

Starting from Scratch

First generation Hereford Herdsman Jacob Wolfrey enjoys helping young people succeed.

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

It's funny how one seemingly unlikely choice can shape the rest of your life. That is certainly the case for the 2022 Hereford Herdsman Jacob Wolfrey of Jarrettsville, Md. Wolfrey didn't grow up in the beef industry. He was not part of a multi-generational ranch. His childhood home was just 50 miles northwest of Washington D.C., and production agriculture wasn't a popular pastime.

Yet, when Wolfrey wanted to join 4-H and exhibit cattle in the early '90s, his parents supported his endeavor. Looking back, none of the Wolfrey family likely realized at the time how pivotal of a moment that was.

"I don't think my parents ever imagined when we started, what this would turn into," the showman says.

For Wolfrey, the cattle industry gave him a hobby, then a passion, then a career. It even helped him meet his wife, and today, it serves as the anchor of his young family and the future for his son.

Humble beginnings

As a first-generation cattlemen, Wolfrey, like many young people, leaned on many mentors when he started with his 4-H calves. The family traveled to show calf sales to purchase their next prospect, and young Wolfrey used these sales as an opportunity to meet people in the industry and glean as much as possible about how to get his projects showing ready.

In his early teens, Wolfrey won reserve grand champion steer at his county fair. That rosette added to the flames of an already growing fire and gave Wolfrey the confidence he needed to continue honing his skills. Within the next year or two,



Jacob Wolfrey of Jarrettsville, Md., was honored as the 2022 Hereford Herdsman of the Year at the National Hereford Show during Cattlemen's Congress hosted in Oklahoma City.

Wolfrey was traveling with show strings on the East Coast — hired to help present cattle before he was old enough to drive.

The first couple years, John Hausner of Pennsylvania had Wolfrey work the Pennsylvania Farm Show, or as Wolfrey says, "the Denver of Pennsylvania." Soon, Wolfrey was preparing cattle for other farms such as Cherry Knoll Farm in West Grove, Pa.

Around this same time, the Wolfrey family sold their 5-acre patch in Frederick, Md., and moved to White Post, Va. Their retired Angus show heifers served as the start of a cow herd. Wolfrey enjoyed working for various producers to help present their cattle. In 2006, he met his future bride, Michelle Grimmel Wolfrey, when he traveled with her family to the Junior National Hereford Expo in Louisville, Ky.

Wolfrey lived in White Post until 2010 when he moved to Jarrettsville to join his wife at Grimmel Girls Show Cattle.

Grimmel Girls Show Cattle

Michelle, and her sister, Melissa Grimmel Schaake, built their cattle operation around retired show heifers, just like Wolfrey's cow herd in White Post. While Wolfrey admits that some cattlemen see production cows and show heifers as two different things, a show heifer must be both in their operation.

"In my mind, a show heifer should be everything a production heifer is, but she needs to be better at it — at everything. If they're going to be the best of the bunch, they must do both. They need to win



Wolfrey grew up 50 miles from Washington, D.C., and is a first-generation cattlemen. Here, he is pictured with his first show calf in 1994.

shows, then go home and have good calves until they're 12 or 15 years old," Wolfrey says.

This high standard for females at Grimmel Girls ensured their heifers were as productive as they were pretty. And as the family began to build upon their few elite females, they used embryo transfer (ET) and in-vitro fertilization (IVF) to grow their cow herd.

"We're just trying to raise the best ones we can," Wolfrey says. "We're darn sure not going to have the most out there, but we're going to try and raise some quality ones and get them into good homes."

By 2016, Grimmel Girls hosted their first online heifer sale, and in just over five years since, the family has marketed cattle to 25 states and Canada.

The online sales gave the relatively small seedstock operation an opportunity to bring a handful of high-quality cattle to public auction, even if it is over the world wide web. But, there are also unique challenges to marketing cattle in that manner. One of which is the importance of a good photo and video.

Since Grimmel Girls Show Cattle is located on the East Coast, many buyers purchase stock without seeing the cattle in person. This adds extra weight to the photos and videos of the sale offerings. It also means that the Grimmel Girls' name and reputation must carry enough brand recognition and trust that buyers from across the country feel confident in their genetics. And, Wolfrey takes the responsibility for raising great cattle and presenting them very seriously.

