

AGRILEADER

Spring 2023 Edition



Strive to Thrive pg. 8 *A Servant's Heart* pg. 12 *An Echoing Success* pg. 20

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Table of Contents

Barrels and Business 6 <i>by LARAMIE WEDEMEYER '23</i>	Broaden Your Horizon 22 <i>by KATHERINE MAGEE '22</i>
Strive to Thrive 8 <i>by MAMIE HERTEL '24</i>	Generations of Strawberry Growers 26 <i>by HANNAH WATTS '24</i>
A Life Away from Ag 10 <i>by CHARLIE HAWK '22</i>	Where's the Beef? 30 <i>by HARLEIGH GOEBEL '23</i>
A Servant's Heart 12 <i>by LARAMIE WEDEMEYER '23</i>	From Wellman to West Africa 35 <i>by MAMIE HERTEL '24</i>
Clear A Higher Bar 17 <i>by HARLEIGH GOEBEL '23</i>	Leadership to last a lifetime 36 <i>by GRACE DEMNY '23</i>
You Grow Girl 18 <i>by NICOLE McCORMICK '23</i>	In the Growing Business 38 <i>by ANDREA RESENDEZ '22</i>
An Echoing Success 20 <i>by KATHERINE MAGEE '23</i>	

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Barrels and Business

by LARAMIE WEDEMEYER '23

Hailey Kinsel '17 works to combine her degree and her passion for horses into a successful career.

Fighting College Station, Texas, traffic, attending 8 a.m. classes, balancing school and rodeo, Hailey Kinsel was just another student pursuing a degree at her dream university, Texas A&M University. Many know her from her rodeo accolades after winning the American Rodeo in February of 2017. This moment launched her rodeo career after splitting a \$1 million payout with other American Rodeo participants. Since then, she has racked up many world champion titles and set new arena records across the country.

Without her degree and experience from Texas A&M, Kinsel's transition and management of her rodeo accomplishments into a business may have never become a career. Kinsel graduated with a Bachelor of Science in agricultural economics with a focus on finance and real estate. "I wanted to study something that would teach me how to turn a life with horses into a profitable business," Kinsel said. "I started out in agricultural business and discovered that economics was a better fit for my end goal as well as my learning style and interests."

Combining rodeo, business, and economics proved valuable for Kinsel as she won extensive

amounts of money in her final year of college and after graduation. She continues using various aspects from both degree plans, including business skills, discipline in budgeting, salesmanship, and more.

One goal for Kinsel was to determine how to balance

personal growth," Kinsel said. "That accomplishment has served as a building block for my career."

While working on her degree, she was also competing year-round in the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association. She competed for the Texas Aggie Rodeo Team and wrapped up her college rodeo career with a barrel racing national championship win.

Although her accomplishments stand out, she is no rookie to experiencing sacrifice and hardship. She chose to obtain a degree knowing that rodeo may not last forever or provide the income needed to live a balanced life. She mentioned how blessed she is to be able to turn her passion into a job.

"Passion requires discipline and sacrifice every day, in order to bring you where you want to be," Kinsel said. "Each of those sacrifices has strengthened me, grown my character, and brought me face-to-face with choosing how I want my life to unfold."

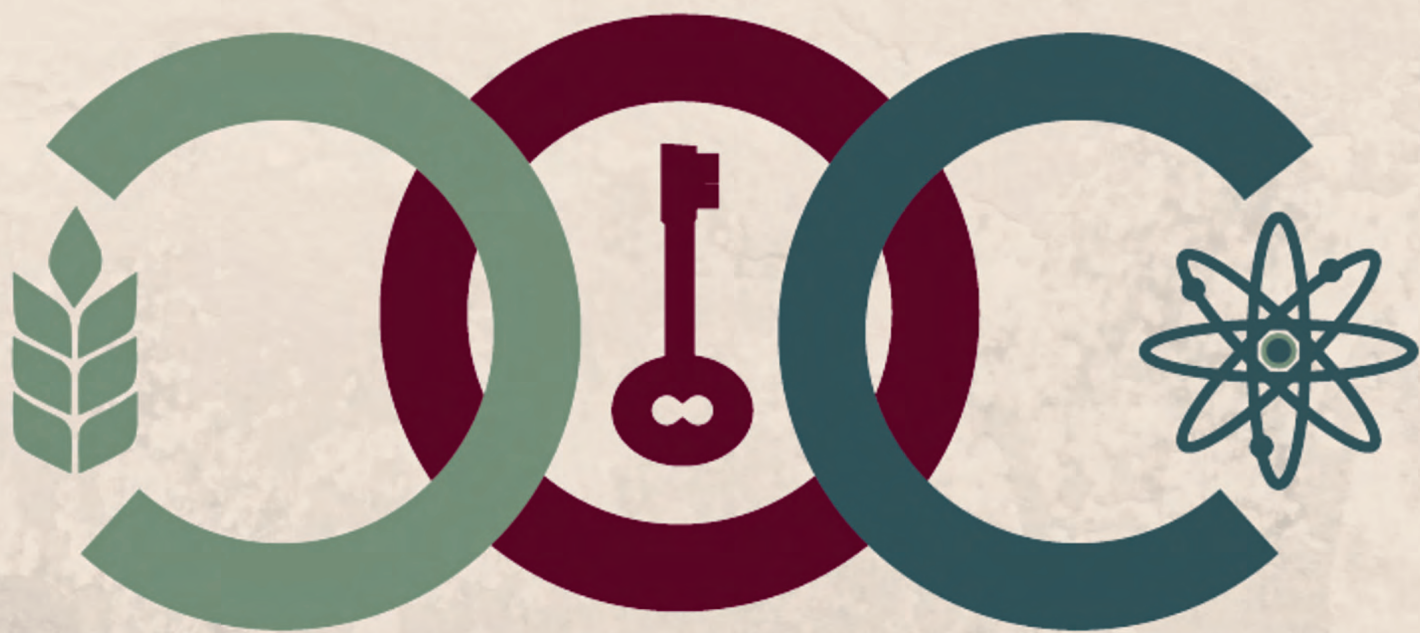
For the student struggling to make it to graduation, Kinsel advises, "Soak in as much as you can in the classroom and enjoy as much as you can outside of it. Those are years and times you can't redo, and you will never forget."



Hailey Kinsel's golden horse, Sister, has carried her to many championships and set numerous arena records.

school and rodeo during college followed by work and rodeo after graduation. Kinsel realized that real estate was a potential business that matched her competition goals with her school schedule in a way that she could be successful in both.

Some of her favorite memories from college are those specific to Texas A&M, such as football games and Tuesday nights at Breakaway Ministries. "Attending and graduating from Texas A&M was a goal of mine, and to accomplish it involved a lot of



C.O.A.L.S.

C O U N C I L

— TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY —

STRIVE TO *thrive*

by MAMIE HERTEL '24

The Cargill THRIVE Program at Texas A&M University strives to support minority students in becoming the next generation of agricultural leaders.

Hailing from Pittsborough, North Carolina, Jerome Linyear did not grow up directly involved in agriculture. After working on a farm for a summer job in high school, Linyear discovered a love for animal agriculture. This love led Linyear to study animal science and agricultural communications at the University of Tennessee. Through mentors gained during his three years working at the University of Tennessee Extension office, Linyear became aware of the opportunity to serve in a director role for a



Photo provided by Laura McKenzie, Texas A&M AgrLife

Cargill THRIVE program director Jerome Linyear coordinates impactful opportunities for scholars such as financial literacy training, mock job interviews and industry speaking panels.

new program at Texas A&M University while also pursuing a Ph.D. in animal ruminant nutrition. “It was good fortune,” Linyear shared. “I could pursue a degree I’m passionate about while also helping the agricultural industry.”

Last year, Linyear led the first-ever Cargill THRIVE cohort, a scholarship and leadership development program created by Cargill, one of the world’s leading agricultural companies. The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University is the first university to partner with Cargill to create a more diverse workplace through this program.

MORE THAN A SCHOLARSHIP

Fifty students became Cargill THRIVE scholars under Linyear’s leadership in 2021. The scholars, first-generation college students, women and from minority groups experienced personal development, meaningful connections and networking opportunities, all orchestrated by Linyear. Additionally, scholars receive a yearly \$2,500 scholarship, which can grow to \$4,000 if the scholar continues the program as an upperclassman. “In 2020, Cargill developed an initiative to create more opportunities for minorities and women in agriculture,” he said. “They knew that the best way to achieve this was through university partnerships, and Texas A&M was the strongest agricultural institution to begin with.”

Scholars participated in résumé workshops, etiquette training dinners, strengths and weakness tests, financial literacy training, mock job interviews, forums, panels, socials and team-building activities.

Highlights of 2021’s program included hearing from Temple Grandin, a prominent author and speaker on autism and animal behavior, attending the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo and the International Livestock Congress and visiting the



Photo Provided by Cargill THRIVE

Cargill THRIVE scholars attended the Diversity Leadership Summit at Cargill headquarters near Minneapolis, Minnesota, to build relationships with fellow scholars from other universities.

Cargill meat packing plant in Fort Worth, Texas. “The Cargill THRIVE program supplies its scholars with experiences and resources that they otherwise would not have encountered,” Linyear said. “More importantly, the program brings people to agriculture that would not have been exposed otherwise. It’s creating a workforce for the future with individuals who have unique backgrounds and perspectives.”

