



THE COWS THAT BOUGHT *the Ranch*

The Strommen family's focus on customers, consistent cattle helps make ranch ownership a reality.

by Miranda Reiman, director of digital content and strategy

There are only so many ways to say somebody worked hard, scraping together everything to get where they are; but the kind who have done it, they put more stock in action over words.

For Aaron and Sheyna Strommen, of Solen, N.D., there are two decades filled with examples.

"We call them the 'lean years,'" Aaron says, not that far removed just yet.

He's remembering the days when he had a full-time day job and then filled nights and weekends custom freeze-branding or working for a local veterinarian.

Meanwhile, Sheyna worked for the North Dakota Stockmen's Association, selling ads, designing, writing and editing their magazine. Then she'd burn the midnight oil laying out sale books for area seedstock producers. Often on deadline, she'd drive more than an hour, one way, to put a freshly burned CD in the overnight post office drop box, destined for the printer the next morning.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY AARON AND SHEYNA STROMMEN.

“We’d go to sleep for a little bit, and get up and do it all over again,” Aaron says. “That’s just what we had to do to make it all work.”

Other stories help illustrate their definition of “lean.”

The gas gauge was squarely on E during the last of 27 trips to move every cow, piece of ragtag equipment, tools and personal belongings to a new lease. Aaron’s wallet was as empty as the tank on the ’89 Ford pickup, and there was no hope the already maxed-out credit would go through. He started digging in his coat pockets and under the seat — he simply needed \$5 of fuel to make it the last 20 miles.

Aaron had given up, ready to beg for an advance on a few gallons when a \$10 bill blew out from under the vehicle. It’s not the only recollection that has “divine intervention” as the only explanation.

When they flip through memories, the couple can laugh about the “beater” cars they drove, the trips that almost always centered around cows and all the ways that saving their pennies made a real difference. They’ll throw around phrases like, “That was the year \$800 changed our lives,” and then give a detailed account of how that’s true.

If hard work and “want to” were enough to build a ranch, the Strommens would have had an expansive spread from the get-go. But hopes and plans don’t make the loan payments.

THE STORY STARTS

They began where most young dreamers do — with a humble foundation and enough enthusiasm to build from there.

When they married in 2001, Aaron brought three cows from his grandparents’ small, registered herd in Minnesota to the partnership. Sheyna was a ranch girl from Rolette, N.D., and brought her own handful of cattle.

“I had seven commercial cows that Aaron quickly put embryos in,” she says.

From Day 1 he had an idea of the feminine cow he was looking for, and used artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET) to quickly propagate more of what he liked. Aaron honed his eye while working 15 years as a sales representative for a bull stud.

“He could learn from other people’s businesses,” Sheyna starts; and Aaron adds, “Working for Genex was a better education than college. I learned what kinds of cows were going to work for us and things I saw that I didn’t want to do.”

The early years of their marriage were marked by moving from one lease to another and working together. A 7-months-pregnant Sheyna might be doing night chores for a landlord while Aaron headed back from any one of his odd jobs meant to bring in more money for cows.

Short on sleep, but not optimism, they were a team.

“We both kind of decided that this is a life that we wanted to live, and this is how we wanted to raise our family,” Aaron says.

Cassidy was born in 2004, and Cooper came just 16 months later.

Continued on page 18

The family grew, as did the herd when they bought some small groups of cows to fill a U.S. Forest Service lease. That's when the Lucy, Betty, Polly and Beauty lines came in. Some of the current herd genetics still tie back to those original females.

As opportunities presented themselves, the family followed, and that's how they ended up at Fort Rice.

"And then Clint was born, and that changed everything," Sheyna says.

In 2011, at 10 days old, their third child was quasi-diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. By 3 months, they knew for sure that he has Merosin Deficient Congenital Muscular Dystrophy.

"He has as much break down in his muscles every day as if he had just run a marathon," Sheyna says. "I wouldn't change a thing about Clint, but I do wish life were easier for him."

Sheyna transitioned to fully freelance design work so she could be with Clint whenever he needed her, and today she produces more than 40 sale books a year.

In between doctor's visits, adapting the house for specialized equipment, and long stints where the family was split between the ranch and hospital stays, the older children grew into being good hands around the ranch.

"Disposition through the years was very, very important because our hired men for a long time were 8 and 9, and then 10 and 11, and that became something we had no tolerance for — poor disposition," Aaron says. "Today it's becoming more and more important to our customers."

What matters to a commercial rancher, matters to the Strommens. When a customer talks — whether it's a phone call, an in-person visit or quick Snapchat — they listen.

CREATING CONSISTENT COWS

"It's one of those things that some Angus breeders will call 'convenience traits,' but we call them essential traits," Aaron says.

Cattlemen will ask about temperament, udders and feet first, before they want to know about weaning weights and ribeye area.

