



# Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

## Bloom!

*The miles fell away on the journey to visit the property of a young cattleman not far from the bluffs of the Missouri River. The day began with a stint on the interstate where speed is valued and travelers barely recognize much of the landscape beyond the white lines and road signs. Even the businesses located at the exits are focused on transactional convenience, speed and efficiency.*

### Making the best

A turn onto a long stretch of state highway drew me closer to the productivity of American agriculture and the character of rural life as rows of corn and soybeans flashed by interspersed with homesteads, hayfields and pastures grazed by cattle. A turn onto a graveled county road and some 3 miles later, at the bottom of a gentle slope a white rock road beckoned along a path bordered by freshly mown shoulders to a mature set of farm and livestock facilities that exuded husbandry and stewardship. Nothing grandiose, but in its fundamental and functional state it was a nearly perfect scene.

Travis Walters, a young Angus breeder met me at the door to his reception area in the shop — a converted office redone with old barn wood, a recycled corrugated tin ceiling and a serving bar along one side. The flat-screen television on one wall was tuned to an agricultural channel, and several tables surrounded by chairs finished off the furnishings. Images of cattle and farming adorned the remaining walls.

Easy conversation followed as we discussed cattle, opportunities and the power of hard work, family and community as if we had been old friends. The pride in his wife and children was evident; his appreciation for neighbors, friends and family who had been part of the journey was communicated in stories and with a depth of respect that was quietly inspiring.

Having made the transition from commercial cattleman to the seedstock business some three years earlier, his passion for the cattle business was evident in every aspect of his life. Perhaps just an ordinary afternoon, but it is one that will be frozen in time when I think about what it means



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to aspire to a vision and underpinning it with intent, hard work and attention to the important details.

### Other example

On the drive home, my thoughts were dominated by the lesson I had just received in pride of ownership and excellence in action. As I reflected on the day, memories of a trip some three weeks earlier through New Mexico replayed my journey through a small town between Carrizozo and Ruidoso early one morning. In the midst of what appeared to be a slowly eroding community, one brightly painted and attractive storefront beckoned as a symbol of vibrant hope to all who would listen.

The same scene had played out in inner-city Denver, where in the midst of neglect, clusters of houses and even entire blocks were adorned by beautiful lawns, flower gardens and homes that shone with the vision that pride of ownership makes a difference.

In each case — the new seedstock enterprise, the small business and the neighborhood — extravagance had not been the difference maker. Instead, it had been the power of the human spirit, sweat equity invested with intent and driven by a hopeful

vision, plus the gritty refusal to accept being common.

Pride of ownership is not the purview of the elite, nor generational group, regional locale or any other conventional demographic; it grows in places both expected and unexpected and is nurtured by self-reliance, a passionate rejection of the status quo, and a sense of action that characterizes the very best of free enterprise.

As the miles rolled by and the heat of the day retreated, Susan Werner's ballad echoed the lessons of the day, "Listen to me kid, there's something to be said for blooming where you are planted!"

The lyrics, sung softly and from the center of experience in rural places were a benediction, offering a challenge to cast off the burden of cynicism, circumstance and blame in favor of a life focused on excellence. Transformation of

landscapes, communities, businesses, families and people is within our reach. In the midst of life's noisy discord, in the chaos of our times and the confused state of our culture, principles that underpin pride of ownership offer each of us, regardless of life station, the opportunity to have an impact, to leave a legacy, to build something of value. The path to practicing those principles is begun with a single step, followed by another and yet another. Action trumps all other hands.

The road had been worth traveling as I had rediscovered the American dream in the most unexpected of places — an impoverished urban neighborhood, a community perched on the edge of the desert, and the end of a gravel road in Nebraska. Susan Werner's lyrics had rung true. There is something to be said for blooming where you are planted!

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**Editor's Note:** Tom Field is a rancher from Parlin, Colo., and the director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.