One of these scholars that will surely make an impact on the agricultural industry in the future is Sydney Sanchez '24. Sanchez is a wildlife and fishery sciences major with a minor in ecology from Friendswood, Texas. Despite being a first-generation Aggie, she has known she wanted to attend Texas A&M since meeting Reveille at a School of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences open-house event in fourth grade. “I only applied here,” Sanchez said. “I knew I loved this school and wanted to pursue a career with animals and conservation.” Through her participation in THRIVE, Sanchez has learned more about job prospects, gained professional advice from leaders in the agricultural industry and has made lasting friendships with other college students with diverse backgrounds in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. “Not having an agricultural background myself, I’ve learned so much and been inspired by other people’s unique perspectives in agriculture,” Sanchez said. “THRIVE brings everyone together for the advancement of us scholars as individuals, but also the entire field of agriculture.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSION

With more than 19.7 million full-and part-time jobs in the agricultural and food industry, which is 10.3 percent of the country’s total employment, the THRIVE program strives to create a workforce that meets the agricultural challenges of the future. “As a global leader in agriculture, Cargill has invested in this program to invite people into agriculture,” Linyear explained. “These new and different faces are imperative to the future of agriculture.” Sanchez echoed Linyear’s thoughts by saying, “It’s important

“It’s important to surround yourself with people that aren’t exactly like you. Learn about how they see the world because there is so much to learn about the agricultural industry through a different lens than your own.”

to surround yourself with people that aren’t exactly like you. Learn about how they see the world because there is so much to learn about the agricultural industry through a different lens than your own.”

Getting as much of the population involved in feeding the world as possible to overcome climate change, food deserts, hunger and clothing needs is becoming more and more of a reality with each Cargill THRIVE cohort at Texas A&M, as well

as many others that have been started thanks to Cargill university partnerships. Now offered at six universities and with two national minority organizations, including Alcorn State University; Tuskegee University; Iowa State University; Kansas State University; the University of Minnesota; Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences; and the Association of Latino Professionals for America, THRIVE supports 250 students through a \$6 million commitment from Cargill.

Although in just its second year of operation, the Cargill THRIVE program has already impacted its scholars and the industry and will continue to do so for years to come. “Each year, we will continue building and striving to thrive,” Linyear expressed. “The future is bright for the agriculture industry with THRIVE.”



Cargill THRIVE scholars celebrated a year of accomplishments and growth at the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Legacy Leadership banquet.

A Life Away *From ag*

by CHARLIE HAWK '22

The Texas A&M College of Agriculture and Life Sciences peaks a particular interest in agriculture. However, a degree from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences does not always lead to a life of farmland and cattle but also provides a variety of opportunities for students. For Brandy Kines, Texas A&M Class of 2005, a degree in agriculture has provided opportunities all around, including at Texas A&M.

Kines grew up in the hill country of Texas and is no stranger to the world of agriculture. “I grew up showing horses, showing cattle, and I judged on the horse judging team at Texas A&M.” In her free time, Kines still enjoys the activities from her college days, judging horses and going hunting. While at Texas A&M, Kines was also a member of Phi Theta Kappa and the Saddle & Sirloin club. In addition, she earned a certificate of photography and black and white film photography from the Darkroom School of Photography.

Kines is currently a director of development with the Texas A&M Foundation, working in fundraising for Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, as well as fundraising for the Agribusiness entrepreneurship program and the Westin Sales program in Ag Economics. After earning her undergraduate degree in agricultural journalism, Kines began her career journey at the Texas A&M Association of Former Students as a newsletter student assistant while earning her master’s degree in agricultural communication. Here, Kines had many responsibilities, including writing newsletters for former classes. After receiving her master’s degree, Kines shifted into a new role as the coordinator of travel programs. After seven years, Kines then moved to Lakeview Methodist Conference Center, beginning her career in fundraising and

development. Notably, Lakeview Methodist is where Aggie Fish Camp is held. In her time at Lakeview Methodist, Kines fundraised money to build a new set of dorms so freshman would better enjoy their

Fish Camp experiences. Finally, after three years at Lakeview Methodist, Kines returned to Texas A&M, working in her current role as a director of development, though her return to Texas A&M was not always the plan. “I had no intention of coming back to College Station. I needed to spread

my wings. I wasn’t happy with what I was looking toward” she said.

When asked about what pushed her to come back, she recalled a conversation with her father. “He said, ‘College Station has always been home. You may be from Cauffman, but since you’ve been in College Station, that has been home. Why don’t you just see what’s there?’” Kines has the background and the interest in the agriculture industry, but she did not pursue a career in the field. “I am not technically in the ag industry, which I am ok with.” As mentioned before, Kines still finds time for her passions in agriculture, but the decision to establish a career was not influenced by those passions.

In her current position at Texas A&M, Kines is able to help current and former students on a daily basis through her fundraising to support. Though her day-to-day operations may change frequently, the goal remains the same. “One day, I am in the office planning a trip to visit donors, and another day I am on the road visiting donors, getting to know them and trying to figure out what their philanthropic program is and trying to match them with one of our programs,” she said.

Her position requires her to cast her net wide, to try a reach and connect with as many people as

“I know how to talk to people, how to network, how to speak in an educated manner on the agribusiness side of things.”

possible. During the football season, one finds Kines attending a tailgate to connect and network with potential donors, building relationships that one day may lead to the benefit of the programs. In the spring, she is doing the same at various department events.

Though her degree may say agricultural communications and journalism, her position in fundraising primarily dwells on the business operations side of the Foundation. Even still, her degree has provided value to her work. “I know how to talk to people, how to network, how to speak in an educated manner on the agribusiness side of things,” she said. Kines also notes that her degree in agricultural communications paved the way to her being more personable and conversational. “Being able to go through [ag communications] classes, I now know which questions to ask donors to get to know them and learn who they have really helped.”

“The network is what gets us through!”

Kines encourages those who may not have a strong, or any, background in agriculture, to broaden their horizons. “What I have learned through working in the entrepreneurship program is Ag touches everything. It may not look like it, but it touches everything across the world,” she said.

“You may find yourself in the position where your specialization gives you the background and edge necessary to make a deal.”

Kines credits Texas A&M with molding her into the person she has become, both in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and away. Growing up in the world of agriculture continually shapes her life and she is thankful for her professors and the opportunities at Texas A&M.

Kines is particularly thankful for the experiences she shared and the relationships she made that continue to be influential as she continues in her career. “Bonding with those lifelong friends, being able to have those relationships was amazing.” Kines is also

thankful that the university has provided her with a career she loves. She has a passion to help and interact with current students, whether through fundraising or through simple conversations, and is

excited to have the chance to give back to the system that changed her life. “It is inspiring work,” she said.

When asked about her favorite part of being a former student, her answer was exactly what you would expect— the Aggie Network. As an employee at the university, Kines knows the power of the Aggie Network. After a business trip in Frankfurt, Germany, Kines was in the airport ready to return back to College Station when, from the boarding line for the plane, she heard someone inquire about her Aggie Ring. “Somebody about ten feet away saw my ring and asked my class year, and we ended up having this really great conversation. It was an instant bond, and I had never realized how deep it ran until I recognized that I was in an airport in a foreign country and was identified by my Aggie Ring. The network is what gets us through!”



Photo by Kate Bradley of Kate B Creative

Kines in Santa Fe, Texas, 2022.



Dr. Honnas and his wife, Lorie, had a dream and worked hard to achieve it. They stand in front of their own private clinic, Texas Equine Hospital.

A SERVANT'S *heart*

by LARAMIE WEDEMEYER '23

A cool, northeast wind blows though the lameness pad, vet techs hustle from exam room to exam room, trailers full of horses filter in and out as each hour passes, laughs are shared, heartache is shared, truth is shared, and one man is at the center of it all.

Cliff Honnas, DVM, DACVS opened Texas Equine Hospital in Bryan, Texas in 2009, but the legacy he has built began on a commercial cow calf operation in southern Arizona. From a young age, Honnas had a niche for discovering techniques to heal and mend issues in sick animals.

Honnas mentioned a time growing up that he was responsible for tending a calf that was deformed at birth. While he was unable to correct the issue, the moment became a foundational point in his life where he found a desire to learn and discover techniques that could heal and correct problems in livestock.

From the influence of his dad, Honnas decided to attend the University of Arizona to work toward becoming a veterinarian. This was one of the hardest transitions for him going from an extremely rural, small town school to a large university of over 44,000 students. Each day was a struggle to learn how to study and do well in classes in such a large and new environment.

"I would call my dad every night when I got home from school and say, 'I think I need to quit,'" Honnas said. "I can't do this, I am not smart enough and my dad kept saying, 'Just give it one more day, just give it one more day.' One more day turned into a year and then turned into two years and finally I kind of got the hang of it."

School did not get any easier, but Honnas learned how to study, and he studied diligently. He said that if he was not in class, he was either studying or sleeping. This continued until he ran into a class that could have cost him his entire veterinary career and altered the path of his life—physics.

Honnas found himself failing physics, past the drop date, and without a way to get through the class. "I think God intervened and, fortunately, I got Mononucleosis somehow and the university allowed me to withdraw that semester passing so that I could go home to rest

and get well," Honnas said.

