

I AM ANGUS

A Better Tomorrow

South Dakota cattiewoman is driven by her Lakota heritage on the family's multi-generation ranch.

Story & photos by **Morgan Marley**, communications intern

From the top of Scatter Butte in north central South Dakota, a person can see for miles. There are rolling hills of unforgiving landscape with rivers and ravines where animals and people can seek shelter from the piercing wind and harsh climate.

In the days of earlier generations, this is where one boy would ride every morning to find his family's herd of cattle and horses. Today, it is where his family goes to remember their grandpa and everything he stood for and raised them to be.

Kelsey Ducheneaux, 24, is a fourth-

generation rancher on her family's cow-calf operation called the DX Ranch.

When she feels lonesome for her Poppy, she says all she has to do is ride across the prairie and she feels a connection with him.

Their home is located on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation. Here, she says, everyone is your neighbor.

At her house, everyone is greeted with an open door and offered fresh coffee, no matter what time of the day you stop by. The same is true of her father, Zach Ducheneaux, who lives just up the road. In fact, most of her

family lives "just up the road." There are only a few homes in sight for miles, and those neighbors have grown as close as family over the years.

"My mom and grandmas taught me when you cook, you have to cook for a whole tribe because you never know who's going to show up that day, and it really is what makes living here great," Kelsey says.

By working so closely with the land on an everyday basis, Kelsey says she feels a connection with her ancestors when she is

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▶ Watch the video at <https://vimeo.com/238476641>

out riding horses through the pastures.

"I've learned over the years this land has a really cool story to tell us," Kelsey says. "Right now, we are able to tell that story with beef."

Lakota heritage

On slow days at the ranch, Kelsey can be found sitting at her dining table with her loom, beading elaborate designs for belts, tack and purse straps. Her fingers glide gracefully between her bowl of beads and the strings on the loom, piecing her work together row by row. While graph paper and computer software make drafting a pattern fairly easy, what Kelsey enjoys most is diving right in and seeing where the beads take her.

Her passion for beading derives from the elaborate beadwork on traditional Lakota clothing. Kelsey and her family are guided by their Lakota heritage. It is what defines the Ducheneaux family and how they live their lives.

"Our Lakota culture teaches us that everything is connected, from the inanimate objects like the rocks and the soil to the animals we get to raise," Kelsey says.

The Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in north central South Dakota encompasses approximately 3 million acres, making it one of the largest reservations in the United States. It is home to thousands of tribe members, but also many others. The DX Ranch is home to as many as 14 people at different points throughout the year, but Kelsey feels at home anytime and anywhere when she's on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation.

"That sense of community still exists among my tribe," Kelsey says. "We were raised

to care for everyone like family."

Like the generations before her, Kelsey upholds a tradition of caring for the community. Her personal commitment to the animals and people is evident as she describes the ranch and wide-open landscape.

"When I'm out here on this land, I feel a connection closer than just with the animals and the people that exist here now," she says. "I feel a connection with the traditional sustainability that the Lakota people used to embody in their lifestyle."

Even in the middle of nowhere, they always expect unexpected company.

"We might have someone drive up while we are working," Zach says. "We'll stop, have a cup of coffee, visit, play that discussion out, and we won't try to hurry them out of here so we can get back to whatever we were doing."

A testimony to this communal mind-set would be their Ducheneaux ancestors. The Ducheneaux name originates from Poitiers, France, from which Napoleon Ducheneaux emigrated to be a fur trapper. Because of the Lakota's communal approach to life, Napoleon became connected with the Lakota and married a Lakota Sioux woman.

"One of the most prominent lessons that stands out from my grandfather is family first, and I've learned family isn't just those who we're related to," Kelsey says. "It's everybody."

About the ranch

When Kelsey saddles her horse preparing to head across the prairie to gather cattle, it is second-nature. Her hands move in a calm

rhythm as she tightens the cinch and buckles the bridle on her sorrel gelding, Polmol. Once she mounts and settles into the saddle, she and her horse move as one. The trust that has been built between the two is evident.

The DX Ranch operates on approximately 7,500 acres and stocks about 280 head of commercial cows.

Like many cattle producers, the Ducheneaux's goal is ultimately to produce one of the highest-quality cuts of beef, but also make it affordable and accessible to the local community.

As the years have passed and the science and knowledge behind ranching has advanced, the Ducheneauxs have learned the kind of cattle that thrive in the harsh South Dakota climate. Angus seems to be the common denominator.

"We want a moderate- to small-frame cow that can produce a calf that's half of her weight and can have that calf on her own without any assistance from us," Zach says. "We don't need to be pushing a lot of mineral and supplements year-round. The Angus breed has been the best that we've found for that."

The land "West River," meaning land west of the Missouri River, in South Dakota poses challenges for growing crops, but the cattle have learned to adapt and thrive. At the DX Ranch, Kelsey says they utilize their resources as long as possible throughout the



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year by keeping their cattle grazing grass as long as they can. Sometimes that is until October, but other times that can be until December.

"It just depends on what Mother Nature has in store for us," she says. "We do our best to fit in along beside her."

Like many ranching businesses, there's a strong family dynamic at the DX Ranch. Everybody has a role and every role is important. Kelsey's dad, uncles, cousins and extended family all take part in managing the operation, whether that is caring for the herd, harvesting hay or feeding the crew.

Because of this, raising docile cattle is a top priority.

"The most rewarding thing is knowing that my cows like to be around me," Kelsey says. "Knowing my interaction with them isn't a stressful event is something that I think a producer should correlate with how they interact with their cattle."

