A Silent Partner

Georgia cattlewoman runs reputable embryo transfer herd ensuring consistency and quality in the demanding market.

Story and photos by Laura Conaway

It's a Tuesday morning in September, hot and humid, and Kristy Arnold asks for five minutes to blow dry her hair.

It's unlike her — most days she's in a ball cap and blue jeans — but planned pictures in the South Georgia sun should be prefaced with a shower; unless one's plan is to hide in the shade like the mama cows hugging the tree line.

Kristy's pretty; her blond hair, long, makes it believable that there's still those folks, "Who no matter where I am or what I've done, they're still going to talk to my husband."

The topic doesn't linger, though. She seems uninterested in the male versus female debate of running a farm or owning a gymnastics studio in town, for that matter. She's too busy doing the stuff to place much stock in how it's perceived.

Of serving as the 2018 Georgia Cattlemen's Association President — only the second woman to ever hold the title — she says it was an honor, but wouldn't have thought to deem it "groundbreaking" as some have. It's usually others who mention the gender role stuff and, as long as she's effective in a role, her no-nonsense demeanor leaves her caring little whether people notice or not.

Her cows, on the other hand — she keeps a close pulse on even the slightest whisper about them through the Angus halls. Their job is surrogacy, mass-producing superior genetics through the technology of embryo transfer (ET), and reputation is everything.

Comfortable on clay

The granddaughter of a row-crop farmer, Kristy grew up down the same washboard roads she apologizes for on today's drive. In Screven, Ga., population 767, her family raised cotton, tobacco, corn and soybeans. Some cows and hogs, too.

When her dad, Ronnie Griffis, took over from her grandfather in the 1980s, "we transferred more and more cropland into pasture," and by the time Kristy was old enough for chore work, "had about 150 head along with 200 sows, farrow to finish."

"I tended to the sows," she says lackadaisically. "Fed and clipped pigs, processed newborns and washed out growing floors."

Necessary but never glamorous, Kristy did her job well until she left for college. At the University of Georgia (UGA) she worked toward a degree in animal science and would hurry home every chance she could.

School had a purpose, something to equip and support her for life, but the farm held a steady grip; she felt destined to return.

In the interim, "I'd beg my dad, 'please, please don't deworm all the calves until I can get home at spring break.'"

The help was welcomed, needed even, as Ronnie had taken a job in town to supplement the farm with steady income and insurance, but there wasn't room for Kristy full-time after graduation. Later, married and with a master's degree in agricultural education, "I ended up teaching middle school social studies for seven years."

A good hand, it worked out that Kristy and her dad shared the same passion for cattle over crops.

"I'd work on the farm in the afternoons, Saturdays and Sundays," gaining life skills from both her roles.

That was the routine until one evening her dad phoned to ask if she'd come to the house for a chat. In the living room where she was raised, he offered her the destiny she'd dreamt of: a chance to come home and farm full-time. Her mom, a hairdresser, and her brother having passed, Kristy was it — the next generation.

In 2008 she quit teaching and signed on for half of the land debt, but it wasn't all a fairytale. Harsh realities would later remove any chance of fantasy. In September of 2014, Ronnie was diagnosed with esophageal cancer adenocarcinoma (in laymen's terms: the aggressive kind); a man who had never smoked, nor drank, died 10 months later, at only 60 years old.

"We were side by side for eight years before he got sick and left," Kristy says. She doesn't seem bitter, only sad.

Surprisingly, her biggest learning curve has been commercial fertilizer, a task her dad always tackled, and all that's required to keep her pastures healthy in a quest to wean 600-pound- (lb.) plus calves at 205 days.

"Nutrition and fertility are best friends," she says. "If that's not being taken care of, they're not going to get pregnant."

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UGA Extension and reps have helped fill in the gaps that time took away.

"You can only learn so much. As much as I'd like to learn everything about everything, my brain can only hold so much," she says. "I feel like I'm pushing stuff out more than I'm putting it in."

A genetic one-stop shop

Lucky for the customers of Boggy Creek Farms, Kristy has retained and perfected what's necessary to rear successful, growthy ET calves just the way they're ordered.

Yet what can sound so clinical, sterile even to the out of tune ear, isn't at all.

"My cows will fight you over the calf when it's born just like any other cow," Kristy says.

It's obvious the Angus cows, both commercial and registered, that roam the Georgia countryside haven't the slightest clue they're nurturing anything but their own. The science and technology that allows ET to exist happens at the front end with the synchronization of estrus cycles, the superovulation of donor cows and a skilled embryologist to perform the flushing and transfers. From there, it's business as usual with Kristy as the caretaker, herd manager and day-to-day task masker.

Where Boggy Creek differs from its commercial and seedstock sisters is in the scheduling.

"The day we breed is based on what time our purebred customers want their calves born, and they all want them born in the fall," Kristy says, "but I can't find 350 cows that are calving in 30 days."