After recovering, he went back to school, retook physics and began wrapping up his time in undergrad while applying to veterinary schools. As time passed, Honnas transitioned again to Colorado State University for veterinary school.

During his time in Colorado, he married the love of his life, Lorie. Lorie grew up as a veterinarian's daughter on a ranch next door to Honnas in Arizona. Growing up with a father as a veterinarian gave her the ability to understand the struggles Honnas was facing in veterinary school and beyond. She supported him through everything and knew it was going to be hard work on both of their parts.

"It was just a way of life," Lorie said. "There was nothing that I was concerned about and [Honnas] being a veterinarian was our goal and that was what we were going to do, and I was going to support him like my mom supported my dad and his practice."

The beginning of their marriage looked different than most as Honnas took the next steps in his path to becoming an equine veterinarian. They moved to Texas for Honnas to be a part of a year-long rotating internship in large animal medicine and surgery at Texas A&M University after graduating from Colorado State University. It was at Texas A&M that he experienced many different roles in the large animal industry. From food animal related cases to equine surgery and even working on cattle in the Texas prisons.

As time passed, Honnas needed to decide what type of residency he wanted to complete and the skill he wanted to advance to become board certified. His mentor recommended that he pursue equine surgery, but Honnas was opposed and did not feel like he would be capable of working in a surgery room.

After being on the fence about it for a while and talking to Lorie, he decided to apply for an equine surgery residency. Lorie believed in him during these times that he did not believe in himself entirely. She pushed him and motivated him to continue reaching for large goals.

Honnas emphasized, "[Lorie] has been the driving



Photo provided by Dr. Honnas, Texas Equine Hospital

Most horses meet Dr. Honnas by receiving a lameness exam.

force behind our success since day one.” Without her faith and support, they may have never gone to the University of California for a residency in equine surgery.

They really enjoyed their time in California but found themselves moving once again to Louisiana after completing the residency in equine surgery. Louisiana offered an assistant professor position at Louisiana State University giving Honnas a chance to prepare for his board certification exam and a place to teach for a period of time before making his final out of state move back to Texas.

When a surgery position became available at Texas A&M, Honnas found himself applying to fill it and the school chose to hire him. “So, I came back to Texas A&M, and I stayed there for 19 years as an equine surgeon and sports medicine veterinarian,” Honnas said.

He taught fourth-year students on rotations during his time at Texas A&M and created friendships and work relationships that still exist today. He loved the security that a job at the university offered with having a wife and six kids, but there was always a desire to try his hand at opening his own clinic.

“I wanted to go to practice for a long time, but I just didn’t have the peace that the timing was right until 2007 and 2008,” Honnas said. “We bought the land where the clinic is in 2004, and sat on the property until

we decided it was time.”

Over the course of the school years and Honnas teaching at Texas A&M, Lorie picked up odd jobs around each university that could help support their family and she began homeschooling their children. Her and Honnas have always been a team and when they decided to build and open a clinic, it is no surprise that she was all in and believed it could be something great.

Through the entirety of building the clinic, Lorie oversaw the crews and construction while Honnas continued working at the university. Lorie recalls that “the building process was such a large undertaking that somebody had to be there to help make decisions.”

They put their last two kids through public school so that Lorie could put time into supervising and making decisions for the clinic and ended up finding a love for the construction of it. Over time, it has grown continuously, and Lorie has served as the general manager through each addition.

When the doors of the clinic opened on January 1, 2009, the staff consisted of Honnas, Lorie, one of their daughters and a secretary. Today the clinic has grown to a staff of nine veterinarians and about 48 total employees.

Karen Dittfurth, first secretary of Texas Equine Hospital, still works there to this day. She came on as a friend from church with a great work ethic and willingness to learn. She expressed, “I have continued working here because I love my job and the people I work with. I appreciate the opportunity that Dr. Honnas gave me to learn the new skills I use today.”

She now serves as the Executive Administration Assistant and is responsible for many different roles. “I assist Mrs. Honnas with everything and anything she may need to make our clinic run smoothly,” Dittfurth said.

“I came back to Texas A&M and I stayed there for 19 years as an equine surgeon and sports medicine veterinarian.”

“... we are here to serve and try to help people and their animals with the problems they are encountering,”

There is a dynamic about Texas Equine Hospital that you do not find elsewhere. Staff members and clients both note that the clinic is like no other. When you are at the clinic, it feels like you are a part of a family.

World champion barrel racer and longtime client, Mary Walker, describes the clinic and the people there as feeling like “home.” She explains that “you are always treated like someone. Everyone knows who you are, and the staff are all so kind and make you feel like your horse is the only horse there.”

If you sit back and watch the work environment and process, it looks like a well working machine getting clients in and out all day long, yet there is still a personal touch from the moment you arrive to the moment you leave.

From the beginning, Honnas had a vision to go above and beyond to take care of his clients no matter the time of day or night and he wanted them to be able to reach him in any situation. He has always provided his clients with his cellphone number to be reachable personally and not only through the clinic.

Walker knows this to be true from first-hand experience when she said, “he never, ever fails to respond. It may be an hour or so, but he never fails to respond to a text and if it is an emergency, I will call him, and he always picks up.”

Honnas stated, “part of my goal was and is to provide superior timely service to my clients and be accessible and I think that is what grew my business to where it is now. Another part of my goal is to treat people with honesty, integrity and run my business where I charge fair prices.”

Sometimes his schedule can consist of anywhere from 20 to 25 horses a day while the clinic, as a whole, sees anywhere from 45 to 70 horses a day. They are constantly moving and trying to provide the best care possible for clients.

Multiple clients stated the same thing when thinking about their relationship now with Honnas, “he’s one of my best friends.” Martha Lynn Walters, long-time client and Cowgirl Hall of Fame Inductee, has been with Honnas since his time at Texas A&M.

“He is a great doctor and a great friend, and I can’t do without him,” Walters said. “He listens to you, and he is always ready to help and interested in what you have to say. I know he is always so busy, but he never makes me feel like I am rushed. I always feel like he is willing to help and wanting to help.”

Honnas’ passion for his career and the relationships he has built from it show greatly through the ways clients have described him, his wife, and the clinic. Some of his favorite aspects of the job are the client interactions and developing friendships that have nothing to do with vet work.

The Texas Equine Hospital mission statement developed by Honnas and his wife states “Our mission is to help our employees and clients understand the Word of God by our actions and strive to be servant leaders by integrating Christian commitment within a caring environment.”

Reflecting on the mission statement, Honnas explained “We believe in Jesus and his resurrection and the forgiveness of sin, so our mission is to serve the Lord and in doing that, it will trickle down to how we deliver



Photo provided by Dr. Honnas, Texas Equine Hospital

Working cattle was a daily event on the ranch and the beginning of a veterinary career for Dr. Honnas.



Above: Dr. Honnas grew up on his family ranch in Southern Arizona Honnas on the left and his grandfather on the right ride through their cattle herd. Right: Dr. Honnas speaks with a client.

our everyday services to our clients.”

Honnas and his wife founded their practice on a vision and mission to serve the Lord and still hold those values today in the way they interact with their staff and clients.

“As a practice, we are trying to be servants. We are not out to make money and be rich, we are here to serve and try to help people and their animals and the problems they are encountering,” Honnas said.

Family is an interwoven aspect of the clinic and its foundation. Working together as a family has a deep root in Texas Equine Hospital and the success it has seen. While being a veterinarian is hard and there has never been a work and life balance, Honnas made it a priority to attend all of his children’s functions because he did not want to sacrifice the time with them.

Out of his six kids, four went to medical school, one is an attorney, and one is a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) working for Honnas. They grew up learning that it takes hard work to be successful in life and each have proven they can step up and work hard.

When clients become close friends, they become a part of the family and can see how important family is to Honnas and his wife. Walker exclaimed, “what a great family man he is! He has raised his kids and has a lovely wife. He has just worked hard his whole life and it shows.

A prominent tradition beginning when the clinic originally opened was a provided lunch for staff. Lorie would make lunches for their children and the few

people that worked at the clinic because they were like family to them.

As things began getting busier, they wanted to provide lunch, so the staff did not have to leave in the middle of cases. “It started out as a family affair and then has just continued on,” explained Lorie.

There are many things that are done differently and ran differently at Texas Equine Hospital than any other clinic. This makes the clinic stand apart from others not only in Texas but across the country.

Today, the name “Honnas” is prominently known across the equine industry by numerous veterinarians, all styles of equine discipline riders, and many schools. He may have started as just a small town Arizona boy tending a calf, but he has gained a respect like no other in the industry.

“He is just a remarkable individual himself and there will never be another like him,” exclaims Walker.

While Honnas may be at the center of everything that is going on at Texas Equine Hospital and have a unique story of working hard to get where he is today, him and his wife do not accredit their success to any of their own doings.

“Without a doubt, none of what we have accomplished is because of Cliff and Lorie Honnas. We have been blessed and it is just our overriding heart to serve God and do his will,” Honnas said. “Whatever that entails, we try to accomplish and transmit it into our everyday work life.”

Clear A Higher Bar

by HARLEIGH GOEBEL '23



Photo provided by Robert Hall

Robert Hall, '08.

Robert Hall '89 has always set the bar high. Born and raised in Port Lavaca, Texas, Hall enjoyed growing up in a family where education, sports, and agriculture were the pillars of his upbringing.

