

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

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PRESS RELEASE: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Feb. 1, 2018

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Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Julie Grant

By Bryan Painter

McALESTER — On the wall of the McAlester Union Stockyards for years was a sign that read, “Large enough to serve you, small enough to care.”

Julie Grant's parents owned the Stockyards, so while growing up she read it time and again.

The saying is gone but the message it represented is deeply engrained in Grant, now a co-owner of those Stockyards.

“Taking care of our customers is the number one goal,” she said. “It doesn't matter if they have five head or 100 head, we try to treat each customer's cattle as if they were our own. We clean our pens and water every week, feed the cattle per customer's instruction, and sort them to sell to maximize dollars. That's why that statement has always stuck in my head.”

That combination of family and the Stockyards have significantly influenced Grant's personal values.

Family, friends and faith

The history of the McAlester Stockyards tells that in 1974 Grant's parents', Kenny and Linda Sherrill, bought the business that at the time was owned by five commission firms.

What happened in the fall of that year provides a much clearer picture of her parents who Grant says “have always been there” and “are the biggest influences” in her life.

That fall, Linda lost her leg due to cancer and spent three months in the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston.

“My dad never left her side,” Grant said. “She does anything she puts her mind to. It doesn't slow her down. I remember us going on a ski trip for the first time, and she was

about 50 at the time. She took lessons and learned to ski on one leg. I'm 51 now and barely do it with both."

Linda worked in the office and still does on sale day, and she stops by almost every day to help.

Kenny ranches and order buys cattle for other people.

Julie was the middle of three children. Along with a younger sister, Laura Sherrill, and older brother, Mark Sherrill, they bought the stockyards in 1998.

However, in 2009, Mark, at age 45, suffered a fatal heart attack.

Everyone stepped up. They offered the kind words you would expect, but they followed through with actions of love.

"After we lost Mark, my husband, Lindsey Grant, came in and took a bigger role in the market," Julie Grant said.

In addition to family, such as Lindsey, countless friends came forward and offered help after the death of Grant's brother Mark.

"It was humbling and uplifting to have those kinds of friends in a time like that," Grant said. "Most long-time employees and customers are friends and what I call salt of the earth good people. So many of them stepped up and carried us through. I don't know how we got through the first few sales after because it was like we were going through the motions. I remember how kind people were that came to offer help and give hugs and even calls from other market owners to help. Even though we are competitors, it's like a family network. They are just really good people."

Grant's family is strong in not only friends, but faith.

Forever, sale day was on Mondays at McAlester, Grant recalls.

That meant Sundays were also very busy unloading and taking care of cattle.

"We felt convicted to change the sale day to Tuesday to allow our employees and ourselves to go to church and spend time with our families," she said.

Not long after that, Lindsey felt led to help start a cowboy church in their area. Grant has joined him in that effort.

That little cowboy church, started in McAlester with just over a dozen people, now has more than 100.

Life and the sale barn

Grant was a child in school when her parents bought the Stockyards.

“We would ride the bus to the yards on sale day, and I always loved helping or getting in the way when I was younger,” she said. “I remember working after school. On one big sale we had, we worked ’til 7 a.m. the next day. I went home, took a shower, and went to school and played in a basketball game that night.”

After two years at Oklahoma State University, Grant drove back and forth to Southeastern Oklahoma State University in Durant. It was during this time she was learning the books from longtime Stockyards bookkeeper, Frances Turney.

Turney was planning to retire and stayed to teach Grant until she finished her degree.

But in addition to Grant, the Stockyards is an overall family business.

“My mom decided to go back to college with me and work on her degree,” Grant said. “She had some credits, then after she started having kids, she had to stop school. She took some with me, then later finished her degree and graduated.”

Julie and Lindsey Grant have three children. Each of the three help with the operation in some way.

Kate, 25, works at the Stockyards and is Grant’s “right arm.” Kate and husband Justin Buckner have a 3-year-old daughter, Gentry, and a child on the way.

Seth, 23, is a diesel mechanic in Tulsa but helps work cattle or pitch in when needed. Lane, 22, is a fireman in McAlester and helps at the sale on his days off.

“When the kids were little, I took them to work with me, and when they got big enough, Lindsey would take them with him to help with feeding, building fence or whatever needed to be done,” Grant said. “Then when they got school age, they would ride the bus here just like I did. My grand babies will be the next ones in line. I feel very fortunate to have been able to take my kids to work with me and blessed to get to see my Gentry almost every day.”

Last year, they ran about 80,000 head of cattle through the McAlester Stockyards. The fall usually has the bigger runs with 2,000 to 3,000 head a week, and the spring numbers range from 1,000 to 1,500 head weekly. People bring cattle from all over Oklahoma as well as Arkansas, Texas, Missouri and Kansas.

Because of the workload, Grant enjoys her extended family.

“We do have generations of families that have worked here, but what I have found more than anything are people that say they have worked at the Stockyards at some point in their life,” Grant said. “Or they’ll say how they used to come with their dad or grandparents to bring cattle to market. They seem to all have fond memories of time spent at auctions.”

The same is true for ranchers.

"We have a few gentlemen that come on sale day to visit and check out the market and catch up on the news," she said. "I have found that most ranchers don't really ever retire. They may reduce their cowherd, but they love what they do and a lot of them still bale their own hay and feed and care for their cattle every day."

This is agriculture

A couple of years ago, the printers wouldn't work on the morning of a sale day.

They could enter the information in the computers, but it wouldn't print checks or invoices.

"It was, of course, on one of the biggest sales we had that fall, almost 3,000 head of cattle," Grant said. "Our head bookkeeper, Charlotte Cantrell, has worked in the Stockyards since she was 14 years old. She is 81 now. Charlotte called some of her kinfolk that had helped us years ago when we did everything by hand. Thankfully, they came to the rescue, and we hand wrote everything 'til 3 or 4 the next morning. The best people I know are involved in agriculture."

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Editor's note: This is part of a continuing series of stories on Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture. The project is a collaborative program between the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food & Forestry and Oklahoma State University to recognize and honor the impact of countless women across all 77 counties of the state, from all aspects and areas of the agricultural industry. The honorees were nominated by their peers and selected by a committee of industry professionals.

Photo Captions: Julie Grant and 3-year-old granddaughter Gentry Buckner are shown at the McAlester Union Stockyard. Grant is being recognized as a Significant Woman in Oklahoma Agriculture.

