

Success Starts at Home

Every year, thousands of students spend spring break exhibiting their livestock at the Oklahoma Youth Expo in hopes of leaving with a grand champion trophy. However, only four leave the champion drive with the title, and only one family has brought home the travelling trophy three different times.

The Burchfields come from a small town in western Oklahoma with a population of approximately 2,500. They have raised and showed sheep for 18 years in Fairview, Okla. During that time, they accomplished a goal no one has been able to reach for 99 years: All three children have won a grand champion title at OYE.

“It is a huge accomplishment for the children and the whole family,” said Kent Boggs, Oklahoma Youth Expo sheep superintendent. “It showed they not only worked hard in the show-ring, but also they put in the necessary time at home.”

The Burchfields’ sheep career started with Dusty, the oldest child, when he was 9 years old. After Dusty’s first of three reserve grand champions at OYE in 1993, Rocky Burchfield, his father, said he made it a personal goal to have all three children exhibit a grand lamb at OYE. Rocky and his wife, Jennifer, Dusty, Heath, and Tara worked as a family to reach this goal, Jennifer said.

“Success started at home,” Rocky said.

The children would feed their sheep before school. Then, after school and sports practice, they would work with their animals at the barn for about two hours each day, Dusty said. Unlike normal kids their age, Dusty, Heath and Tara would wake up early on Saturday mornings to work with their animals for almost five hours, Dusty said.

“It wasn’t because they wanted to,” Jennifer said, “but because of the commitment it took to be at the top of their game.”

For approximately two years, all three children showed together, Jennifer said. She said it was one of the most challenging times of their showing career.

“Trying to balance our lives with both parents working full time and running the kids around to get them where they needed to be could be very stressful,” Jennifer said.

Dusty, Heath and Tara were involved in multiple school clubs and held class offices. Each one played sports and was active in church. They had to manage their time so sheep would get worked every day to prepare for the shows, Heath said.

“It was tough,” Heath said. “It was a very strict way of doing things so things would get done.”

Jennifer said even with all of them going different ways most of the time, showing remained a team effort.

“There was a spirit of everybody helping everybody,” Dusty said.

Dusty said he would go home from college for a weekend to help Heath and Tara with a problem with showing a lamb. Rocky would watch and critique their efforts at the barn and coach from the sidelines of the show arena, Tara said.

“Dad was there to tell us what we did wrong, celebrate with us when we won, and put his hand on our shoulder when we put the lamb on the truck,” Tara said.

She said her mom was the constant supporter who never missed a show. Jennifer put her kids first to make sure she was there to root them on, Tara said.

Because of the significant age gap between Dusty and Tara, the youngest sibling, usually only one or two showed at a time.

Working toward this goal as a family contributed greatly to their success, but even more so, working toward goals with their FFA chapter and community made their success possible.

“We actually had a leg up on everyone because we had so much help and support,” Heath said.

Jennifer said Fairview FFA showed as a family. They always supported and helped one another, she said.

“Fairview is a unique place,” Dusty said. “People encourage people to do what they are good at.

“In school, there was no ‘if you are good at one thing you can’t do another,’” he said. “They encourage you to do it all.”

Rocky said Fairview FFA had many great showmen. The chapter worked together to find the best way to show a lamb, said Cody Ott, family friend and former Fairview FFA member.

Rocky said Dusty, Heath and Tara grew up watching other showmen to learn how to show. Their responsibility at shows was to sit in the stands for a couple of classes to watch and learn from these showmen, he said.

“I didn’t have any formal teaching,” Dusty said, “but I remember watching from the stands at every single show. Then, I would go home and try what they did.”

Heath and Tara said they learned by watching the late Kami Ott, Robin Ott and Dusty. Dusty said they also learned a great amount of how to show from their dad.

“A lot of people would pay to have the knowledge my dad has,” Dusty Burchfield said. “Knowing how to feed and exercise a lamb right to prepare one for show day isn’t easy.”

Dusty said his initial goal was not for the grand champion trophy but to win senior showmanship at the Oklahoma Youth Expo. He tried every year for that title, but never achieved it, he said.

“I always wanted to win grand,” Dusty said, “but my pride was in my ability to get the lamb shown and presented.”

However, he did reach the grand drive in 1999. When the judge walked over to shake his hand for Grand Champion Market Wether, Dusty felt his career was wrapped up, he said.

Tara said this paved the way for her and Heath.

Showing challenged Heath with time management and commitment in a whole new way, he said.

“I would have done a terrible job with it had my dad not ridden me or gotten after me all the time,” Heath said, “because I procrastinated with the best of them.”

He said he never questioned if he could reach his goal of winning grand champion at OYE.

“I never thought about not achieving it,” Heath said. “I knew as long as I was still showing that my goal was attainable.”

In 2003, Heath found himself in the grand drive at the Oklahoma Youth Expo. He said he was excited when the judge walked over to shake his hand.

Now, only one Burchfield was left.

Tara said it was a different road to success for her because less challenges arose since her brothers had already been there. She had more help and more advice, she said.

“My brothers were always quick to help in any way I needed it,” Tara said. “Whether it was at home trying to figure out a trick to show a lamb or at a show needing someone to pick up a pair of clippers to help shear, they were there.”

In 2006, Tara walked into OYE without a clue she would complete the Burchfield dream, she said.

However, there she stood — in the grand champion drive on the very last day of the Oklahoma Youth Expo, she said.

“I remember holding my lamb in the ring as I watched the judge,” Tara said. “I stayed in that position for so long my legs were cramping up.”

The judge kept moving back and forth between her lamb and another, Tara said. Finally, the judge walked over to her and shook her hand, she said.

“I almost let go of my lamb,” Tara said. “Then, I looked over and saw my dad hugging my two brothers. They were so excited for me. It was one of the best moments.”

Tara was the third Burchfield to win OYE. The Burchfields became the first family to ever have all three children exhibit a grand champion.

“We’re always proud of our kids,” Jennifer said, “but watching their daily effort and commitment end up in something as fantastic as a grand lamb is pure joy.”

The goal may have been achieved, but the Burchfields continue to give back to the Oklahoma Youth Expo and showmen following in their footsteps.

An important lesson Dusty, Heath and Tara learned from showing is it is not all about them, Jennifer said.

Rocky and Jennifer Burchfield continue to give their time and expertise to younger showmen each year. Their kids have helped numerous exhibitors grow and strengthen their showmanship skills, said Hershel Williams, family friend and former agricultural education instructor.

“Financially, I have never taken a dime for time and support,” Rocky Burchfield said. “What I treasure most is the continuous involvement with those kids and their families.”

Williams said this family not only has achieved what others only dream about, but also they hold the title humbly.

“Life is about sharing your talents and time with other people,” Jennifer Burchfield said.

“That is why God gives them to us.”

SIDE BAR: Next year, the Oklahoma Youth Expo will celebrate its 100th anniversary. For this special event, all the grand champions from the past 100 years will be invited back for a special ceremony.

In addition, the grand champion steer is guaranteed to bring \$100,000 in the Sale of Champions, said Tyler Norvell, OYE executive director. He said they expect a million dollar sale.