"When I try to find a bull, I'm already looking two generations down and what those daughters will be bred to," he says, noting genetics typically come from one of four main lines: Emulations, Rainmakers, Travelers and Ritos.

That's intentional. The cows are similar across the board in their look, body length and udder type, Aaron says.

"When we make decisions, whether it's on genetic or management or how we help our customers out, we need to make sure that it's the right decision for them every time," he explains. "Keep your customers happy, do whatever it takes to help them generate a profit, and then be patient and do the things that are right for your cow herd. And it'll eventually come, because it's taken us a long time."

North Dakota rancher Jim Hornbacher started his own herd as the Strommens grew theirs, and he's bought bulls from them for almost two decades. He's seen firsthand how that patience pays off.

"One thing about Aaron that I appreciate the most on the cattle breeding side is his discipline," Hornbacher says. "If you page through his [sale book], those cows are all bred very alike. You can go through that bull sale and those bulls are made alike."

Half siblings and three-quarter siblings are found throughout the pages.



“He’s not just throwing it out there and seeing what sticks,” Hornbacher adds.

MAKING MATERNAL MAMAS

If the Strommen cattle are known for one thing, Aaron hopes it’s that they’re cow-makers. Several years ago he and Sheyna went through the hoops to trademark the phrase MaternalPower™ to help them market as such, and heifers from their genetics became an additional enterprise.

Each year they partner with two other operations to host a consignment heifer sale to help clients get more value out of the investment in good female lines. Last year 469 lots earned \$332 on average per head more than a generic black heifer — real dollars captured for their customers.

The Strommens reap the benefits of maternal focus firsthand. Until they hired their former intern, Kayla Weinzierl, on full-time, Aaron calved mostly on his own.

“All our embryo cows and all our other cows and all our heifers calve at the same time. If I’m here, and I’m checking, I want to be busy,” he says.

It also helps him market first-cycle bulls in their main February bull sale. In December they’ll feature older bulls in an additional sale they added at the request of customers. They now sell about 150 bulls annually.

“People buy bulls from other people,” Aaron

says. “A lot of success you have selling your bulls is based on your relationship with your customers.”

Aaron works at that, keeping in touch with his peers beyond sale day and guaranteeing the bulls. He takes care of them.

Hornbacher has several hundred Angus cows, but also serves as a regional president for Dakota Community Bank and Trust. In that role, people will ask for advice.

“He’s one of handful of guys I recommend because I have real confidence in the cattle, the guarantee and the family,” Hornbacher says.

LAND AND A LEGACY

Having a long history with the Strommens also gave the banker confidence as they came to him with a big ask: after years of leasing, they wanted to purchase a ranch.

Ten miles down the road from their most long-standing lease to date, they found land, facilities and two houses — both wheelchair accessible. Having no other ground to put up as collateral, they made a call to Hornbacher to see if it was even possible.

The sellers gave them a hard number, and for a moment the place that seemed almost too perfectly appointed for their family was indeed out of reach. But Hornbacher advised them as they worked on a USDA first-time landowner program and kept the dream alive.

“That was a game changer...He had to go to bat for us, that we’re a risk worth taking,” Sheyna says.

Continued on page 20

“ ”

**A lot of success you
have selling your bulls
is based on your relationship
with your customers.**

— AARON STROMMEN



“ ”
The Angus cow is just amazing for what she can do for people with a dream.

— SHEYNA STROMMEN



They signed the note in late December 2020, a relief in what had been an extraordinarily stressful year, with hospital stays, lease challenges and the general state of the world.

“It’s definitely been a pile of work to get to where we are today,” Aaron says.

Yet, they’ve proven time and time again they’re not afraid of elbow grease.

“You couldn’t even write a better story, and we were just happy to be part of it, having known them over that long-term relationship and how they handle themselves,” Hornbacher says. “Aaron’s economic philosophy is a lot like his philosophy with livestock. He’s very, very disciplined, and that sure makes that a lot easier to take a small risk on somebody that has that type of discipline.”

A mentor told them early on, “You can buy land or you can buy cows, but you should never buy both at the same time.”

“We figured our cow herd would eventually buy us a ranch...and it did,” Aaron says.

It takes a leap of faith to invest everything in an Angus business, but the couple’s vision goes beyond their careers.

“We hope the kids want to come back someday — that’s what we’re building this all for, the next generation,” Aaron says.

It wasn’t until after they’d made their first payment a full year later that Sheyna finally hung pictures on the wall — perhaps part of her heart still remembered those early years of uncertainty. Today, as Clint scoots down the hall in his motorized wheelchair, in a house with ample space for the whole family, the couple counts all the “God things” that added up to get them here.

One of them is out in their pastures, Sheyna says. “The Angus cow is just amazing for what she can do for people with a dream.” 