

When 'Someday' Becomes Today

Ranch Covey Hill earns Certified Angus Beef Canadian Commitment to Excellence Award

by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor, for Certified Angus Beef

Emmanuel Chenail of Havelock, Québec, had a dream in his heart that he just couldn't explain.

The French-speaking son of a construction contractor grew up operating road graders and riding his moped through town. When he went to school it was to study business, not animal science.

Still, Emmanuel often spoke of his boyhood dream to his wife and later their three children: "To have cattle on a hill."

It was specific yet abstract, but they never doubted it would happen. If Emmanuel has a big idea, it's his nature to make it so. In 2018, after a career as president of his family's construction business, the dreamer sold his company and Ranch Covey Hill was born.

"My wife Brigitte and I were out on a drive when the name came to us, just like that," he says. "It's perfect for this hillside."

The hill is where a winding driveway leads through front pastures and up to the well-appointed ranch headquarters. Bits of history mix with modern buildings and their completely remodeled home. Off to the west, the maple forest or "sugar bush" flourishes with more than 20,000 taps ready to produce syrup come late winter. Near



the sugar shack sits the carefully planned sale barn.

"What inspires me every morning is, we've started something that isn't over yet. It's just beginning," Emmanuel says.

Just a few years ago, Ranch Covey Hill showed no signs of an Angus destiny. It was a country estate in disrepair as owners stopped coming out from Montreal in the summers. The Chenails had been looking for land, a place where they could build a herd. They saw potential.

The day the family got the deed, they began the transformation.

"When we first bought this place,

I don't think anybody would believe it looked that way, compared to now," says eldest daughter Sabrina. "We couldn't get through the main driveway, couldn't even tell there was a pasture there — no fences, rock chains everywhere, no barns — the house was not habitable."

The family, which also includes daughter, Camille, and son, Raphael, has checked projects off the list one by one, dedicated employees providing steady support.

"One day we might be done, but we're always working on it," Sabrina says.

That continual pursuit of the best

and finding the right people to help caught the attention of the world's premium beef brand. Their eagerness to support the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB) brand mission earned Ranch Covey Hill the 2022 CAB Canadian Commitment to Excellence award.



Building in quality from the start

Their first 10 Angus females came from neighbor, mentor and friend, David Sample, Mac Angus Ranch.

“One thing I’ve learned about Angus breeders is they’re always willing to share what they know,” Emmanuel says. “They open their doors, give you a tour. They’re open-minded. That’s a huge advantage, and I really appreciate what people have done for us in that way.”

They quickly grew the herd to 75 cows and hosted their first annual Hillspride Sale at the ranch in February, along with Mac Angus Farm and PJ Ranch from nearby Hemmingford.

The three operations have separate programs, but similar philosophies.

“The ideal cow is moderately sized, good-tempered, not too demanding, and maternal — easy to look at. That’s my ideal,” Emmanuel says. “You can’t overlook how important the cow is in terms of herd continuity, easy-keeping and ultimately, marbling.”

Sabrina explains why calving ease was a top goal from Day 1.

“We were new to the business, new to calving cows, so the less intervention we had to do at calving, the better it was for us,” she says.

That provided some initial

confidence as they adjusted to a steep learning curve.

“We had to learn everything,” she says.

But for all the disadvantage in that, there are also benefits.

Maybe that’s why they’ve never understood the debate between carcass and maternal.

“Customers want quality. That’s not negotiable: you need to get it right the first time. It’s a priority,” Emmanuel says. “Customers come to us to buy a good breeding bull and maybe to produce cows for their operation. They’re looking for sound legs, calving ease, healthy teats, and meat for Angus steers is known for its marbling. At the end of the day, we do it to put food on people’s tables.”

That enthusiasm led the family to CAB in search of educational resources.

“They don’t want to keep the secret of quality to themselves as something only they can be good at,” says Kara Lee, CAB director of producer engagement. “They want to help their customers understand how they can continue to excel at the ranch and from the perspective of consumer eating satisfaction.”

This spring’s sale book included materials from the brand, and



Ranch Covey Hill invited CAB staff to participate in their fall customer event.

“They had a very fresh set of eyes in terms of the value in pursuing maternal and carcass traits in the cow herd. They realized there are tools and diversity in the Angus breed that let us achieve improvement in tandem,” Lee says.

Most bull buyers come from within the province, but they have been showing a small string of cattle to get the ranch name out.

“We think it’s a good opportunity to meet more people. It’s just for fun,” Sabrina says.

Dad’s vision, everyone’s mission

When Sabrina talks cattle these days, it would be easy to assume the beef business was a long-time career aspiration. In truth, it was more that her dad’s dream eventually became hers, too. Emmanuel has a way of inspiring people to believe.

“I got into the cattle business

Continued on page 104

by accident because when my dad bought the ranch, what interested me was the maple trees," she admits. "He needed someone to help him out with the registrations and all that because everyone at the Association speaks English and my dad doesn't speak English."

Sabrina started doing the registrations and eventually became hooked.

"I guess it's just being able to see them being born, and then raising them and then seeing after a year what they can look like," she says.

Soon Sabrina wanted to know more than just what looked good in the pastures.

"I didn't study this, but I wanted to understand. I had all these people around me talking EPDs (expected progeny differences) and genetics and cow families, asking me what my cows were out of, and I couldn't answer," Sabrina says.

Today, she can — a fact not lost on her father.

"I want to instill in our children, in our family, a taste for a job well done, for doing things right the first time," Emmanuel says. "I'm demanding. I ask a lot of them. I'd like them to keep asking a lot of themselves and of others."

They each have their roles.

"Sabrina looks after the genetics and the calving. She likes to find which bull will provide the best genetic mix," Emmanuel says. "Camille is responsible for sales and marketing. She works with cuts of meat to imagine very creative dishes. Brigitte takes care of everybody and makes sure we're all happy."

Raphael is away at school right now but comes back as he's able.

"I like working with my family because we're all kind of the same, and we're intense people," Camille says. It's easier to uphold high standards when you've been raised with them, she notes. Each has a unique skill they bring to the table. "So when we work together, we balance things up and make things work out."

Then there are Amélie Barbeau, Corrie Patterson and Jason Poole, who have been with the family since the beginning. They do everything — building projects from the ground up, day-to-day cattle care, accounting and maple-tree tapping.

"A large team is something else, but a small team has a lot going for it," Barbeau says. "It's more like a family; it's more close-knit. We're all close to one another."


When the Chenails sold their business, she transferred from that office out to the ranch. There was no question, she'd go wherever Emmanuel went because his work ethic matches hers.

"Giving 100% all the time means you care about what you do. We love what we do and so giving 100% comes naturally," she says.

From their wraparound porch, the Chenails see a pasture filled with Clydesdale horses, foreground to another with their main group of cows. They can name the ones "that belong to" (sired by) Untouchable, Captain or Intimidator. They think about the very different life they had just a few short years ago.

"Me and my family are intense in the sense that we love things that move quick. We love to make things happen," Camille says.

So long ago a young boy gave them the dream to act on when the time came to move.

"It's like I imagined," Emmanuel says, his eyes glistening a little, "but I didn't think it would be this beautiful." 

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"BEING NEW TO THE BUSINESS HAS ALLOWED US TO INNOVATE, TO DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY." — EMMANUEL