



Real stories. Real farmers. Real inspiration.



CONTENTS

3 Driven to Overcome
Nothing can keep this dairy farmer down

6 Kristen's Journey
How one young veterinarian battled cancer through COVID-19 pandemic

8 From the Streets to the Sow Barn
Gracee Workman finds her purpose in agriculture

11 The Stories No One Talked About
A look at the resiliency of U.S. hog farmers when packing plants shuttered

14 Always Audrey
How Audrey Angus fought cancer and found a new perspective on life

17 From Tragedy to Opportunity
Missouri hog producers rebuild after a devastating fire

Driven to Overcome

Nothing can keep this dairy farmer down

By Anna-Lisa Laca

When Anita Van der Laan was a child, she spent her days on her family's dairy farm in Holland. After high school, she had a tough conversation with her parents that made it clear there wouldn't be room for her to come back to the farm.

Van der Laan moved to the U.S. and started her own farm with her husband, Pieter, in 1990. Today, they milk 4,500 cows and farm 7,000 acres in Oklahoma with their grown children.

Like many farm families, the Van der Laans have dealt with weather and health challenges. On Nov. 7, 2011, an EF-5 tornado left their farm in ruins. "That was a life altering experience that's for sure," Van der Laan says.

Meteorologists had been talking about the potential for bad weather, but nobody expected it to materialize because the region hadn't seen a major rain for five months.

"We thought, finally, there's rain coming," Van der Laan remembers. "I'll never forget, I had just come home from Louisville and from a local show with our youngest child. We were breeding one of the show heifers in the backyard and my husband said, 'look at that. What is that? It looks like a tornado.' And it was a small tornado. We looked around and there was another tornado, but they





Disaster Planning:



For more advice for preparing for those unforeseen circumstances, scan the QR code or search “disaster planning” on [AgWeb.com](https://www.agweb.com)



Photo: iStock

both went back in the clouds.”

Tornadoes can happen anytime in Oklahoma, but they aren’t of much concern in November.

“The tornado started to grow and grow and it turned out to be a EF-4 when it entered our dairy and an EF-5 when it left,” she says. “I had about 675 calf houses and 98% were gone. Calves were walking around, and some could not walk any longer.”

Fortunately, no family members or employees were hurt on that day. The Van der Laans have a solid storm procedure in place, so employees knew what to do. They also had a post-storm procedure in place; their first call was to their veterinarian, then their insurance agent, then their banker. They set out to start cleaning up from the storm.

“We started walking around and within half an hour to an hour it was just unbelievable, half the town came to help us,” she says, still choking up today. “That night I fed about 300 calves with people from churches and schools, and that continued for the next couple of weeks. That’s how you know you’re in the right community.”

The next morning friends from across the country arrived to pick up heifers that survived the storm.

“We did not even know where all our heifers went,” she says. “People borrowed our trailers and took them. I didn’t have a barn to put them in.”

It would be months before the Van der Laans recovered from the tornado. Little did they know another blow was in store: cancer.

The Fight of her Lifetime

“Breast cancer has been my biggest challenge,” she says. “I think about the tornado, and I know God prepares you for tough times. I got diagnosed on Sept. 17, 2013.”

Earlier that summer, a Brown Swiss show heifer, named Gema, hit Van der Laan with a bottle during feeding time.

“It felt like I got hit with a baseball,” Van der Laan says. “There was a big bruise that didn’t go away and continued to hurt, so I had it checked.”

It turned out to be an aggressive form of breast cancer. While she felt like she didn’t have time to deal with cancer, her doctor encouraged her to

make time.

“I told [the doctor], I’ve got a high school senior and a business to run, I don’t have time for this. My doctor replied, ‘Anita, you will make time for this.’ So I did,” Van der Laan says.

In October 2013 she had a mastectomy, and then in December she started eight rounds of chemotherapy followed by radiation treatments.

“It was a blessing that it was in the winter because it was easier to make time to go to Oklahoma City [two hours from their farm] for treatments,” she says. “My sweet husband, Pieter, came with me to every appointment.”

On May 31, 2014, she was declared cancer free.

Unfortunately, the calf that saved her life didn’t live to see that day.

“She died of pneumonia during my treatments,” Van der Laan says. “That’s really rare for us, and at first I was really upset about it. Then I realized she may have died, but I lived. I believe she was an angel sent in the form I needed, so I would see a doctor.”

Today, Van der Laan, who now farms with her grown children and their spouses, is in remission. The No. 1 thing she learned from these experiences is to take nothing for granted. She says life is short, and it’s best lived to the fullest.