With parents who both taught, a father who coached, and summers spent custom harvesting with his father and two older brothers, Hall says he was blessed with an incredible family.

After graduating high school, Hall made his way to College Station, walking on to the track and field team as a freshman, competing as a pole vaulter for his four years at Texas A&M University. This was just the beginning of clearing high bars for Hall, however.

Hall made the decision to attend Texas A&M after seeing his cousins and older brothers become Aggies a few years before him. "I really wanted to go the business route, and they said, 'well, you can definitely do that, but you can do it in the ag side, and you can be in ag business.'" Hall then majored in agricultural economics.

After graduation, Hall had no specific plans. "I didn't know where I wanted to go or what I wanted, other than I wanted to be a business owner. I wanted to run a business somewhere - to contribute to a business. And that was, that was big for me."

His cousin, Jody, who had urged him to major in agricultural economics, told him to look into job opportunities at H-E-B. "He was getting his masters at Texas A&M at the time, and he was going to interview with H-E-B," Hall said. "He's someone I totally respected."

After investigating a career within H-E-B, Hall was sold. "I knew it was a food business, and I knew everyone had to eat. Their spirit, their energy, their culture was very similar to what I saw and experienced at Texas A&M. It moved to the top of my list on the offers that they provided. So I said, 'you know, I am gonna do this,' and sure enough, it has been pretty amazing."

Hall began his career with H-E-B in the Store Management Training, which he explained is what H-E-B's School of Retail Leadership is today. "They ran me through three weeks in every department."

"For me, one of the big things I knew early on was I needed to be challenged. I'd worked a couple of jobs, jobs that I was just bored to death. I cannot just sit here and do very little. That's definitely not the thing with H-E-B."

Custom harvesting with his father gave Hall a feeling of satisfaction that he pursued later on in life. "I wanted to have that same feeling of responsibility, feeling of ownership, and pride," Hall said.

Currently, Hall is the regional vice president for H-E-B in the gulf coast region, leading 33 stores across South Texas, serving over half a million people.

"We've got a team of 7,000 now in the Mighty Gulf Coast, and the responsibility is there. I take it very seriously that my leadership and guidance is impacting those 7,000 partners plus their families, and I still sense that and feel it."

When Hall looks for potential leaders within H-E-B, he has three criteria he follows - criteria directly from H-E-B. They must have a head for business, a heart for people, and a passion for results. "I want a balanced leader," Hall said. "I am always looking for someone that's eager and willing to improve themselves each and every day."

"As a pole vaulter, you try to clear a higher bar each time you jump. 'You did that. Now, what's next?'" Hall's motivation as an athlete was not limited to the track; he set a higher bar daily within his role at H-E-B.

"When I'm at my best, I bring out the best in others. That's what I ask others to do, be at your best so you can invest in others."



Photo by Nicole McCormick

Lush foliage lines the walls of What's the Buzz.

You Grow Girl

by NICOLE McCORMICK '23

Walking into What's the Buzz, a local coffee shop in College Station, Texas, customers are greeted with a lush jungle of exotic plants, ranging from variegated pothos to unique varieties of sanseveria. Foliage hangs from the ceiling and growth emerges from every corner of the coffee shop, creating a vibrant atmosphere for chattering and studying.

Summer Morgenroth '23, a biomedical sciences major who is one such customer, finds the environment more relaxing and conducive to getting homework done because of the plants surrounding her while she works.

"I really like palm leaves and greenery a lot," Morgenroth said. "That's what draws me to What's The Buzz."

The jungle grew due to the green thumb of Kristin Hammons, '16. The Texas A&M University horticulture graduate has always had a fascination with plants, stemming from a polka-dot plant she had in her childhood home, which she learned how to propagate and take care of. This prompted her to pursue horticulture sciences in college, where her passion only continued to develop.

"I knew horticulture was the right thing for me, because when I got to Texas A&M, the first thing I did was set up a patio garden. I had a tomato plant, a strawberry plant, and some cilantro," Hammons said. "I decided I need to learn more."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Hammons accumulated a collection of plants — taking advantage of the lighting in her College Station home, her plants quickly grew in number. With a collection of over 150 plants, she found herself looking for ways to offset the quick growth. At the end of her lease, she had to quickly cull her collection, and her coworkers told her she

needed to sell her plants at The Local, a pop-up market hosted at Lake Walk in Bryan, Texas.

"I thought that was a great idea, because we went to The Local every single Tuesday," Hammons said. "We were big fans, we had been there since day one. It felt like the right place to pop up at. I wanted something that was a hobby, but something I could grow."

Starting the shop planted a seed for Hammons, who continues popping up at The Local every Tuesday. People were looking for unique plants that they couldn't find at hardware and landscape stores — a niche that she was happy to fill.

"I love the idea of a pop-up shop, because you're not limited to anything," Hammons said. "My first one was really chaotic, but I sold plants with very minimal advertising. From there it really took off."

To her surprise, the popularity of her stall quickly inspired her to find a more permanent location as she began to expand her small business. What's The Buzz was the perfect place to set up shop, with its good lighting and large space for visitors to spread out and study.

Now, Hammons is looking at expanding further. With two locations to display her collection in, What's the Buzz and Tabo Coffee House, she has begun to consider establishing a greenhouse to further build her business, especially since her move to Austin.

Grow 'Em Plant Co. has established firm roots in College Station, but Hammons is dedicated to continue growing her business into new areas through her interns. With students able to stay in College Station to care for plants, the business is well-prepared to continue to expand into new cities and new horizons throughout the coming years.

An Echoing Success

by KATHERINE MAGEE '23

Karina Farias '15 quickly became a young successor within the radio industry and now represents the hope that all Aggies can achieve great things through passion and dedication.

All it took was one trip to Nashville, Tennessee, for Karina Farias '15 to discover the deep-rooted passion she carried for radio. During her time at Texas A&M University studying agricultural communications and journalism, Farias found her calling after her professor, Dr. Billy Ray McKim, suggested she take a radio broadcasting course. This was the turning point for Farias's career. Shortly after graduating, she explored the radio scene by becoming the program director/morning co-host at KUFX-FM in San Jose, California, and was later recognized as a young successor at age 25 by being voted Top 30 under 30 radio superstar.

Farias is currently working for Edison Research as a project coordinator. "I do both qualitative and quantitative research. My job focuses on radio perceptual studies. I now work with stations across



Karina K. Farias, Project Coordinator at Edison Research.

the world and help them understand what listeners think of their stations," Farias said.

Farias shared that when it comes to being successful within radio, have "passion," "patience" and "thick skin."

"Passion is something that can't be taught, but every single person in radio has it. You need to love the industry and what you do," she said. "You also need patience. You can't expect to rise to the top in two years. Those are rare situations; but if you have passion, hard work and dedication, it can get you there."

"Probably the most important thing is you need to have thick skin.

Every day you are being judged by

thousands if not millions of people about things you say," Farias added. "You'll receive some hate and it's going to hurt, but if you can make it past the few bad apples the rest of the batch is pretty great."

However, there are some diverse opportunities that

working in radio offers to outweigh the unpleasant moments.

“I think one of the best parts of this industry is helping a newer artist get discovered,” Farias said. “They show up at the station, play a set for the staff, and you get to see this artist grow to become a big star.”

She said her favorite part is meeting her listeners and developing lifelong connections with them. Farias advises future Aggies to make sure


“Passion is something that can’t be taught, but every single person in radio has it. You need to love the industry and what you do...if you have passion, hard work and dedication, it can get you there.”

you “network” well. “Radio is definitely a ‘who-you-know’ industry,” Farias said. “Learn every aspect of the trade from being on air to setting up the station tent to producing commercials. Radio is an industry about passion. If you have the passion for it and are willing to put in the time, effort, and network it can get you very far.”


Much like the Aggie way, connections are essential to unraveling endless opportunities. Karina Farias symbolizes those opportunities as she has effectively connected with many through her passion of radio. For Farias, all it took was one trip to open her eyes to her potential in a career she was passionate about. “Follow your ambitions, remain driven toward your goals and the rest will fall into place.”

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Photo by an unknown traveler

Rick Harwell and a fellow traveler standing on the continent of Antarctica.

Broaden your

by KATHERINE MAGEE '22

horizon

Imagine standing at the summit of a Hawaiian volcano or echoing chirps back to a colorful toucan. Those are real memories made by former students who jumped on the opportunity to study abroad and experience these once-in-a-lifetime moments. Rick Harwell, an assistant professor of the practice for recreation, parks, and tourism science at Texas A&M University, has made it his mission to help students experience what he already has. Having visited all seven continents as well as being a former park ranger for several Tennessee National Parks, Harwell was recognized as the perfect individual to bring students all over the world and show them new perspectives of

the agriculture industry.

Growing up in Tennessee, Rick Harwell was exposed to national parks early in life. “My first park was The Great Smokey Mountains as a kid. And then I probably didn’t see another park until I graduated high school and went west,” Harwell said.

