

Making a Difference



If you think a junior high student doesn't have the qualities needed to make a major contribution to her community, then you haven't met Mackenzie Forman.

Story by **Ed Haag**; photos by **Rod Wesselman**

While those organizing the annual March 1 bull sale at Trinity Farms in Ellensburg, Wash., believed it would be a financial success, no one could have predicted that the efforts of a compassionate 14-year-old would transform the sale into a life-affirming experience for all who attended.

"No question about it. What happened that day was very special," says Butch Booker, auctioneer at the sale. "We have all had loved ones affected by cancer and done what we could, but to have a young girl donate her own personal heifer to that cause is extraordinary."

Booker's sentiments were shared by others who were present at the event.

"It wasn't just your average production sale," says Rod Wesselman, regional manager for the American Angus Association.

"Mackenzie's commitment to form a team for the American Cancer Society's Kittitas County Relay for Life in order to help others made it a lot more."

Both men recall that from the moment when Mike Forman, Mackenzie's grandfather and founder of Trinity Farms, announced that the first animal to be auctioned would be his granddaughter's heifer and that all the proceeds would go to fighting cancer, the tenor of the event changed.

"You could feel the emotion in the sale barn and sense that here were people from several states who had come to buy bulls but were now connected by a single wish to contribute to a worthy cause," says Booker, adding that it became obvious from the response that followed.

Mackenzie's mother, Debbie, who had been watching the event unfold, also knew something special had occurred when her father-in-law addressed the crowd.

"He told them how Mackenzie wanted to do more and how she stepped up and started her own Relay for Life team," she says. "Then he talked about the storyboards that Mackenzie had put around the sale barn and in the pen with her heifer to tell everyone what she was doing."

For Debbie the deal was sealed when Mike announced that all the proceeds from the sale of her daughter's heifer would go directly to Mackenzie's Relay for Life Team, Friends for a Cure. "When we saw one paddle after another go up, we knew people were on fire," she recalls. "As we saw the bidding get higher and higher, Robb and I just watched the smile on our daughter's face get bigger and bigger."

The final hammer went down at \$2,300, more than double what Debbie and other family members expected, but the auction was far from over.

Debbie admits that after Bob Matthieson from Mansfield, Wash., bought the heifer,

everyone involved in the auction expected to move on to the regular sale, but someone forgot to tell the buyers. An announcement that an attendee from California had donated \$200 was quickly followed by a Euphrata, Wash., family pledging \$500 to Mackenzie's team.

Before Mackenzie's animal had been led out of the salering, Booker and his auction associates were already being inundated by a flood of spontaneous donation pledges. These would lead, within a week, to accruing a sum that was twice what was received for the heifer.

"Mackenzie's act of generosity touched virtually everyone in that sale barn," Wesselman recalls. "And they responded in kind."

Girl with a plan

For Mackenzie Forman's family and friends, her generous act began with an idea two years before the auction and ended in June of that year with the American Cancer Society's Kittitas County Relay for Life. For Mackenzie herself, it began with the loss of her beloved great-grandmother to cancer and a cancer diagnosis and treatment for an aunt.

"I have had close family members affected by cancer," she says. "In seeing the disease firsthand, I always wanted to help those who were fighting it."

In 2007, Mackenzie broached the idea to her family about participating in the Kittitas County Relay for Life. She had walked in a previous relay with her older sister's 4-H group, but this time she had decided on something much more ambitious.

"My goal was to get my family and friends together and start our own team," she says. "This seemed like the perfect opportunity to help those with cancer."

Debbie wasn't surprised by her daughter's request.

"When Mackenzie sets her mind to do something, she does it, and usually it is in a big way," she says. "That is just the kind of kid she is."

After attending a fund drive kick-off party, Mackenzie officially committed herself to forming a youth team to participate in the 2008 Relay for Life. While the majority of her team were peers from school and her ballet class, adult family members, including her father, mother and grandmother, were also recruited. Another adult to be invited to join the team was Rachael Brunson, a family friend and Mackenzie's fifth-grade teacher.

Like Mackenzie's mother, Brunson, too, was not surprised that her former student had the confidence, drive and leadership qualities to form her own relay team.