For this reason, they focus their cattle handling techniques around low-stress livestock handling practices.

Recently, Kelsey completed an internship with renowned animal handling expert Curt Pate. She helped present a stockmanship workshop titled "RancHer" along with Curt's wife, Tammy, at the 2017 Cattle Industry Convention. Kelsey says the cattle know what to do better than we know how to tell them to do it.

At their core, all the decisions they make and their management style relate back to

their Lakota heritage and back to the early days when bison roamed the land and sustained the soil.

"Sometimes the similarities of managing a cattle herd and the roaming bison herds are lost," Kelsey says, "but we really try to capture that in how we manage our pastures and how we let the cattle graze."

Relating it back to the time when Indians roamed the West and followed buffalo across the prairie is how the DX Ranch manages its forages. They keep the cows in a herd as much as possible, Kelsey says, to impact the ecosystem in the way it was designed to be impacted.

In addition to being an active partner in the ranching operations, she also serves as the youth programs coordinator with the Intertribal Agriculture Council. Her position allows her to share support to the next generation of leaders in Indian agriculture across more than 567 tribal nations.

"I feel like I am making an impact when I work with this network of youth," Kelsey says.

She says if she's doing her job right, she's training a replacement for her position in case the cattle herd calls her home for good.

"I love ranching," Kelsey says. "That's what I want to do."

Since Kelsey and her brother were young kids, Kelsey's dad says he felt inclined to include them in the daily operations at the ranch. As his kids get older, their responsibilities continue to grow.

"For Kelsey to be stepping up and solidifying her role as a part of the next

generation to operate this place is the fulfillment of a lifelong goal," Zach says.

Food insecurity

When Kelsey stands over her stove browning hamburger meat for chili and tossing in spices and other ingredients, she looks content.

When asked if she likes to cook, she hesitates before answering, "I like to feed people."

This way of thinking derives from the hunger she has seen in the people closest to her.

The Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation, along with virtually *all* of Indian country, is designated as a major food desert because many residents have minimal access to fresh, healthy and affordable food.

Limited access to fresh food on the reservation has resulted in growing symptoms of poverty. Compared to the rest of the U.S. population, Native Americans are twice as likely to experience nutrition-related health problems. Because of this and poor diets, there are higher rates of diabetes, heart disease and childhood obesity within the population.

"In my backyard, less than 30 miles away, there are kids facing hunger," Kelsey says. "To me, as a cattle producer, I need to make sure that I can make the food system secure enough so that I can one day get food on the plate of those who really need it."

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The Ducheneaux family recognizes the resources they have within their ranch. Yet all ranchers are feeding people, just maybe not as directly.

At the DX Ranch, they believe they have a responsibility to share their bounty, whether that be beef or their quality of life, to directly impact the Indian community in a positive light, Kelsey says.

“Similar to a lot of cultures, food is what really brings us together,” she says. “Traditionally, for Native Americans, that may have been going out and foraging. But for us now, we get to bring people together with our beef.”

With a lack of value-added agriculture on the reservation, Kelsey and her family have a dream of helping others gain access to wholesome beef. While Kelsey pursued her master’s degree in agriculture with an emphasis in integrated resource management, she developed a program called DX Beef. Designed to be a subscription to ground beef, Kelsey hopes to one day capture the “Toms Shoes” model, where buying a pound of beef puts another pound on the plate of someone in need. In May 2017, they launched the program with their first subscription.

Where she lives, they have to haul cattle more than an hour off the reservation to have USDA-approved processing. The goal is to take cull cows that would normally just go to the sale barn and harvest them for

ground beef through DX Beef. Although it is in its beginning stages, Kelsey hopes to grow DX Beef so that a USDA-approved processing facility will be available on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation. She also says she hopes to become a provider for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP) to help those on government assistance.

A better tomorrow

The lack of professional growth opportunities available to Lakota youth inspired the Ducheneauxs to use their resources on the ranch to impact their local communities.

In 2013, they began their work with their nonprofit, Project H3LP!. Now, they have partnered with the Tiospaye Topa School to bring youth to the ranch in an after-school and summer school program.

Completely funded thus far through the generous contributions of the DX Ranch’s family and friends, the nonprofit is geared toward exposing local youth to effective horsemanship techniques and how they can relate it back to situations in their everyday lives. Working with the horses encourages youth to be aware of the situations they are in and to read into the body language of those around them.

“We try to develop our Project H3LP! lessons to mirror situations that happen in

everyday life,” Kelsey says. “We center around the thought of horsemanship and how you can structure your life to be low stress, how to effectively manage your life and really just improve your quality of life.”

By participating in the program, youth learn to direct their energy to complete various tasks. Through the process, they build self-confidence, and develop patience, awareness and empathy.

Since Project H3LP!’s startup, it has grown to include other partnerships, including the local Cheyenne River Youth Horsemanship Program and Simply Smiles, a nonprofit based in Connecticut, working with communities on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation. Now, Project H3LP! is reaching more than 100 youth per year.

Their programming continues to grow, now offering internship positions for students in both high school and college.

“These opportunities show our youth that the wide-open spaces out here aren’t just the middle of nowhere,” she says. “There’s grass growing here, and it can be utilized to raise some of the best beef in the country. I really hope that we can help foster that and inspire young individuals to go out and pursue a career in agriculture.”



Editor’s Note: *The American Angus Association’s I Am Angus documentary television show features ranch stories and Angus heritage. The next episode will air Dec. 25, 2017, on RFD-TV.*

