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Women Leading the Way

Angus women find their footing as leaders on operations.

by **Bridget Beran**, editorial intern

For many years, agriculture has been a field dominated by men. These days, 30% of farmers across the United States are women, and in the Angus business these women are taking the responsibility and leadership seriously.

“It’s evolved that more and more women are coming back to the farm in a management position,” explains Jeanne Bernick, K•Coe Isom consultant. “It used to take a lot of muscle to run a farm, and now it’s more about brains.”

Bernick, who organized Executive Women in Ag conferences while she was with *Top Producer* magazine, says that with the average age of farmers being 58 and succession becoming evident, more farmers are looking to their daughters, as well as to their sons, to step into leadership and management positions.

“The daughter may have gone to business school and now that is just as valuable as a kid who stayed home to work in the fields or with the livestock. Technology has really evened the playing field because there’s so

much need for financial and business skills on the farm,” Bernick says.

Bringing women together

After Bernick was approached by women at different agriculture conferences that were dominated by men, she saw a need for a different kind of conference. While it didn’t bother Bernick to be one of the only women in the room, women approached her seeking a conference centered on women in agriculture.

“It became apparent to us that women often were attending these conferences with their husbands, fathers, brothers or fathers-in-law. That sometimes put them in an uncomfortable position for them to

raise their hands and ask questions,” Bernick explains. “They may want to ask financial questions concerning whoever they were in partnership with and were getting shut down by someone else on the farm.”

At the time, there was nothing available to help with this problem, and there wasn’t a good way for women to develop a community of other women in executive agricultural roles. So Bernick and *Top Producer* started the Executive Women in Ag conferences, which are hosted in Chicago each December.

“It’s often hard for women in these roles to find peers who are like them in rural areas,” Bernick says. “The number of women running multimillion dollar



PHOTO COURTESY OF JEANNE BERNICK

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businesses are few and far between, and without a strong community, it can be really lonely.”

Bernick also references the challenge women face in juggling a lot of tasks on the farm, from raising cattle, crops and kids to staying up to date on the latest technologies and software. Her work at K•Coe Isom, a national accounting and farm-management firm, has given her the opportunity to reach out to producers — men and women alike — and help provide information to them, wherever they are. From the latest in accounting and estate planning to sustainability service, K•Coe Isom seeks to help producers in all aspects of the business side of farming.

“So many women who are returning to the ranch fall into the role of recordkeeper, office manager and human resources, so we want to make sure we’re reaching their needs,” Bernick says. “One-third of our partners are women. We try to pair women together and do webinars and one-on-one business mentoring. We do a lot to support women in agriculture and to help them develop their leadership skills to be leaders in their operation.”

While women can be faced with some different challenges, there are several women in the Angus business taking on leadership roles.

Strength in sisterhood

In Richfield, N.C., the Harward sisters are running the show when it comes to their registered-Angus herd. Starting in 2005, the Harward girls began showing cattle for a fellow Angus breeder in North Carolina. By 2010 they had purchased their own show heifers, starting the core sector of their Angus herd, which now includes about 50 registered-Angus cows.

Though oldest sister Lorie isn’t as involved due to their involvement beginning after she was already in college, the five younger Harward sisters have been building their registered herd together since the beginning.

“We all have our roles. Mattie and Marcie are home full-time, and they are in charge of the day-to-day operations and feeding the show cattle,” Brooke Harward says of the 14-year-old twins. “When Catherine and I come home, we’re asking them what we’re feeding. They’re the ones going out before and after school, getting the breeding and calving done.”

Brooke, 23, is back on the ranch full-time now and is working hands-on with the bigger portion of the family operation. With around 700 commercial cows, the family also manages three livestock markets and puts on



► After growing up on an Angus ranch, Courtney Jentz-Zehr became the herd manager at Henning Farms, Janesville, Wis., in 2011. Started in 1991 by Mike and Lora Henning, Henning Farms focuses on cash crops, trucking and Angus cattle. Courtney now manages the cattle operation of 200 Angus cows and a feedlot of 75 steers.

a video auction once a month. In the family operation, Brooke works in the office for the stockyard and video auction, as well as doing the marketing and sale books. In Harward Sisters, she takes on a leadership role.

“I love the genetics side of the breed, so I do the research to evaluate [to] what bulls we’re going to breed, and I manage the advertising decisions,” Brooke explains.

Catherine, 21, puts her time toward the commercial herd and working with cattle, as well as doing all of the clipping on their show cattle when she’s home from college.

While LeAnn, 18, is phasing out of the operations as she prepares to start college, she is still involved and helps to make sure things get done when needed.

For these sisters, Brooke says being a young woman in agriculture has been interesting.

“The people who have known us growing up take us seriously, but the people we don’t know don’t always take us seriously when we start talking cattle,” Brooke explains. “You just have to get over the

fact that it’s going to take a little while longer for people to realize you do know what you’re talking about.”

On the registered side of the business, Brooke says they had a lot of support, and it has not been as difficult of a transition.

However, during her time working in a salebarn, she says she and her sisters are often underestimated.

“One of the funniest things is when people will want to know about the cattle sale or certain animals and they immediately ask for our dad. Then once they tell me what they want to know, I can answer them,” Brooke says. “One of the best things a girl can do is continually prove you know exactly what you’re talking about.”

