgun seat beside him, she's his perfect counterpart.

In the distance her husband projects a familiar sound: "Wooooeeeh cows, wooooeeeh." With hands cupped and lungs stretched, he offers a warm welcome to the herd he always wanted. **AJ**

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