Behind the scenes

Building the brand and reputation of a cattle operation is a full-time job — and then some. Wolfrey often spends more time in the barn each day than most people spend clocked-in to their jobs. But there is a lot to do to present cattle to the best of their abilities.

"50 million things go into it — nutrition, genetics, your daily routine, getting them clipped and fitted to the best of your abilities," Wolfrey explains.

He feels fortunate to have had several good mentors from whom to learn over the years, but the bar for great cattle is constantly rising in a competitive environment.

"The quality of cattle just seems to be getting better and better each year. It doesn't matter the breed," he says.

"Everybody wants to win — obviously. I think that is what drives everybody."



Consistently staying in the purple is challenging. Clipping and fitting techniques evolve and improve as fast as the cattle themselves.

Wolfrey laughs when he recalls that sometimes he didn't even need to fit front legs when he started as a young person. "Now, we fit essentially their entire body. These cattle have to look so smooth, so presented and so put together."

For a growing operation, like Grimmel Girls, hanging a banner is more than wall art; it is also advertising.

"The better you do — the more well-known your name is," Wolfrey says. "It just seems like people are more apt to buy a calf from you if they know you, especially online."

Thanks in part to Wolfrey's gifts for cattle selection, management, fitting and clipping, the Grimmel Girls' program won numerous national titles, including the National Western Stock Show (NWSS), North American International Livestock Expo, Junior National Hereford Expo, Keystone International Livestock Expo, and, most notably, the 2016 NWSS grand champion polled female, along with several show heifer and show bull of the year awards.

And their show ring success is echoed by the demand for their genetics, as the Grimmel Girls' female sales are now among the highest averaging sales held annually.

"He has a wealth of knowledge when it comes to breeding and raising cattle and pays close attention to detail to feed, manage, clip and fit, and get the most out of each animal," says Schaake.

"With immense talent, he's extremely humble and

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With Wolfrey's help, Grimmel Girls Show Cattle have bred and presented many national show winners, including the 2016 NWSS grand champion polled female shown by his sister-in-law, Melissa Grimmel Schaake

continuously looks for ways to learn, improve and enhance his skills. It has been an absolute joy working side by side with him to grow and expand our herd, and I'm excited for the future ahead."

Young people

While the family is undoubtedly happy with their operation's success in the show and sale rings, Wolfrey finds it most rewarding when young people succeed with their genetics. It's likely because he remembers his humble beginnings in the cattle industry and sees a little bit of himself in each young person holding the halter of a Grimmel-bred Hereford heifer.

Seeing young people succeed makes all the hard work, long hours in the barn and miles on the road worth it for Wolfrey. It also drives the family to keep going. Building a brand isn't always easy; there aren't any days off on a cattle operation. The young family is often pulled in different directions between national shows, calving, breeding, sale



Wolfrey focuses on fitting Grimmel Girls Show Cattle's Hereford heifers at Cattlemen's Congress.



Many cattlemen mentored Wolfrey over nearly three decades. Today, watching young people learn and succeed is one of the most rewarding parts of Wolfrey's role.

prep, weaning, etc. Wolfrey even admits the life of a cattleman can seem like an uphill battle, but one that is worth it.

"Just keep at it," he says. "It's definitely an uphill struggle, but you just have to stay the course. That doesn't apply to just this. That's anything, really. I grew up, and my parents did not have an agricultural background at all. Who would have ever thought that I would be doing what I'm doing now?"

Yet, at the second annual Cattlemen's Congress, a first-generation cowman was recognized by his peers as one of the best in the business after decades of learning the trade by living it. The 2022 Herdsman of the Year award was one that Wolfrey accepted humbly. Although he hopes his 2-year-old son, Andrew, will have a leg up in the industry with the foundation they have built at Grimmel Girls, Wolfrey hopes young people read this story and are inspired to reach for their dreams.

"I think that you just have to do it — you never know where you will end up if you don't get started," Wolfrey says. "You can't be scared of an opportunity. You have to say, 'Yes.' It doesn't matter where you are, who you are or where you are from; if this is what you want to do, then you can do it. You just have to be willing to do it. You must stay the course and put in the time and the miles. It is a long uphill battle, but the opportunity is there; take it. Take the chance; take the risk." **HW**



Wolfrey hopes his son, Andrew, will be able to build upon the operation he created. At 2 years old, Andrew already enjoys rinsing show cattle.