Holding her own

For Courtney Jentz-Zehr, being a part of the Angus business is second nature. After

growing up on an Angus ranch, she became the herd manager at Henning Farms, Janesville, Wis., in 2011. Started in 1991 by Mike and Lora Henning, Henning Farms focuses on cash crops, trucking and Angus cattle. Courtney now manages the cattle operation of 200 Angus cows and a feedlot of 75 steers.

“[The] Hennings had actually bought some show cattle from my family in our production sale, and we kept in close touch. After I graduated

from college, I was working at home on our cattle and looking for a job, and they were looking for someone to help with show cattle,” Courtney explains. “The kids had been showing on a state level and were wanting to get more involved and go to more

“Juggling ranch life and my kids’ lives can be one of the most challenging things I’ve encountered, but there’s no better way to raise your kids. I feel blessed every day to be able to do it.”
— Sarah McKenzie

► After 18 years away from the family ranch, Sarah McKenzie was ready to be home when she returned to McKenzie Land and Livestock, Fort Stockton, Texas, five years ago. The fourth-generation breeder says her family homesteaded in West Texas in the late 1800s. The long family line's future focuses on Sarah and her children, Henry, 11, Sawyer, 9, and Brenna, 6, as well as her sister and brother-in-law, Lydia and Anthony May.



Sarah McKenzie was ready to be home when she returned to McKenzie Land and Livestock, Fort Stockton, Texas, five years ago. The

country, convincing her family that the added \$100-plus per head was worth the investment was a challenge, but they've found it to be worth it. Sarah has also gotten McKenzie Land and Livestock on the Internet — with the help of a web designer — and they've started to expand into some higher levels of marketing.

Sarah says coming from an established family ranch helped ease the transition for her as a woman in agriculture, along with the nontraditional mind-set of people in West Texas.

"In my area, I don't think it was any more difficult to make that change than it would have been for a man with a father with a big personality," Sarah says. "I notice more difference when I leave my area. Sometimes people won't think you know your stuff until you start talking shop."

She notes that many of the ranchers in their area are starting to have daughters who are beginning careers in the field of agriculture, which has opened a lot of eyes to women in agriculture.

"Thanks to the women in my mother's generation, it's become so much easier," Sarah says. "I love agriculture, and it's all I've ever wanted to do. I love the ability to be here with my three kids and to be able to teach them real skills for their life. Juggling ranch life and my kids' lives can be one of the most challenging things I've encountered, but there's no better way to raise your kids. I feel blessed every day to be able to do it."

Being a woman in agriculture can certainly present challenges, but as Brooke, Courtney and Sarah have proven, it's nothing they can't overcome with hard work and determination.

"For people looking to go back as young women in the cattle industry, it's still a great opportunity," Brooke says. "Sometimes it may take you a little longer to gain that reputation, but it's a really gratifying experience to know that you're a part of that and that you might be able to help other young women get started."

shows. They needed someone who knew that side of the industry better."

Courtney was the right fit for the operation, and now the Hennings children are showing all over the country. Breeding and selecting for show cattle have become one of the operation's priorities.

"I am very fortunate the Hennings gave me a chance to run their cow herd, make breeding decisions and pick out their show cattle to utilize as breeding stock," Courtney says.

Since her start at the operation, Courtney does all of the artificial insemination (AI) and synchronization work, and they're now utilizing more embryo transfer (ET) and *in vitro* fertilization (IVF). Moving to calving throughout the year, they've been able to spread the ages of show calves more efficiently, which has allowed them to have a fall and spring sale.

"I really enjoyed showing as a junior, and these kids work really hard on it," Courtney says. "They've become very dedicated, so it was very easy for them to become involved on a national level."

As far as being a woman in the agriculture world, Courtney says, "I grew up in a household with all men and was always expected to keep up with my older brothers growing up. I have always had respect for my male counterparts and have experienced the same in return at Henning Farms and in the Angus business. The opportunities are endless for women in the agriculture world, and there are so many strong women paving the way for us."

Foundation of family

After 18 years away from the family ranch,

fourth-generation breeder says her family homesteaded in West Texas in the late 1800s. The long family line's future focuses on Sarah and her children, Henry, 11, Sawyer, 9, and Brenna, 6, as well as her sister and brother-in-law, Lydia and Anthony May.

Sarah's parents, Houston and Laura McKenzie, are still involved on the registered-Angus ranch and small farm, and the whole family works together, but when it comes to cattle operations, Sarah runs the show.

"It's my job to worry about water and feeding and what cows are in which pastures," Sarah explains. "When we start thinking about AIing, I'm in charge of deciding what bulls we're going to pursue and consider any new technology that we can implement in our program."

Though she'd been keeping the records for five years before she returned to the ranch, it was after her return that they started making big technological advances. Her dad, who was managing their cattle, just didn't have the time to focus on adding technology for genetic selection, she explains. His time and attention was consumed with ensuring they had enough bulls for the sale and general oversight of the business, which includes the ranch in New Mexico, which is now managed by Sarah's uncle and his family.

"Once I came back and got to know more about the Association, I decided I wanted to take our production to the next level," Sarah says. "We started ultrasounding all of our cattle, and that was a game changer. We've also implemented the 50K [DNA-profiling], which has been a huge help for us, and I really pushed for that."

Working with what she calls marginal