Starting off as a pre-med student, Harwell began his college career studying medicine and working at a hospital in Memphis. He quickly realized his passion for parks and recreation after revisiting a few national parks on a 30-day excursion west of Tennessee. “I went on the trip again and thought, man, ‘This is pretty cool stuff,’ you know, get to pay to play. So that’s when

I changed my major to parks and rec and then the rest kind of all fell into place,” Harwell exclaimed. “So, I started collecting national parks back in 1975. Then when I finally moved to Alaska, I was able to afford to visit the ones that you have to fly into in Alaska.”

Out of the 63 national parks in North America, Harwell has been to all of them except American Samoa National Park. Starting in 1980, Harwell has accumulated a vast amount of work experience from receiving extensive training skills within the Navy Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR) training unit to being Park Ranger for the Winchester and Millington, Tennessee national parks. Being so knowledgeable and experienced about the parks and recreation field is what landed Harwell an assistant professor position at Texas A&M University.

In December 2021, Harwell ventured to the freezing terrain of Antarctica to complete his mission of visiting all seven continents. As he described his journey to Antarctica, it was very apparent that it required planning, preparation, and extensive routing.

“So, you fly to Argentina and then you get on the ship. You cross the Drake passage, which is 750 miles of wild ocean, like 35-foot seas,” Harwell explained. “Worst ocean in the world. We went to the Shetland islands into Antarctica, into the Falkland, St. Georgia Island, and then the Falkland Islands. And then finally back to Argentina, we traveled about 2,500 miles or something. It was crazy.”

Harwell said the company he traveled with to Antarctica was called Albatros Expeditions. “I think they can hold 1,780 passengers and they have about a hundred and some crew as well.”

Harwell went on to mention that Antarctica is not an area that has people living there all year round, “Nobody is there permanently.” Civilization may not be possible for Antarctica, but something different can be said for the wildlife that chose to make it their forever home. “Every day you get off and do what are called either cruises or landings. Cruises means you’re getting on a Zodiac and you’re riding around. Look at animals. Landing means you go up to the shore, get off, walk around on the shore, and look at animals,” Harwell continued by describing the wide variety of penguins he saw on and offshore. “Oh my God. We saw emperor [penguins]. We saw rockhopper [penguins]. We saw seven different kinds of king [penguins]. Gosh.”

Not only did this trip give him some high-quality images, but an idea. After his visit, Harwell decided that Antarctica would be a great opportunity for students to

meet travelers from all over the world as well as wildlife native to that continent. He is currently planning a trip to return with students in December 2023.

Not all of his study abroad trips entail extreme temperatures or extensive planning such as Antarctica. Harwell travels with students all over the world. A more popular trip previous students have enjoyed was Hawaii.

Laney Kohout, a former student of Harwell’s, said going on her first study abroad trip was “one of the best decisions of her life.” In December 2018, Kohout traveled to Oahu and the big islands in Hawaii with Harwell. “This trip was for a morale, welfare, and recreation class,” she said. “We visited a base for the Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Marine Corps to learn how each branch offers recreation opportunities to their service members and families. The entire trip was so memorable for me, it is one of the most fun trips I’ve ever had.”

She was also fortunate enough to have another opportunity to travel to Costa Rica in November 2019. She was tasked with evaluating local areas to see what would benefit future parks and recreation students. “We hiked Arenal Volcano, white water rafted, saw sloths, toucans, and howler monkeys, and stayed at the Texas A&M Soltis Center” Kohout said.

Kohout went on to add that the trips she took were more influential on her life than she ever imagined. “The information I’ve learned has been so helpful in the jobs I’ve held. I also met some of my closest friends because of these trips. [Harwell] also taught me the importance of making and maintaining connections with professionals in our field and how beneficial those connections can be.” She explained that if it were not for Harwell’s connections to so many professionals in the morale, welfare, and recreation field, “I don’t think our trip would have been nearly as fantastic and memorable as it was.”

Kohout walked away from each trip with unforgettable memories, but also a few life lessons that she will carry with her for the rest of her life. “I absolutely plan to return to Hawaii and Costa Rica. I would love to go back to where I have visited and find some new adventures as well. I am so grateful for these opportunities to travel because I likely would not be where I am today without them,” Kohout exclaimed.

Study abroad, now referred to as education abroad is designed to provide students with a variety of experiences such as study, internships, volunteer, research, and service-learning programs. According to abroad.tamu.edu, Texas A&M’s education abroad is structured with the belief that it will, “broaden students’ intellectual

and personal horizons, help them navigate in different environments, practice or perfect a language, and build a resume to help broaden career options.”

The purpose of education abroad is to provide Aggies with a unique education and experiences they will never forget. There are currently nine education abroad program types at Texas A&M University. The nine programs offered are Affiliate provider or authorized provider, exchange, National Student Exchange (NSE), independent experiences, virtual, student group, faculty-led, field trip, and unit-led trip.

Rick Harwell is one of several staff members that are involved with the faculty-led education abroad. The education abroad website described the faculty-led programs to be ideal for students “who want to go abroad with a group of fellow Aggies, with whom they can share hands-on experiences of doing activities they cannot do in a classroom in College Station.”

Harwell has placed his focus on a future trip to Antarctica so Texas A&M can say, “As an education abroad office over there that we take students to all seven continents. Cause they go to another six, but they don’t go to Antarctica.” Harwell noted that the trips are very expensive, but donors usually help students out as well as scholarships.

Texas A&M offers many forms of education and opportunities that prepare students for success in any career they choose, but teachers like Rick Harwell embody how to utilize the Aggie Network as well as dedicating themselves to broadening student’s horizons.

Former students like Laney Kohout, have been provided with experiences from their international studies that has left them with life-changing knowledge and skills. Both will be transferrable within any environment or career they put themselves in.

Education abroad programs are a great opportunity for all Aggies to learn and receive impactful information about cultures, languages, agricultural functions, and self-development within their Aggie Network. The education abroad program is for all students not just parks, recreation, and tourism science majors. The faculty-led trips that Rick Harwell is actively involved in are just some of the nine programs that are offered within education abroad. These are once-in-a-lifetime career building opportunities you will not want to miss out on.

For more information about travel opportunities visit Texas A&M’s education abroad website at abroad.tamu.edu.



A fellow Aggie passenger and Rick Harwell holding a Texas A&M flag on a cruise ship sailing to an island in the Falkland Island chain.



Texas A&M Soltis Center in Costa Rica.



Rick Harwell and Texas A&M students white water rafting in Costa Rica.



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Photo provided by Renin Garcia

Freshly picked produce at Garcia Strawberry Farm.

Generations of

strawberry growers

by HANNAH WATTS '24

Poteet, Texas, is known for two things, the birthplace of George Strait, and the Poteet Strawberry Festival. Believe it or not the latter holds more weight.

The Poteet Strawberry Festival is an annual event that has taken place for over 75 years. During the first or second weekend of April, people from all over the world come to visit this small town in South Texas.

The first ever Poteet Strawberry Festival was held in 1948 when the Poteet Rotary Club wanted to provide World War II veterans an opportunity to earn income and increase farming in Atascosa County.

Fast forward to today and Poteet is known as the Strawberry Capital of Texas and the festival has grown into one of the largest agricultural festivals in Texas with more than 100,000 people in attendance.

Poteet has a deep and rich history as do many families who have been there for over 125 years. For the last five generations, the Garcia family has been prominent strawberry growers within the Poteet community.

Being one of the original families to participate in the first-ever strawberry festival, this family has a rich history in this small South Texas town.

In 1958, 10 years after the first ever Poteet Strawberry Festival, Dolores Garcia Jr., third generation strawberry grower and a highly decorated WWII Veteran won Grand Champion. Sixty years later and he was the oldest living strawberry grower that took part in the festival.

The Garcia Strawberry Farmers family operation has a plethora of moving parts and Donovan Garcia, fourth-generation strawberry grower, his wife Shawna, and their two children Ronin and Taryn, fifth-generation strawberry growers, all have a role to play in their family operation.

Donovan and his family farm an acre of land which yields anywhere from 15,000 to 20,000 strawberry plants a season. The growing season starts in October and ends around July. That's right, the beautiful vibrant colored berries take 10 months out of the year.

In the beginning, strawberry growers must ensure their land and soil is ready for the season. The grower must plow the soil and bed up the rows then lay a drip irrigation line. This line will constantly drip water to the roots of the plants.

This irrigation system is very important to ensure that the water does not touch the actual strawberries, if it does they will begin to rot. After the irrigation line is laid the grower lays down a thick, vinyl material over the rows.

This vinyl material keeps heat and moisture trapped in the sand which helps the strawberries grow and most importantly it keeps the berries off of the sand which keeps them from rotting.

Now that the rows are all set, the next step is planting the strawberry. The grower will cut a hole in the plastic and place the frozen rootstock in the ground. Since strawberry plants are hard to grow from seeds, growers tend to use frozen rootstock, which saves them time and ensures the plant will grow.

Finally, the last step is the best part of the whole process, harvest. When the strawberries are ready for picking the growers will begin to pick row by row plant by plant picking every berry by hand.

As you can see the planting process for strawberries is quite labor-intensive. Over the years the change in climate has impacted the strawberries growing season making the process more difficult.

“As a youngster, I remember thinking this was the perfect time to be out planting... we were able to wear



*Right: An old photograph of the Garcia Family on their farmland.
Left: Fourth and Fifth generation Strawberry growers continue the 125-year tradition. Featured from left to right are Ronin Garcia, Shawna Garcia, Taryn Garcia, and Donovan Garcia.*

short sleeves and shorts and stay cool in the month of September,” Donovan said.

