

A Fighting Chance

*Connealy presidency was about strengthening the breed,
the future for families like his.*

by Julie Mais, editor

It was 1981 and perhaps one of the toughest times to be a cowboy, and the Sandhills of Nebraska tough country. Jerry and Sharon Connealy, newly married and recent college graduates, were faced with a decision: send Jerry to vet school or return to his family's ranch in Whitman, Neb.

Since Jerry's six siblings were taking different paths, there was a chance, and a place, for Jerry to pursue what had always come natural. He never minded the chores required of him before and after school, and he had the ability to call out numbers and pedigrees of cows in the Connealy's 120-head herd.

For Sharon, an Omaha native, Whitman was unlike anywhere she'd been, with treeless hills and one-lane roads.

"I guess it was embedded in my DNA to come back," Jerry says. "After college Sharon and I decided to come back to the home place. And we went to work."


The path ahead was not easy.

"The 1980s were tough," he remembers. "It was really tough when we moved home. Interest rates were high and cattle prices depressed."

The couple lived in a single-wide trailer house for their first 10 years of marriage and invested every penny back into their cow herd.

"My dad, Marty, was very generous even though times were tough," Jerry says of his parents raising





seven kids and sending them to college. “He made room for me on the ranch and allowed me to make plenty of decisions that somebody right out of college probably wasn’t qualified to.”

But it was make or break, he says.

“We were hanging on by a shoestring, but you know, it’s just a passion, I guess.”

So the young Connealys got to work raising cattle and kids.

“We never thought twice about it. We got up and worked every day. We raised our family, and we were together. We had food on the table,” he explains.

In the early 1990s, his dad hosted a female sale — it had gone poorly.

“We were once again fighting the wolves off from the door,” Jerry says.

In a last-ditch effort, his father turned the management of their annual bull sale completely over to Jerry and Sharon.

That year Connealy Dateline went through the sale ring bringing \$31,000.

“At that time that was an astronomical amount, especially for us,” he says.

“That was when the light went on that we had a fighting chance to survive, and to thrive, if we could keep things going in that direction.”

Jerry attributes his family’s success in the Angus breed by going through those tough times.

“It molded me and my family into who we are today,” he says. “I may be more frugal than probably what’s needed at times, but you always wonder if history will repeat itself.”

It’s not just saving pennies; Jerry and Sharon invest in things that matter — their family, their operation and the Angus breed.

“We’ve sunk everything back into the business, into what we know and what we are passionate about.”

Jerry brought this philosophy with him as he’s served the past eight years on the American Angus Association Board of Directors and as president and chairman of the Board in 2022.

Angus by accident

A fourth-generation Sandhills rancher, Jerry says his dad initially brought black cattle to their herd; the “new kid on the block” wanted to do something different.

Jerry’s mother’s side of the family, the Vintons, first homesteaded south of Whitman in the late 1880s. Her ancestors came to the United States from Wales, made their way through the Midwest and settled in the Sandhills.

Marty, with his strong Irish ancestry, grew up in a suburb of Chicago, and they made a life in the Whitman area.

“We had some of the only black cattle in the country,” Jerry says, remembering from childhood. “I think he didn’t want to jump in the mainstream of Hereford and try to compete with established producers. I’m not sure he really knew what he was doing, but he made a good choice. We’ve benefited from it for years.”

Jerry and Sharon raised four kids, Jed, Ben, Hannah and Gabriel, on the ranch, and today they are sharing their passion with their nine grandchildren.

“My family is absolutely the most important thing in the world to me,” he says. “We’re blessed.”

When Jed graduated from college, he moved back to Connealy Angus Ranch. He’s a representative for Northern Livestock Video Auction and artificially inseminates commercial heifers around the country.

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Jerry overlooks the sale facility from the spot that was a childhood favorite.

“He’s kind of the pull-through guy for Connealy Angus,” Jerry says. “He buys a lot of feeder cattle and progeny of our bulls. He’s the one who makes guys want to come back to the sale because we’ve added value.”

Jed is engaged to Jais, a practicing veterinarian, and he has three children, Cian, Colin and Aislynn.

Ben lives in San Diego and is living a long-time dream. “He’s successful, he’s happy and he loves it out there,” Jerry says, adding that he and Sharon visit the west coast a few times a year.

Hannah, who has lived overseas and in Boston, now

resides in the house she was raised in. She and her three kids, Charlotte, Rudy and Henriette, are often visiting her parents as she is the point person for Connealy Angus Meat Market, helps Sharon with data entry, and also helps around the ranch.

Gabriel is following in his father’s footsteps and shows interest in the genetics side of the business.

“He loves what I love and probably can’t wait for me to get out of the road,” Jerry laughs. “He contributes a lot to the genetic progress.”

Gabriel helps with the day-to-day management, and his wife, Becca, a practicing registered nurse, also helps with many ranch and office duties. They and their children, Finnegan, Martin and Mickey, live in the house Jerry grew up in.