Replacement cows every year go into the front-

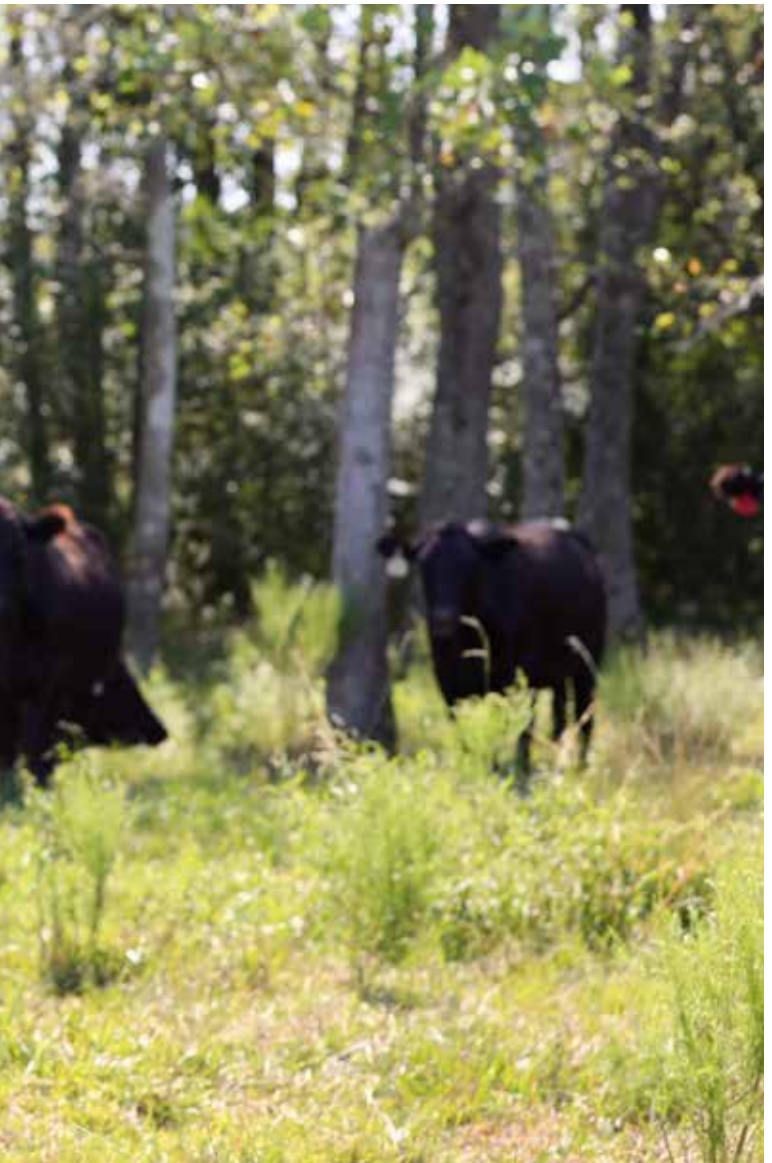
end group to satisfy customer demand. Each cow gets one chance with an embryo and 60 days with a bull seven days after transfer. If she's a late calver, she'll fall to the next group, with each group representing a customer for accurate recordkeeping.

Forget the demands that come with fall- and spring-calving herds, Boggy Creek calves are born in September, October, November, January and February each year.

"Our cows run through the chute quite a few times," she says.

It's a lot of work, for a return that's not always as high as the seedstock supplier renting the uterus and ultimately selling the heifer or bull, but she'll keep her role as a silent partner of sorts.

"No matter what the market does — high, low, whatever — we're guaranteed a premium," Kristy says, and "guarantees are hard to come by in ag."



Bloodlines get hot, then cold, and she'd rather hedge the risk and see the real-world results out on the farm.

The responsibility weighs heavy

The way she sees it, "We're mass-producing superior genetics. Instead of getting that one highly sought-after progeny every year, we're putting it in a blender, dividing it up and making 40 or 50 of them. I think that makes us a critical part in the food chain as far as producing high-quality Angus beef."

It sounds simple and concise — Kristy's skilled at getting to the point, being direct — yet pressure exists as Boggy Creek's bottom line depends on the seamless handoff of healthy calves at weaning. Registered seedstock customers rely on those calves to fill their production sales and keep their businesses afloat while their commercial customers count on replacement heifers to keep the whole system in order.

Often same-day transfers, "The animals we grow go to farms to be mamas and daddies and those genetics carry down to your terminal crosses that eventually end up on the plate," Kristy says. "So we do play a critical role in making the beef supply in our nation more uniform."

That starts with the individual ranchers who tap into Kristy's talents.

Andrew McPeake, CAM Ranches, near Arnoldsville, Ga., has been a customer for four years.

"It's the values learned growing up and working side by side with her father that make Boggy Creek successful today," McPeake says of his experience working with Kristy. "Collectively, the entire family is dedicated, hardworking and uncompromised in their pursuit of raising a quality beef product."

That's the key to a lasting partnership — a shared goal of goodness and a voracious appetite for quality. AJ

Editor's note: Laura Conaway is a freelance writer from DeLeon Springs, Fla.