The planting processes used to take place around Labor Day when the weather would cool down; however, now in September the Texas heat beats down which in turn is horrible on the plants and hard on the growers.

But the Texas heat is not the only climate issue at hand. “With winters becoming harsher berries are more susceptible to dying,” Ronin said.

Because strawberries can not withstand freezing temperatures, every time there is cold weather from December to March the berries die and take two weeks to produce again.

As winter becomes spring, Donovan and his family start to prepare for the main event, the Poteet Strawberry Festival. The festival lands right in the peak of harvest allowing Ronin and his bunch to showcase their ‘berry’ best.

“We know for a fact that we will make our money back no matter what during the Festival, plus we are able to give back to the community at the same time.” Donovan said. The Poteet Strawberry Festivals outreach is beyond measure, not only does the association allow the local berry growers to sell and make their biggest profit, but part of the profits from the whole festival goes into a scholarship fund for the youth.

“We don’t sell as much locally as we used to...we’ve been using our yields to brew craftbeers and wine,” said Donovan said. Donovan and Ronin decided to venture out into different markets which paid off for them. Now, they have two different craft beers on the market, but also just opened a brand new winery in Poteet.

Brazos Valley Brewing Company contacted Donovan and proposed the idea of brewing a strawberry beer. Donovan said, “They wanted to make a Poteet Strawberry beer and I replied how do we get started?” With much excitement Ronin and Donovan got to work creating their first craft beer.

Brazos Valley Brewing Company names all their beer after classic 60s & 70s country songs which fit perfectly with Donovan. After much consideration, the company decided to name this new beer Wasted Days a Strawberry Blonde craft beer.

Weathered Souls Brewing Co. located in San Antonio also reached out to Garcia Strawberry Farms and wanted to make another Poteet Strawberry beer.

This beer was named Grand Champion.

“The name was pretty cool since winning Grand Champion grower at the PSFA auction is a huge honor,” Donovan said. “We decided to name the beer Grand Champion, because it is the best of the best.”

In fall 2022, Donovan and Ronin opened a winery in Poteet. After two years of planning, their hard work came to life. Using their own Garcia Farm Strawberries they have a strawberry wine.

“We made a special wine in the month of October hich was a pink-tinted color for breast cancer awareness,” Ronin said.

A part of the proceeds for the October wine went to breast cancer awareness.

Ronin said, “We plan to grow our wine selection and will be adding some new flavors in the coming months.”



Photo provided by Ronin Garcia

Ronin Garcia holds freshly picked produce at Garcia Strawberry Farm.

Where's the

beef?

by HARLEIGH GOEBEL '23

In South Texas, ranchers are selling their cattle in a new form called direct market sales, innovating the beef industry.



Photo courtesy of James O'Brien

James O'Brien, a seventh-generation rancher from Beeville, Texas, stands in front of cattle at his family ranch.

In South Texas, cattle is king. Towns like George West and Kingsville are named after the cattle barons that founded them; Port Lavaca and Santa Gertrudis after the animal itself. Herds of Angus, Brahman, Charolais, and Hereford are not considered just assets, but symbols of status.

The beef raised in these pastures was a privilege few

had, until now. The ranchers in this feature sell the cattle directly from the ranch to your table, pioneering a new path in the beef industry.

BEEVILLE, TEXAS - J.J. O'BRIEN RANCH

James O'Brien '00, is a seventh-generation rancher, raising cattle with his family in the coastal bend of Texas in a small town called Beeville. After graduating from

Texas A&M University with a degree in computer science and computer engineering, O'Brien returned to the family ranch.

In 2016, O'Brien bought his first steers from his late grandfather. At that time, direct market beef was becoming popular, according to O'Brien.

"You go back to the ranch, and if the ranch is not growing, you've got to innovate and figure out new ways to bring in new revenue streams if you're supporting a new family," O'Brien said about returning to South Texas with his wife, Tonni O'Brien '00.

O'Brien and his wife co-own and operate J. J. O'Brien Ranch, where they raise grass-fed cattle, a decision because of Tonni. "We chose grass-fed because of a conversation we had with my wife's neurologist in San Antonio. My wife has multiple sclerosis and that was the first time that the idea was put into my head."

O'Brien explained that his wife's neurologist argued there is a reduced inflammatory response with grass-fed beef than with traditionally raised beef. "That is why we got started, it was because we eat beef every day, and if there's something out there that could help her situation in regards to inflammation, then she's going to try it," O'Brien said.

Though O'Brien had years of experience with cattle, raising grass-fed was a different beast. "All the carcass data you can get is gathered on feedlot cattle, and so your conversion rates in regards to rations are all related to grain," O'Brien said. "Getting the calf fat on grass is a huge challenge, so you will have to use everything at your disposal, and genetics is a huge part of that."

The genetic combination that O'Brien found works the best is Brangus cows bred by Angus plus bulls. "That tiny bit of Brahma allows us to get through summertime and still have calves with finish on them down here in South Texas."

The process in which O'Brien raises his cattle is one he defines as low stress. The calves are born, raised, and finished on their ranch. They are only moved when they are hauled to be slaughtered. "I tell people all the time; grass finished is like trust. It takes you two years to get it, it takes you five minutes to get rid of it," O'Brien said.

Four to six cattle are slaughtered each month on the ranch, defining this operation as a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) small certified producer which requires O'Brien to have cattle ready for slaughter at all times, meaning bulls must breed cows year round.

The grass-fed cattle on the J.J. O'Brien Ranch are not marketed as antibiotic free, though they are. "If

our cattle got sick, we would doctor them," O'Brien said. He explained that because the cattle are a 'single source,' meaning the only time they leave the ranch is to slaughter, there have been no issues with sickness.

Not marketing the cattle as antibiotic free is a deliberate choice on O'Brien's part, demonstrating his respect for all forms of cattle raising. "I am not interested in bashing somebody else's program," O'Brien said. "If a customer calls us and asks us, we're going to be transparent. I'm not going to hide it from them. I am going to tell them, 'They're antibiotic free.' But, I am just not actively pushing that message in a public format anywhere and I am not going to."

A sector that O'Brien is expanding in is utilizing the entire cow and profiting off the bones and organ meat. "Low waste or no waste is the name of the game," O'Brien said. Restaurants request livers or bones for soup. Even dog breeders have reached out for this grass-fed specialty, inspiring O'Brien to develop pet boxes called CarniDog. "They're wanting quality beef, not throw out [beef], but not ribeyes, obviously."

"It will have a month's worth of curated treats," O'Brien said. The contents would range from organ meat like hearts and livers, to bones and ground hamburger.

Regarding how the future looks for direct market production, O'Brien is confident that it is here to stay. "I absolutely think that it'll still be here in 10 years. I do think some consolidation will take place."

O'Brien believes one of the significant changes in direct market operations that is evolving is the processing, not the production. "There's USDA certified plants that are popping up, that are allowing everybody with a calf to go to market with their beef," O'Brien said.

O'Brien explained further that while direct market beef is rewarding, there is an added expense incurred that traditional beef producers do not experience. "Lots of people are trying it [direct market practices], they think it's a good opportunity to get a premium on the animals that they're raising," he said. "After a year, or even after six months, you have to decide. Was that just a fun thing we did? Is it a hobby that we're going to do two times a year? Or is it a business?"

O'Brien feels that small producers will face a production issue in the future. "You can't make a steer grow and finish any faster than Mother Nature is going to do it. So what they [small, direct market beef producers] have to do is turn to their neighbor and say 'Hey, can I buy some of your cows?'" O'Brien said. "I think that's how things are going to consolidate, you'll see some co-ops develop, some ranchers get together, and start selling



Photo courtesy of the Lowry family

The Lowry family, who own W&R Farm and Ranch in Bulverde, Texas.

under one brand.”

What O’Brien refers to is common in the cattle industry and a practice used by larger beef producers. “44 Farms is what it is because of their production practices. You can certify under their label, and it’s raised by ranchers all over the United States. So in that situation, you’re buying a production practice,” O’Brien said.

“That’ll be one benefit, I think, that the public sees from consolidation is a more consistent product,” O’Brien said after explaining that a significant challenge in grass-fed production is consistent products.

“When you harvest four steers, one of them is not going to eat as good as the other three,” he said. The consistency that would occur with a co-op is due to the number of steers slaughtered according to O’Brien. “They can get 16 rib eyes in and they’ll retail 12 to 14 of them because they’re primo, look good on a retail shelf, and have lots of internalized marbling,” he said.

Many consumers who buy from small producers do to not contribute to the ‘Big Four’ meatpackers: Tyson, Cargill, National Beef (Marfrig, and JBS. However, the sheer amount of beef that the big four can slaughter and process daily dwarfs the rising growth of smaller beef producers. O’Brien believes the Big Four will have to pay attention.

“Are we affecting their bottom line? No. But, you saw prices change just because there was an investigation.

Nothing came from that investigation; but you saw behavior changes, just because an investigation was happening,” O’Brien said. “I do think direct-to-market is educating consumers, and just because that education is happening; I think that will improve the processes.... And for that reason, there probably is a little bit of impact happening.”

