

Calf and heifer business grows with DCHA help

WHEN MY BROTHER NATHAN CAME BACK TO THE farm in 1998 after receiving two degrees in college, we could have never known how our life would turn out. Farming was his passion. There was very little doubt in what he wanted to do. He had several offers to work for this bank or that organization out of college, but he wanted to be back on our family's farm.

Nathan felt a duty to be the fifth generation to come home and take over the farm homesteaded in 1885 by our great-grandfather, who arrived in a covered wagon from Ohio and decided to settle in southwest Kansas, in Haskell County.

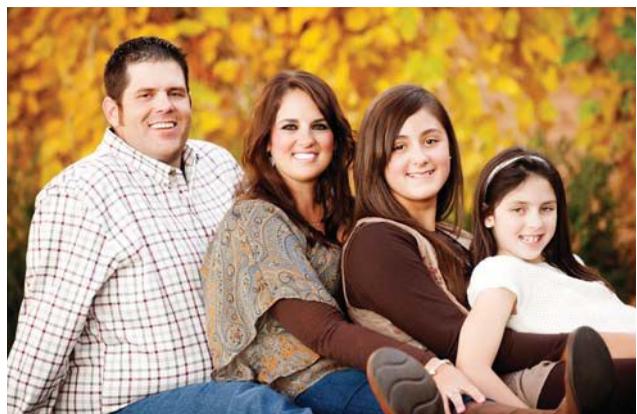
Growing up, Nathan had always helped dad with the cropping operation. I, on the other hand, got bored with tractors and dirt, and would much rather help our granddad on our beef feedlot. We had a company called Circle Bar Cattle Company, in which we ran momma cows and fed around 2,000 feeder cattle in a confinement operation.

I was the younger, wilder one, with no real direction in life. I played one year of college football and found out it wasn't as fun and easy as it was in high school. After wasting two years in college, I figured out it just wasn't for me. My high school sweetheart Tara Martin and I were married, and we moved back home to find work and be closer to family.

After a year of working in town and on the farm part-time, Nathan asked if I would join him and become a partner in the operation. We weren't running any cattle except for a few beef cows at this time, and my other grandfather thought it would be a good idea to start raising heifers for a local dairy that was just being built. We had the empty pens, some feed and an old feed truck; what more did a guy need?

Let the education begin! A beef heifer is a little different than a dairy heifer – they're about as much alike as a horse and pig. We started caring for about 1,000 heifers purchased by the new dairy. We were lucky to hire a guy who had worked at a heifer facility. Between him and the patient dairy manager, I started to understand what it took to raise a dairy heifer.

My brother saw an ad in a magazine for the Professional Dairy Heifers Growers Association's (PDHGA) annual conference in Baltimore, Md. He thought it best for me to go and see what other people were doing. If you know me now, it might be hard to imagine that I was shy and uncomfortable going someplace where I knew no one. But that meet-



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY BROOKE JANTZ PHOTOGRAPHY

Vance and Tara Kells (shown with daughters Mia and Ali), are partners with Nathan and Sarah Kells in Circle Bar Heifer Ranch, Satanta, Kansas.

ing started long-term relationships with people who do the exact same thing as I do.

Over the years, the PDHGA became the Dairy Calf & Heifer Association, and I became active as a member, and then on the board of directors. Today, there are many dairy conferences throughout the year, but none that cover the gamut from raising heifers from birth to freshening like DCHA.

After being a member and serving on the DCHA board for the last 10 years, I can truly say having been part of this organization has been the best investment in time and money I have ever spent for my business. I have met life-long friends who, even though we might bid against each other for a dairy's heifer business, are all better at our jobs because of DCHA.

Today, we have capacity to run 10,000 heifers between 4 months old and 2 months pre-fresh. We bring most of our cattle from Wisconsin, but have a few from Minnesota, Illinois and Kansas.

For more on the Dairy Calf & Heifer Association and the 2014 annual conference, April 1-3, in Green Bay, Wis., see Page 22 or visit www.calfandheifer.org

For more on Circle Bar Heifer Ranch, LLC, visit www.circlebarheiferranch.com.

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