



► Susan, Albert and Joe support Will at the 2014 World Livestock Auctioneering Championship, where he made the top 10.

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Rising Sons

With a World Livestock Auctioneering Championship finalist and an under-30 assistant executive director as sons, Susan and Albert Epperly have plenty of which to be proud.

Story & photos by **Bridget Beran**, editorial intern

For parents in agriculture, the directions their children can take in life may seem endless. Many parents hope their children choose a career in agriculture and that they might be successful in their field of choice. Albert and Susan Epperly's sons are a prime example of the power of good parenting, instilling a love for agriculture and a strong work ethic.

Raised as members of the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA), Joe and Will Epperly say their parents were huge influences in their lives. Joe, now the assistant executive director of the North American

Limousin Foundation (NALF) at just 30 years old, and Will, a seven-time competitor at the World Livestock Auctioneering Championship (WLAC), are their parents' greatest achievements.

"They're really different people, and they've taken different things from the NJAA and their life experiences on the farm," Albert says. "They both grew to love being involved in cattle."

Raised on what was originally called Deer Run Angus, now ADR Farms following a partnership formation, the boys acquired a taste for hard work from the very beginning.

In fact, Joe cites his first memory at the age of 4 as holding a halter on a ewe while Susan pulled a lamb. Farm life instilled the importance of work ethic into Will and Joe from a young age.

"It was the best life for us," Will says. "I can't think of a day that I didn't enjoy getting up and going to work with my family. It taught me about responsibility, and it made me a better person in life."

Angus involvement

When the boys were young, the NJAA was a big part of family togetherness. Albert and his brother were previous members and Susan and Albert knew it was the right thing for their sons. Though Susan says she put a lamb in their hands from the time they were old enough to show, it was ultimately Will and Joe's decision to continue their involvement in the NJAA.

"It was a natural part of growing up on a farm. They started at the local five-county fair, and they still know all of those kids. They shared a weekend, sold their animals together and cried together. They understand life and death better than most kids do, just from that experience," Susan says.

She calls the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) "too much fun," and Albert remarks that it was a positive influence on their sons, largely due to the people who surrounded them.

"It was important for us to get our kids around good kids," Albert says. "For those people who have never been to an NJAS or a regional show, the caliber of kids gave our

kids a passion for the animals and the industry. You can't overestimate how important that is. No matter what it costs, it's immeasurable how much of a positive influence it has on the kids."

The Epperly boys were involved in the cook-off, quiz bowl, team sales and, for Joe, public speaking contests. They attended Leaders Engaged in Angus Development (LEAD) conferences and both say it helped them to make friends across the country and helped lead them into their careers. Though Joe says Will was the one who never knew a stranger and made friends easily, Joe was the one who served on the National Junior Angus Board (NJAB).

"I'm naturally an introvert, but when I was about 13, I realized you can't be successful just brushing cows and being happy. I had to become a little bit more like my little brother," Joe says.

At 13, he served as a delegate at the NJAS, which sparked his interest in serving on the NJAB.

"I was a very serious little 13-year-old. I brought a whole sheet of questions that I'd discussed with my father to roundtables, and I was ready," Joe says. "So that night Sonya Smith was the board member at my table, and she was sitting next to me. We get to the first candidate and it comes around to me. I get all shy and I don't ask anything. So the next one comes up and Sonya says, 'Joe, you're going to start us off and ask that one,' pointing to my sheet. By the end of the night, people were stealing my questions before I could ask them.

"That changed something for me because someone like that thought what I had to say had some value. I realized that making people

► Though Albert wanted him to pursue engineering, Joe knew that agriculture was in his future. "Cows were always where my heart was. It might be hard, but I thought it was where I needed to be," Joe says.



feel the way she made me feel was something I wanted to do. Being a junior board member was an opportunity to be that influence and touch kids' lives in ways that you never thought you could."

Joe went on to be elected to the NJAB in 2006 and calls it one of his proudest moments in agriculture. He served as the leadership director, planning a LEAD conference in Montana. He cites a lesson from Clinton Laflin as his biggest take-away from his junior board years.

"No matter what happens, there's no reason not to attack every day with some

joy," Joe says. "That's something I try to do every day."

Now he is finding his joy in his work with NALF and the junior members of the North American Limousin Junior Association (NALJA). After a stint as an engineering student, he graduated from Virginia Tech with a degree in animal science and worked for a ranch before being hired at NALF. Joe was originally hired to be the commercial marketing director in 2010, but he has worked his way up to assistant executive director. While everyone else in the office was away at a show, he spent his first week learning about the breed and making connections with board and association members.

After in-office changes, Joe took on the responsibilities of being the performance person within NALF and was elected to serve as the Limousin representative on the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) board of directors. He also assisted with the NALJA operations and board during director of activities changes.