"Anything Mackenzie approaches she always gives 100%," Brunson says. "She is



► **Above:** Mackenzie's mother, Debbie, wasn't surprised by her daughter's request for her family and friends to start their own team for the Kittitas County Relay for Life.



► **Left:** Mackenzie's team raised \$11,690 to contribute to finding a cure for cancer.

► **Below:** "Anything Mackenzie approaches she always gives 100%," says Rachael Brunson, a family friend and Mackenzie's fifth-grade teacher.

incredibly mature for her age. Most kids wouldn't even dream of accomplishing a third of what Mackenzie accomplishes."

A tradition of achievement

Brunson goes on to point out that Mackenzie's exemplary behavior is not an exception in the Forman family. Having taught Mackenzie's three other siblings, Brunson sees many of the same special qualities in all the Forman children.

"They all have very different gifts, but they all are, in their own right, amazing kids," she says, adding that much of that can be attributed to their home environment. "I am into my 17th year of teaching, and in all that time I have never seen parents or



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grandparents that are more involved or more visible in the school.”

For Brunson, what makes Mackenzie’s parents and grandparents even more remarkable is what they have managed to achieve both in raising their families and building a highly successful cattle operation.

“This is a large ranch. Everyone in the family has to work, and yet they always seem to find the time to be involved in their community and helping others,” she says.

Butch Booker concurs with Brunson’s assessment.

“The Formans have built a top-notch seedstock operation,” Booker says, adding that their business is built on patience, hard work and fairness to their customers. “They always do what is right. There is no question they are quality folks.”

It is an ethic that has served the Forman family well for three generations. Mike and Paulette Forman, tired of a life of commuting to work on the west side of the state, longed for a cattle ranch on the other side of the Cascade Mountains.

“When our boys were 2 and 4, we were afforded the opportunity to make the giant move,” says Paulette in her account of the birth of Trinity Farms. “Within a year we owned our own business and purchased a home.”

Beginning with sheep, by the time Mike and Paulette’s sons were adults the focus of the family business had shifted to commercial cattle then, most recently, to purebred registered Angus, purebred Simmentals and the ranch’s own F₁ hybrid “Meatmaker” cross (an Angus-Simmental hybrid).

Since the early 1990s, Debbie and Robb have worked alongside Mike and Paulette in the family commercial and seedstock cattle business. In addition to managing more than 300 cow-calf pairs comprised of two registered herds, the family operation farms 900 acres of ground, producing timothy hay for export into the Asian Pacific Rim.

Mackenzie is the first to recognize that the skills her parents and grandparents acquired in operating a diverse and complex cattle operation have provided her with a unique resource to draw upon.

“They have taught me so much about organizing my time and how to deal with different people so they are motivated and working at their best,” she says, adding that what her parents and grandparents passed on to her has proved invaluable in her efforts to raise money for her team.

Something else Mackenzie has learned from her parents and grandparents is that a person should never rest on his or her laurels. The fact that by the second week in March she and her team had exceeded their \$1,500 fundraising goal by \$6,300 did not deter her planning additional fundraising events before the final Relay for Life at the end of June. During the next four months, team members sold raffle tickets. When spring finally arrived, a yard sale helped raise even more money.

For Mackenzie, one of the biggest challenges as team captain was transportation.

“Because most of my team members were too young to drive, it was difficult to get

everyone together,” she says. “I was always trying to find rides for people.”

On June 27 and 28, Mackenzie’s team, Friends for a Cure, proudly participated in Relay for Life’s two-day fundraising event at the local high school track. Thirty teams were in attendance, with more than 400 participants registered.

“The goal was to walk in relays for 24 hours straight,” Debbie says, adding that people pledged donations in the memory of those lost to cancer or in support of those surviving the disease.

Three months later Mackenzie and her mother attended a regional Cancer Fundraising Conference in Reno, Nev., where Mackenzie was honored for her work.

“Mackenzie’s team total was \$11,690, of which she turned in \$10,000 personally,” Debbie says. “While in Reno she got to attend several Team Captain classes as well as getting to present her story at the top fundraiser class.”

To Mackenzie the trip was more about business and the future than about being recognized for her fundraising achievements.

“At the conference, I got to sit in on some classes that explained exactly where the money went for Relays for Life and also they gave us tips and great ideas for fundraising,” she says. “I learned so much and got so many new ideas for next year.”

