

Angus Stakes

► by **David Gazda**, American Angus Association

A lesson learned

Each month one of 13 regional managers employed by the American Angus Association is asked to write a short column for the Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA. Articles are normally informative pieces that focus on the programs and services offered by the Association, as well as other topics and events occurring within the beef cattle industry. If you're settling into your favorite recliner expecting to read another such article, now would be a good time to hit the mouse and advance to the next page. However, if the thought of possibly saving one's life — namely yours or that of someone close to you — is of interest, then I would encourage you to read on.

Exposed

Sixteen months ago I was diagnosed with stage IIIC metastatic melanoma. After recovering from the initial shock of having been told I had cancer, my next thought was "How could this be? How could this possibly have happened to me?"

After all, in my mind I was the picture of health, running and cycling daily to stay in shape, eating healthy and watching my weight, and having a complete physical annually. In hindsight, however, I was the perfect candidate. You might even say I was the "poster child" for skin cancer, having spent countless hours as a child at the pool or on the ball field, and later as a lifeguard in high school and college, slowly being baked by the sun and unconsciously inflicting irreparable damage to my skin.

To add further insult to injury, this doesn't even include my adult years when I knew better, yet continued to work outside on an open-cab tractor, building fence and performing other farm chores in the middle

of the day during the sun's strongest rays and always without any form of skin protection.

According to the National Cancer Institute:

- Skin cancer is the most common and fastest-growing type of cancer in the United States, with exposure to the sun being the main risk factor.
- Each year more than 68,000 Americans are diagnosed with melanoma, and another 48,000 are diagnosed with an early form of the disease.
- In addition, more than 2 million people are treated for basal-cell or squamous-cell skin cancer each year.
- Most skin cancers, including melanoma, can be cured if found and treated early.

My intent with this article is not to have you feel sorry for my situation nor to unnecessarily frighten you. It is simply to

Every cattleman needs to hear this message Regional Manager David Gazda shared with our Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA subscribers.

— Shauna

remind you that, as cattlemen, we spend an immense amount of time in the sun, usually unprotected and therefore more susceptible to skin cancer than most other professions in this country.

I am fortunate that I work for an organization that places personal well-being above punching a time clock and job performance, allowing me to travel to the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, 10 times in that 16-month period to receive the best medical attention available for my condition. More importantly, I am blessed to have the support, encouragement and prayers of family, friends and co-workers as I continue my daily battle to defeat this disease.

In closing, I encourage you to take time to learn the "ABCDE" features of melanoma (visit <http://1.usa.gov/XFJ3wB>) and early signs of skin cancer. Do weekly checks of your body, and if you find anything unusual, go to the doctor immediately. Avoid the sun during the middle of the day and protect yourself from the sun's rays by wearing long sleeves, long pants and a hat with a wide brim.

Finally, regardless of the weather outside, always use a sunscreen lotion with an SPF value of at least 15.

Living with melanoma has changed my life and that of my family forever. I hope by you taking the time to read this column, it might change and extend your life, and maybe that of someone else you care about, as well.

Editor's Note: David Gazda (dgazda@angus.org) is a regional manager for the American Angus Association, serving cattlemen in the states of Florida, Georgia, and North and South Carolina.

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