

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

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Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Brandi Herndon

By: Kaylee Snow

BRISTOW – When Brandi Herndon worked her first Tulsa State Fair as a livestock entry coordinator, a coworker told her she would either love it or hate it.

Fifteen years later, she’s still working for the Tulsa Expo Square, now as the agribusiness manager.

After graduating from Oklahoma State University with a degree in agricultural business, Herndon found the job opening for the position.

“I was like, ‘You know what? That sounds really fun. I think that’d be a really fun job to have until I figure out what I want to do with my life,’” she said.

Now considered her dream job, Herndon said she had no idea at the time that it would lead to a career.

“I feel very fortunate,” she said. “There’s not a lot of people that can go to work and say, ‘Wow, I love getting up and going to work every day.’”

An agriculturalist from day one

Herndon, a fourth-generation agriculturalist who considers herself an “Oklahoma transplant,” grew up in Fort Collins, Colo., where her dad, Vaughn Cook, owns an equine reproduction facility and where she raised and showed purebred Simmental cattle. She recalls having “a lot of interesting stories for people at school” because of her experiences. She was riding horses at a very young age and began showing both horses and cattle through 4-H by age 8. Herndon showed livestock at all levels, from county fairs to national shows.

“As I got older, cattle became more of my passion, so I had the opportunity and was fortunate enough to be able to show my cattle all over the country. I was involved in the American Junior Simmental Association, and we’d go to our junior nationals every summer for what people call our ‘cowcation,’” Herndon laughed.

In fact, showing at junior nationals are some of Herndon’s best childhood memories.

“I think back to all of my junior nationals,” she said, “and I can pretty much tell you a great story from each of them. The friendships and people I met along the way are invaluable.”

She was also involved in 4-H livestock judging and received a scholarship to Connors State College where she judged on a “very successful livestock judging team” coached by Jerry McPeak. She then completed her bachelor’s degree at OSU in 2003. She had planned on working in banking or agricultural lending and had even considered law school before finding the job in Tulsa.

“As a young person growing up and showing, I feel like it’s something I just always knew that I wanted to be involved with in some way, somehow,” she said.

Luckily, Cas Sally, who first hired Herndon, gave her that opportunity.

At the Expo Square, Herndon oversees all agricultural events at the facilities. In the past year, this included 40 different events – not including the fair – consisting primarily of world and national horse shows that are typically two to three weeks each in length. Occasionally this includes cattle junior national shows as well – which are always a treat for Herndon.

“When you look at our calendar, we are fortunate enough to be booked from the beginning of March through mid to late December,” she said. “The equine industry brings millions of dollars to Tulsa and the surrounding area each year.”

During the Tulsa State Fair, she’s in charge of both open and junior livestock and horse shows, the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) rodeo, the birthing center, indoor 4-H and FFA exhibits, and the agricultural education area called Aglahoma.

Herndon said she loves all aspects of her job from the fair to working with various organizations throughout the year and helping them host successful shows.

She also loves “promoting agriculture to the public as well as the support of the 4-H and FFA youth and the opportunities we give to them showing their livestock projects,” she said.

An added bonus of her job is helping to give back, from scholarships to youth auctions and awards.

“It’s very rewarding,” Herndon said. “I am glad to give back to programs that gave so much to me growing up.”

Why it matters

Herndon says agriculture is a way of life for her.

“As agriculturalists, one of the most important jobs we have is educating people where their food and fiber comes from,” she said.

Herndon, who doesn’t mind going out of her way to teach someone about agriculture, says it’s important to not only promote the industry but also the people behind it.

“They’re some of the greatest, hardworking people on this earth,” she said. “I wish the world would have a greater respect for the people who feed us three times a day. Agriculture means a lot to me, and the promotion of it is really one of my passions. I’m lucky to be able to do that through my job here at Expo Square.”

Along with these industry-wide challenges, Herndon faces ongoing obstacles throughout the year. With the public becoming further removed from the farm, less people are supporting youth agricultural events like the Tulsa State Fair.

“We have a saying here at Expo: every day is an eventful day – no two days are the same in the event business,” Herndon said. “There are days more challenging than others, but all and all, I enjoy the challenges and working through them to find solutions to improve and make exhibitor experiences the best they can be at Expo Square.”

Then and now

Agriculture has been instilled in Herndon since she was little.

“It’s in my blood. It’s my roots,” she said.

With her husband Bart, Herndon now owns a small herd of Maine, Angus and Simmental cows. Her husband owns and operates Herndon Cattle Company, where he raises and sells show cattle. He also partners and assists his parents in running 80 cow-calf pairs.

Herndon is the vice chair of the International Association of Fairs & Expositions agricultural committee and the secretary treasurer of the North American Livestock Show & Rodeo Managers Association.

She attributes her passion for the equine industry to her parents Vaughn and Gwen Cook, and her step mother Jill Cook. Her father and step mother own Royal Vista Equine and Royal Vista Ranches, which is located in Wayne, Okla. Her uncle Erroll Cook and her cousin Chad Cook, owners of Bridle Bit Simmentals, played a vital role in

developing Herndon's passion for cattle and exhibition during her childhood. She credits much of her success to coach McPeak and her previous boss Cas Salley. Both have been great mentors and friends of Herndon's to this day.

She considers agriculture the best lifestyle to be raised in and is excited to give her daughters, Brynna, 8, and Bria, 6, the opportunities she was given growing up. This next year will be Brynna's first time showing at junior nationals and the Oklahoma Youth Expo.

"I just want those same things for my kids because I think I grew and learned so much, but most of all, I made some great memories and some great friends along the way," Herndon said.

With Brynna's first junior nationals, maybe this year will be the start of a new family "cowcation" tradition.

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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 Caption: Brandi Herndon is a fourth-generation agriculturalist and the Tulsa Expo Square agribusiness manager. She is being recognized as a Significant Woman in Oklahoma Agriculture. She is pictured here (far right) with her family (from left to right): Bart Herndon, husband, and daughters Brynna and Bria Herndon.