Jerry and Sharon are true partners, in life and in business.

“I’m president of the American Angus Association, but I wouldn’t be here without her. She came out here and fell in love with a cowboy. She swallowed everything, hook, line and sinker, and has thrived.”

Sharon focuses on the accounting, data entry and the intricacies of recordkeeping for the ranch.

“I bounce all my ideas off of Sharon,” Jerry says. “All the good decisions I’ve made, you can probably trace back to her.”

The Connealys focus on their customers, who Jerry says are their neighbors and friends.



Charlotte and Rudy live just down the road from their grandparents, a proximity that suits them well.

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A good, harsh place

“We raise our cattle just like our commercial customers do,” he explains. “In fact, we probably manage them rougher than many of them do. It’s a harsh environment here.”

Their 3,000 head of Angus cattle graze sand dunes delicately held together by grasses. With an average of 17 inches (in.) of moisture a year, it takes around 18 acres per cow.

Temperatures range from triple digits in the summer to subzero winters with deep snow. Fall is temperate, and spring is when Jerry says everything comes to life — the hills are green and reminiscent of his Irish roots.

“I love living here,” Jerry says. “I love the challenges the environment brings to us.”

The ranch resides on top of the Ogallala Aquifer. Water is abundant, but trees are scarce.

“Our cows don’t know what shade is, but they seem to thrive on it. It takes a cow that’s easy-fleshing, moderate-sized and functionally sound. She has to cover a lot of acres here to get her belly full every day. It takes a pretty rough, tough cow to thrive in this environment.”

The Connealy family has hosted a bull sale since 1968, and today have a spring and fall sale offering of around 1,000 bulls annually.



The Connealy family pictured (back row, from left) are Gabriel, Becca, Mickey, Sharon, Jerry, Hannah, Henriette, Cian, Jais and Jed. Front row (from left) are Finnegan, Martin, Rudy, Charlotte, Aislynn and Colin.

When it comes to breeding season, it’s a family decision and a lively discussion.

“We have four breeding seasons, so we get to have these conversations four times a year, which makes life good. We come together as a family and we will discuss what we see from our commercial customers. We analyze where we are falling short and try to forecast the future.”

And selection decisions are made.

Jerry says he believes in the tools made available by the American Angus Association. “We think \$C (Combined Value) matters. We don’t chase it, but with the \$M (Maternal Weaned Calf Value) component in \$C, we can ensure maternal traits are covered.”

Marbling, ribeye area and carcass weight are important terminal traits, he says, ensuring when calves go to a

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feedyard, they perform and the feeder buys them again.

“We take it pretty seriously that our customers can thrive because they have the right genetics,” he says. “We want our customers to be generational and sustainable, and if it’s their will, they can pass their ranch down to their children. We don’t want to get in the way of that from a genetic standpoint.”

A family business that’s viable for the next generation is top of mind for Jerry and Sharon.

“The kids have brought a lot of new ideas to the ranch,” Sharon says, from trying new technologies, like QR codes in their sale books to changing the atmosphere for hosting sales. “We are stepping aside to let them make changes.”

The sale facility and corrals Jerry helped his dad build while in high school have hardly ever changed.

“It’s a worn-out facility, but we’ve sold a lot of bulls.”

That’s part of his “investing in things that are profitable” mindset.

However, this spring Connealy customers enjoyed a new facility near the sale ring. What started as Jerry’s design, a concrete footprint for modern restrooms, morphed “a little” when he stepped away. The kids’ vision of a facility to host customer meals and entertainment was completed in March. Jerry says he was outvoted.

“That’s what happened,” Sharon says, with a smile

that hints at the satisfaction it gives her, seeing the next generation making their mark.

Time well spent

When Jerry was first elected to the Board in 2014, he sometimes questioned if he was using his time wisely. Instead of sitting in a boardroom, should he be in Whitman making breeding decisions and fixing fence? Those thoughts went away quickly, he says.

“You’re surrounded by so many good people and realize you are part of a team that can succeed with the brainpower and work ethic there. It’s all worth it.”

When he’d go back home, it was all the more evident time on the Board was time well spent.

“I saw my kids who were involved, and my grandkids coming up, and it didn’t take long to realize it was a no-brainer decision. Hopefully I could weigh in and help make sure they could enjoy the lifestyle I’ve been fortunate enough to enjoy.”

A large table now sits in Jerry and Sharon’s open kitchen in a home they built a few years ago.

“There’s no better day than when the kitchen’s full of grandkids who are running around and we’re having conversations,” Jerry describes. “We pinch ourselves every day because we could never imagine that we could have had the resources to have children back and let alone have them live right close to us. We’re so blessed.”

During those countless hours spent in meetings, making hard decisions and the years spent on the ranch, Jerry was investing in the future for the Angus breed and for his family — in hopes of giving them a fighting chance. **AJ**

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