Grit WITH
Grace
RESILIENCE IN AMERICAN AGRICULTURE

Real stories. Real farmers. Real inspiration.

Grit with Grace highlights farmers’ resilience in the face of adversity. Read their stories at

AgWeb.com/Grit-With-Grace

Kristen's Journey

How one young woman battled cancer through COVID-19 pandemic

By Tyne Morgan

A serene setting on this Missouri farm is where Kristen Clenney is living her dream. “I was about 8 years old, and I declared, ‘Dad, I want to be a vet,’” she remembers.

Her dad, Tom Wright, says Kristen was even younger than that when he knew animals were her calling. “Oh, it was probably when she was 3,” he says. “She always helped me in the turkeys. She was the one daughter who the animals didn’t bother her. She always liked the animals.”

Now a veterinarian in the neighboring town of Eldon, Mo., her career desires have been steadfast.

“I never changed my course at all; everything I did throughout high school and college directed me towards my goal of becoming a vet,” she adds.

A graduate of the University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine, she thought a large animal practice was her calling. But that changed when Kristen and her husband John had a chance to move back to her family’s farm.

“And as we move back home, we had just started our family. We had a son, and definitely my role on the farm changed, as well as my career, where I was a smaller animal veterinarian and having more controlled hours worked a lot better for our family,” she says.

Family first, Kristen is now a mom who just went through the fight of her life.

“In January 2020, I randomly felt a lump in my neck that I knew was something odd,” says Kristen. “As soon as I felt it, I knew it wasn’t right.”

The next few weeks, were a whirlwind of doctor’s appointments, biopsies and ultrasounds.

“Unfortunately I found out that I did have thyroid cancer.”

Coping with the news, Kristen underwent surgery within five days.

“We were under the impression my tumor was small, they caught it early. I’d have one surgery, and that would be the end of it,” she says.

But it wasn’t so simple.

“We got the bad news that although my tumor was small, it was rather mighty so to speak, and it had spread. And I would be needing a second

Photos: Tyne Morgan





surgery as well as radiation therapy.”

The radiation crippled her ability to be around anyone, or anything, including her husband, son and animals. And she said that battle is when she almost hit a breaking point.

“Initially, they said they were going to take your whole thyroid, and I was on board for that,” she says. “But then the doctor changed his mind and said, ‘We’re going to do half your thyroid, they’ve come out with new recommendations.’ I said, ‘I don’t feel comfortable with this,’ because what I originally felt was a lymph node. So I knew it had spread. I just knew it had.”

The one surgery turned into two. Radiation to try to get it all happened at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The medical battle came with a mountain of obstacles, as Kristen—the one who’s usually doing the healing—couldn’t do the healing herself.

“That was the first time John broke down through it all, because he knew he was losing his job due to the pandemic and he felt he was letting me down. Our whole world just felt like it was crashing around us,” she says.

The battle to keep fighting was one that took place both mentally and physically. “I found out I was reacting really badly to my medication and my kidneys were shutting down, and that’s why I felt so terrible,” says Kristen.

She was too weak to even do simple things on the farm, at the vet clinic and at home.

“I read something midway through my journey when I really struggling. It said, ‘It takes the same energy to be strong or to be miserable. It’s your choice.’ After reading that, I made a conscious decision that every day I was going to choose to be strong. Because I needed to be strong, not only for myself, but

for my husband, for my son for my family.”

She’s a wife and mom and now a cancer survivor.

“I know that through the love of my family and my faith, I can get through anything,” she says. “And really, it is not giving up. it was a complete mindset.”

A scar on her neck is now something Kristen wears with pride.

“When I look at that scar, I remember all I’ve overcome,” she says. “I remember to be grateful for each day because life changes immediately sometimes and to just continue to be strong no matter what life throws at you. Just keep going.”

There’s more:



Scan the QR code to see more photos and a video featuring Kristen. Or visit this link.

[Strength of a Mom](#)



From the Streets to the Sow Barn

Gracee Workman finds her purpose in agriculture

By Jennifer Shike 

Gracee Workman wants people to know they aren't alone. Everyone goes through hard times, but life is worth pushing through to the other side. She is living proof.



The first thing Gracee Workman will tell you about her story is that she is not a victim. But her story is not easy, and most people will never understand what she's been through.

Workman grew up far from hog barns and oblivious of the industry she's come to love. The obstacles she's overcome to build a career that's included working in a sow unit and vet clinic to managing the Ohio State University swine farm is inspiring.