"Working for any breed association, you're able to educate and help breeders become better. It's really rewarding to help them in their business," Joe says. "Juniors are always rewarding to work with, as well. You see the development in them a lot faster than you do with breeders."

Working toward Worlds

For Will, a self-proclaimed "sale barn rat," the NJAA provided an opportunity to make connections with countless producers who would still be a part of his life today as an auctioneer. Before that, he says his fascination with auctioneering and all it entailed started at a young age.

"When I was 5 years old, I was watching an auction with my grandfather and Ralph Wade, the 1974 world champion auctioneer, was auctioneering. I turned to my grandfather that day and said 'I want to be a world champion. I want to be like Ralph Wade,'" Will says.

A few weeks later, he started out selling baby calves and goats at the family livestock auction. At 7 years old, he moved up to cows, and those early experiences set him on his way to becoming a world-class auctioneer.

"I loved the livestock market, and I loved the auction," Will says. "Once my grandfather put me behind the mic, I fell in love with it."

At just 18 years old, Will entered his first qualifier for the WLAC. Though he didn't finish successfully, he was granted what he calls the opportunity of a lifetime. Matt Lowery, the 2008 world champion, told Will to come out and work with him for the



► Albert and Susan instilled a love of Angus cattle in their sons from Day 1.

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summer so he could teach him about the livestock marketing business.

“That man built more confidence in me than anything else,” Will says.

After that 2009 summer, Will returned to competition and qualified for his first WLAC at the age of 19. From a lifelong dream to sitting in the room with auctioneers that he had idolized over the years, it was an intimidating experience.

“My first year I was scared to death,” Will says. “It was one of the most humbling experiences of my life, as well.”

Now a seven-time qualifier, Will placed in the top 10 in 2014, 2015 and most recently in 2016. He says he’s more confident in his abilities these days and counts being able to be a role model to young auctioneer hopefuls as one of his greatest honors.

“It’s absolutely humbling to know that there are people looking up to me. I feel so honored and blessed to be counted among the top 31 auctioneers in the country,” Will says.

His family was by his side for this year’s competition, with big brother Joe and dad Albert giving him pointers along the way. While Will says he is always tickled to be in the top 10, he knows that no matter how the contest ends up, his family is proud of him and that is the most important thing.

“He’s always been so passionate about merchandizing cattle,” Albert says. “He’s a ball of energy, and you can see it when he’s working.”

When he’s not competing at WLAC, Will works as an auctioneer at Dunlap Livestock Auction with the Schaben family. In addition to his work on the auction block,

he speaks with farmers and ranchers about their cattle and breeding programs, as well as sorting cattle.

“I can’t represent a man’s livestock without being back there and knowing how they’re sorted,” Will says. “This is the job I’ve always dreamed of having and doing. It’s a great life, and I love my bosses, and I think I’ve got the greatest job in the world.”

Family first

Though life has taken them to different sectors of the agriculture industry, the Epperly boys have nothing but praise for each other and their dedication to their work.

“I couldn’t ask God for a better big brother than mine,” Will says. “He’s my rock and my role model. I’ve always looked up to him, and he’s someone that I’m always working to make proud in my life.”

Though Will laughs that he often got Joe into trouble “because that’s what little brothers are for,” he says their relationship is always a positive force in his life. For Joe, Will’s been making him proud since Day 1.

“I’m so proud of him I don’t know even what to think. I pick on him about little things, but he’s my joy. If I’m having a bad day, he’s the pick-me-up. He’s got as good of a heart as anyone I know,” Joe says. He laughs and adds, “When I grow up, I want to be like Will. I always have.”

While their sons have given them plenty to be proud of, Albert and Susan say they are most proud of the way their sons have taken opportunities and grown as people.

“Watching Joe go from that shy individual to metamorphose into the young man he is today where he’s very comfortable talking to hundreds or thousands of folks has been remarkable,” Susan says. “Will has always been comfortable with people, but through his association with NJAA he learned to focus that to make friends and use that energy to do his work.”

“The Angus breed is full of people who are happy to lend a helping hand to young people if they will just reach out and take hold,” Albert says.

These days, Joe and Will

try to give back to the organizations that influenced them.

“A lot of people reached out to them and helped them out. Now they’re paying it back,” Susan says. “They still send money back to buy an animal or two at the little five-county fair here. They come back and fit kids’ cattle for nothing. If it’s a kid, they’re going to help them because somebody helped them once.”

Susan also cites their ability to work with all types of people from all walks of life as a skill she’s proud they possess. As far as future lessons go, kindness is key.

“They will call me on their most frustrating day. The one thing I always remind them of, whether it’s personal or professional relationships, is that it never hurts to be kind.”



Editor’s Note: Bridget Beran was Angus Media’s 2016 summer publications intern.

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