O’Brien and his family sell directly to consumers via their website jjobrienranch.com and at farmer’s markets in South Texas. Their grass-fed beef is dry aged, vacuum-sealed, and shipped in an insulated box to your door. You can follow them on Facebook at O’Brien Grass-fed Beef and on Instagram at [theranchprincess](https://www.instagram.com/theranchprincess).

BULVERDE, TEXAS - W & R FARM AND RANCH

Wade Lowry ’05 is a South Texas native, born and raised in Kingsville, Texas. After graduating from Texas A&M, Lowry married his wife Raegan ’02, and began working in the oil field. After being laid off in 2015, Lowry returned to his roots and began ranching.

They bought 12 King Ranch steers and raised them entirely on grass. “We knew we wanted to ranch; we didn’t know we wanted to ranch this early in our career,” Lowry said.

At the time, the ‘paleo, grass-fed movement’ and CrossFit were gaining popularity, according to Lowry.

“We were able to sell all those grass-fed steers butchered to local people in the CrossFit gym,” Lowry said. “We knew there was an opportunity there with it [selling grass-fed beef] just within our gym by itself.”

Lowry describes his and his wife’s operation as a ‘90/10 split’ of grass-fed versus grain-fed cattle, explaining that they sell less grass-fed now than they have in the past. “We feel the consumer now is back to wanting grain-fed beef... We have kind of closed our outside marketing to grass-fed people because we can’t supply it enough like being in this drought, I just can’t supply it enough. A hardy deal [meaning hardy breed of cow] of grass-fed beef is not going to be satisfactory to myself, it would just taste like shit,” Lowry said.

“We started to grass feed for three years, then we realized, ‘What about this corn option?’” Lowry said. He explained that Texas A&M had released studies on grass-fed versus grain-fed beef, and established that grain-fed was as healthy as grass-fed.

Like James O’Brien, Lowry must produce beef year-round, meaning bulls are breeding cows at all times. “We rotate our bull program every two years, so there’s always new genetics,” Lowry said. They raise cattle in multiple locations around South Texas, the southernmost areas covered by Lowry’s father, a former nutritionist for the King Ranch, who has developed mineral and protein programs for his son’s cattle.

W & R Lowry Farms sells ranch raised beef (cattle that eat both grass and grain), grass-fed beef (cattle that eat only grass, forage, and hay, no grain at all), and Akaushi beef (cattle that are half-Akaushi, a breed which produces Wagyu meat, and eats grass and grain.)

The Wagyu that Lowry produces are bred by HeartBrand Cattle bulls, producing a cow that is half-Akaushi. “I think we are really known for our really fantastic, locally raised Japanese beef. It’s just half-bloods because I don’t think the consumer here wants a full blood,” Lowry said.

Lowry attributes COVID-19 as being the best thing that happened to his family. He explained that the food shortages experienced during quarantine allowed him and his wife to reassure and educate people about the food system. “We didn’t ever jack up our prices... I felt that if someone could have ground beef, it was a big deal for me,” Lowry said.

Education and philanthropy are paramount to Lowry, two of his operation’s major objectives. “We do a thing in our program where every tenth steer, we donate a steer to the food bank [in Bulverde]. And that’s always

been something that we’ve never publicly told anybody, you’d [Texas A&M AgriLeader] would be the first person. It holds big in our hearts to give back,” Lowry said.

The future for W & R Lowry Farm and Ranches prioritizes education. Lowry and his family recently bought a farm in Bulverde and plan on converting it so people can tour the farm and understand how their cattle are raised. “My goal is to make a good living, but to really educate consumers,” Lowry explained. “I think for us, in the future, it’ll probably be more ag education. And I think, in return, will bring us beef sales...” Lowry said. Visitors will be able to see cattle be vaccinated, dehorned, and worked by dogs. “I think that opens it up to the urban people,” he said.

“If a beef guy woke up next door to me and started raising beef, I don’t look at it as a threat. Because we can all serve the community... Just like I don’t get mad at vegetarians, because in the end, they’re helping the vegetable farmer. That’s the way we have to look at agriculture... I just think we’re all in this for the greater good, to do something we either love or are passionate about.”

Wade and Raegan Lowry document their ranch operations on Facebook at W&R Farms and Ranches, on their Instagram willieranch, and sell their beef at wegrowbeef.com.

CALLEN, TEXAS - CHAMPS MEAT MARKET

In 2000, Christian Ockels moved to South Texas. Growing up outside Waco, he spent his childhood in the cattle industry, where he continues today. While working in the cattle industry in South Texas, Ockels met Jason Peeler ‘90, and founded Ockels Peeler Ranching Company.

Ockels and Peeler then began feeding cattle in feed yards across Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas and in Peeler’s own yard, Texana Feeders. Peeler also owns Dean & Peeler Premium Beef with Dustin Dean ‘06. Dean and Peeler breed, raise and even process their cattle in South Texas.

The decision to separate from commercial meatpackers and vertically integrate cattle came from the increasingly large margins that producers were receiving from major meatpackers. “It wasn’t very enticing...” Ockels said.

“It made sense because we were cattle guys to own and manage those cattle that were going into their branded beef program which is Dean and Peeler Premium Beef... So we honed our herd down to where

now, we are just feeding and finishing these cattle that are going into Dean and Peeler Premium Beef,” Ockels said.

Following the downsize of cattle that Ockels and Peeler were feeding and their decision to focus on feeding cattle solely for Dean and Peeler Premium Beef, they decided to invest their time into developing Champs Meat Market. “We needed a way to get back a hold to some of the beef and be able to retail it, so that’s why we came up with Champs.”

Ockels explained that he and his partner brainstormed ideas for Champs Meat Market, designing the store around what they want in a meat market. “What would I like to have? What would be a cool store? If I walked into a place, what would I like to see?” Ockels said.

All the beef sold at Champs Meat Market is a product of Dean and Peeler Premium Beef or Peeler Farms (Wagyu beef raised and owned by the Jason Peeler family), as well as other local brands such as Chorizo de San Manuel and Pecan House of Cuero.

“Most meat markets, if you get a bad steak, you won’t know why. You can ask the meat market, and they won’t know why either because they don’t know where it comes from. They know it comes from the middleman...” Ockels said. “We have control of everything: from what they eat to when they’re slaughtered. We just have quality control dams set all throughout the system, and it just creates a very good, consistent, high-end product.”

“The problem with agriculture is not just the X factor, you got X, Y, Z, ‘you name it’ factor...There’s so many things that you don’t have control of agriculture, and for sure, the cattle business,” Ockels said. He explains that these ‘unknown variables’ can be factors as slight as lightbulbs not allowing the meat grader to light the carcass properly, or human factors like the feed yard manager getting ‘crossways’ with the packer cattle buyer. “Anytime that you can eliminate those unknown variables, you’re better off. That’s just what people are doing; they’re taking control of their marketing.”

Champs Meat Market is in Calallen, Texas, just outside Corpus Christi. “Our average customer is from every race, every religion. I mean, it’s such a broad

spectrum,” Ockels said. “It’s been a grand experiment of human nature, I’ve figured out that I didn’t know anything about people. You know, honestly, I was surprised there’s still a lot of dang good people out there. Our customer base, they’re awesome, and they’re very supportive.”

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“Our marketing people asked me who I wanted to target with

our branding, and I told her vegans,” Ockels joked. “We want to make it a place where people feel better about what they’re buying when they come in, and feel good about being there and don’t mind telling someone ‘I am at Champs.’”

“We feel that if a customer is better informed, then their eating experience is going to be better. If your eating experience is going to be better, it’s not just good for Champs, it’s good for the whole industry,” Ockels said. “We’re small enough where we are able to do what we need to do to change things, make things more efficient and better for the consumer, and still offer the consumer everything they want. And we will continue to do that.”

Champs Meat Market is expanding and opening a new store in Corpus Christi, which Ockels is very excited about. “The new store that we have planned is beautiful. It’s going to be a special place.”

You can visit their current location in Calallen, view their website at champsmeatmarket.com, and follow them on Facebook and Instagram at Champs Meat Market.

While these ranchers raise the cattle amid the brush country, they also educate a generation about agriculture practices in the beef industry. The privilege these ranchers experienced in the past in one that they choose to share with their community.

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From Wellman to West Africa

by MAMIE HERTEL '24

Growing up on a watermelon, cotton and peanut farm in Wellman, Texas, Blaze Currie '08, has always had a passion for getting to know people on a personal level. Running errands for the farm with his father, he was known to strike up a conversation with every person he met. His desire to hear life stories only grew with time, eventually leading him to a career in which he seeks to develop transformational learning experiences.

Currie's first transformational experience occurred when he traveled to Rwanda with Texas A&M University students and faculty. His first time out of the United States, Currie admits that he arrived with negative assumptions about the country's challenges. "I thought I could go over there and fix it," Currie shared. "Hearing that now is nails on a chalkboard. Their challenges are complex, and no person can change things overnight. It takes time and transformational change."

During his time in Rwanda, Currie experienced what he says is the key to a transformational experience: a disorienting dilemma. In conversations with Rwandans, he learned firsthand about the horrendous genocide that had occurred in the 1990s. "Hearing their stories made me gain perspective on my privileges," he explained. "I questioned my assumptions. That is a transformational experience."

A TRANSFORMATIONAL CAREER

Since that trip to Rwanda, Currie has dedicated himself to creating spaces for people to experience disorienting dilemmas that challenge assumptions and biases. Upon graduating with a degree in agricultural leadership and development, Currie began working with the Norman Borlaug Institute for International Agriculture and traveled to Iraq in a joint effort with the United States Department of Defense. He then worked for the Texas FFA Association before transitioning to a role with National FFA. Through these career changes, however, Currie's common thread was developing transformational experiences for others, whether it was



Photo provided by Blaze Currie

Blaze Currie, '08.

for Iraqis or FFA members.

While at National FFA, Currie was contacted by an old friend, Trent McKnight. McKnight wanted to start a nonprofit organization, AgriCorps, that brings agricultural education to developing countries. Currie served as the executive director for AgriCorps, building the organization alongside McKnight in Ghana and West Africa. Today, AgriCorps has trained more than 1,100 teachers who are able to provide agricultural education to students.

RETURNING TRANSFORMED

In 2015, Currie came back stateside to pursue a master's degree in agricultural and extension education services from the University of Illinois. He later returned to National FFA to manage the National FFA officer team and develop leadership curriculum for nearly 20,000 FFA members as the associate director for leadership development. Today, Currie is an account manager and learning analyst at Vivayic, a learning strategy company that builds others' capacity to do good in the world.

Through his travels and career, Currie stays true to his hometown habit of learning more about each person he meets and each place he visits. "You can't truly understand a place until you leave it," Currie expressed. "Become immersed in something different. That's when you experience transformational change and become a better leader for the agricultural industry."

Leadership to *Cast a Lifetime*

by GRACE DEMNY '23



TALL Cohort graduation.

Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz, Texas A&M University class of 1977, has been the director of the Governor Dolph Briscoe Jr. Texas Agricultural Lifetime Leadership (TALL) program since April 1, 1998.

Before gaining the position as director of TALL, Mazurkiewicz was a student majoring in animal science while also judging on the Texas A&M University Meat Judging Team. Mazurkiewicz really found his niche within meat grading, and quickly became the United States Department of Agriculture number one recruit in the nation.

After graduation, Mazurkiewicz became an agriculture extension agent with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. He served several different counties throughout his time as an agent, and this is how he really got his foot in the door with the TALL

program.

TALL is a two-year program that meets every three months and allows individuals averagely aged 26 to 52 to experience how different aspects of agriculture are run across the country and world.

According to its website, the mission statement is “The Governor Dolph Briscoe Jr., Texas Agricultural Lifetime Leadership (TALL) program will create a cadre of Texas leaders to help ensure effective understanding and encourage positive action on key issues, theories, policy and economics that will advance the agriculture industry.”

TALL is all about continuing a person’s education through knowledge of the agricultural industry. “We are like a nerve center for the industry and the go to place for connecting people and businesses,”

Mazurkiewicz said. “We also take pride in being an educational institute where we study issues, not take issues.”

The program consists of six in-state sessions, two out-of-state sessions, and one international session.

Each international country is chosen based off of its relation to United States agriculture. “Some international places we have gone are China, Brazil, and Europe,” Mazurkiweicz said. “I try to choose non-English speaking countries in order to encourage communications skills and learn more about different international government, policy, and communications.”

The in-state Texas locations include College Station, Lubbock/Amarillo, Austin, Houston, Nacogdoches, Corpus Christi, and national locations include Washington, D.C., the East Coast, and California. These locations may not be the same for every cohort and can possibly be changed. However, participants will learn about what makes the particular location unique.

Since becoming the director of TALL, Mazurkiewicz has helped raise around \$12.7 million

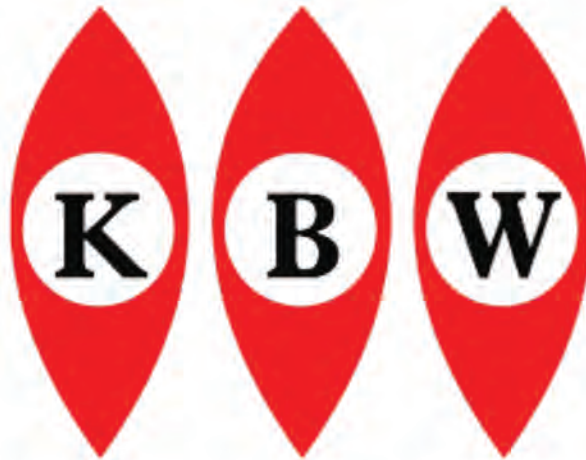
dollars for the program as well as a \$7 million endowment. TALL is funded directly from donations, so 100 percent of the money raised goes directly to the program.

TALL also acts as a mobile classroom and provides a total of 500 hours in training. “We offer 57 more hours of training than a masters program,” Mazurkiewicz said.

Having so many great benefits, the process to getting accepted into TALL can be intimidating. “The application process is quite extensive,” Mazurkiewicz said. “Our application alone consists of four different essays. We really want to see your leadership experiences and your different accomplishments.”

Although the application process may be difficult, completion of the program is so sweet. A formal graduation occurs to signify graduation and completion from TALL. Every person in the cohort is recognized for their accomplishments and presented with an element signifying completion.

If you are interested in possibly joining the TALL program, applications for the next round are due on March 15, 2024.



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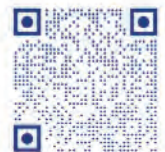
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Photos provided by the Kinney family.

Left photo: Chase Kinney and Todd Kinney of KBW. Right photo: Gary Kinney, founder of KBW.

In the *growing business*

by ANDREA RESENDEZ '22

Any former student of Texas A&M University will tell you there is nothing more rewarding as an Aggie than the opportunity to make an impact in your community after graduating. Todd Kinney and his son, Chase, are perfect example of making an impact in agriculture as former students.

Todd Kinney grew up in McAllen, Texas, and went on to study business management at Mays Business School. Todd chose to attend Texas A&M because of the university's strong reputation in the agriculture industry, but more so because of the business programs the university had to offer. Todd graduated from Texas A&M in 1989.

After graduating, Todd knew he had to put his hard-earned Aggie degree to use and began to work under the guidance of his father, Gary Kinney, better known as "Papa Kinney."

Gary was a Wisconsin native, but moved to Texas early in his professional career seeking better business opportunities. Gary and his wife, Beverly, originally opened Kinney Bonded Warehouse (KBW) in Donna, Texas in 1975.

KBW began as a small bonded warehouse no bigger than a three-car garage where Kinney primarily sold duck manure to local farmers. Gary

and Beverly started as the only two employees of the company until they could grow in size and reputation.

Todd continued to work full time with his father and eventually went on to marry his college sweetheart, Michelle. Together, Todd and Michelle had three sons: Austin, Chase and Karson. Chase and Karson decided to pursue degrees at Texas A&M like their father, and Chase chose to study agricultural business with a minor in horticulture. Chase graduated from Texas A&M in the fall of 2021 and immediately joined the family business.

"I knew that returning to KBW was going to be what I did with my degree. Not only did I want to be an Aggie, but I wanted to return home and use my newly learned skills about the industry to help my family," Chase said. "I knew that being a part of a tight-knit community like the Association of Former Students would open a lot of doors for both myself and KBW."

Although not an Aggie himself, Gary worked closely with the Horticulture department and was inducted into the Texas A&M Horticulture Hall of Fame in September of 2002. In his lifetime, he raised over \$200,000 for the Department of Horticultural

Sciences at Texas A&M University to be used for research in nursery and floricultural crops.

“My grandfather loved Texas A&M and everything it stands for. I think if he could’ve gone back in time he would’ve moved to Texas sooner to attend A&M as a student himself,” Chase said. “He poured every ounce of his hard work and dedication into the University any chance he got.”

Gary passed away in June of 2020, but laid the greatest foundation for his Aggies, Todd and Chase, to continue on the family business as well as his horticultural legacy.

KBW remains a full supplier of horticultural products including fertilizers, chemicals, horticultural containers, potting and soil amendments, landscape supplies, pest control, irrigation parts and greenhouse construction. The company has locations in Donna and Tyler, Texas.

“KBW has always been synonymous with family for us Kinney’s. That spreads to not just the direct family, but also for the employees, customers, and the manufacturer’s we work with,” Todd says.

The Kinney family stays connected to Texas A&M through their frequent donation of materials for special projects, servicing Texas A&M Agrilife outreach centers throughout the state, and attending educational events held on campus. This upcoming summer KBW is even offering a summer internship to any Texas A&M horticulture student willing to travel to South Texas and learn the ins and outs of the industry.

“My favorite thing about being an Aggie is the tradition that comes with it and the great campus culture. My favorite thing about working for the family is finally being able to get involved in the business, all while being surrounded by a great group of people in a great industry,” Chase says.

“KBW has always been synonymous with family for us Kinney’s. That spreads to not just the direct family, but also for the employees, customers, and the manufacturer’s we work with.”

KBW continues to strive to be the best supplier for greenhouse, nursery growers, and landscape contractors in the State of Texas.

“We work to be the company growers want to do business with, people want to work for, and manufacturers want to sell to,” Todd says. “I think Papa Kinney would be proud to know that the third generation is working hard to continue the legacy he left behind.”

colophon

The AgriLeader magazine was produced by the Fall 2022 AGCJ 405 class, comprised of nine Texas A&M students and one faculty member, in College Station, Texas.

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