Daughter of Addicts

Shortly after turning 1, Workman's parents divorced. She and her sister slept on a cement floor as their mother's addiction grew worse and she gradually sold everything in their house for drugs and alcohol.

"She would wake up, and immediately we'd count whatever change we could find and walk with her to the liquor store," Workman says. "She'd get her King Cobra first thing so she could start drinking or get high or whatever she needed to do. On good days, we'd go trash

picking. We'd go from dumpster to dumpster to see what we could find."

When Workman was 5, her father received custody and moved the girls away from the streets of Columbus, Ohio, out near Buckeye Lake to be closer to his family. Her father was an addict, too, but functioned at a higher level than her mother.

Her father dated several women throughout her childhood. One of his

"I was in the atmosphere to become an addict due to the choices that were put in front of me at a young age."

longer term girlfriends struggled with mental health and attempted suicide several times. After a big fight one day, her dad took the girls to their grandparents' house. While they were away, the girlfriend hanged herself.

Workman's mother struggled with mental health, too, and attempted suicide. She died of a drug overdose when Workman was 18.

Fallen Heroes

Workman's dad was her hero. During her childhood, he was in and out of hospitals for nine different back surgeries and became addicted to opiates.

"There were times my father wouldn't get out of bed, and there were times he would be gone for weeks," she says.

Before long, families in the community began to notice and offered Workman support and a place to live. Looking back, she says those families are why she pushed through nearly impossible circumstances. For example, when Workman was 10, her older sister got her high so she would sleep while her sister had parties.

"I was in the atmosphere to become an addict due to the choices put in front of me at a young age," she says. "But I knew I wanted something else. I did not want to go down the same path as my parents."

Introduction to Agriculture

Although she grew up disconnected from agriculture, she quickly uncovered a passion for it in high school while taking care of a friend's horse.



They moved the horse to a new farm that also had a pig finishing barn. She eventually helped this family with chores and realized how much she enjoyed working with animals.

During her senior year, she became pregnant. After graduation, that same family watched her baby while she took college classes and worked.

“One day they asked me if I was interested in playing with pigs,” Workman says. “And that’s where it all started.”

They connected her with the production manager at a Heimerl Farms sow farm in Pleasantville. However, the transition to working at a sow farm wasn’t easy. In fact, it was downright overwhelming at times. She also struggled to fit in, but she says that was the fuel she needed to rise up and prove people wrong. And prove them wrong she did. She stuck it out, gaining respect from co-workers and developing great relationships.

For the Love of Pigs

Workman completed her vet tech degree while working for Heimerl Farms. After her vet clinic internship, she worked at the clinic and Heimerl Farms until she was offered a position as a gilt multiplication director at the farm. Workman oversaw 50,000 pigs and traveled throughout Ohio. When the chance to manage the Ohio State University swine farm came her way, Workman couldn’t pass up the opportunity. Workman oversees everyday care of the pigs, farrowing, breeding and gestation. She works with researchers and vet students. She’s taken on facility improvements, from the teaching arena to a neonatal pig nutrition research area.

Growing up, Workman was often judged by the actions of her addict parents. She hopes her story helps people see the value of giving others a chance before making assumptions.



To read the whole story ...

Just scan the QR code OR visit this link.

[Swine Barn](#)



Working with pigs is Workman’s passion, but it’s closely followed by a desire to produce food to feed the world.



The Stories No One Talked About

A look at the resiliency of U.S. hog farmers when packing plants shuttered

By Jennifer Shike 

In July, Steve Rommereim received the best news he'd heard for months. He was able to secure 12 loads and empty his barns. He's looking forward to starting over with young pigs and less marketing pressure for now.



Photo: National Pork Board and the Pork Checkoff

“I’m not sure what’s going to happen,” South Dakota pig farmer Steve Rommereim confided to his friend Scott Phillips, a pig farmer in Missouri. “It’s bad. Real bad.” The line went quiet. Although Phillips had heard rumors some producers were going to have to euthanize pigs, the situation wasn’t that devastating in his area. The next morning Phillips called his friend back and left Rommereim speechless.

A Risky Move

“How far are you from Remsen, Iowa?” Phillips asked.

“Forty minutes,” Rommereim replied.

“A truck is going to stop in your yard later today. It’s dropping off some weaner pigs in Remsen, then will come your way to bring back a load of your hogs to Missouri,” Phillips said.

During a time when the hog markets were on a roller coaster to hell, his friend was just going to give up a chance to send a load of hogs to his packer? Sure enough, a truck pulled into his yard that afternoon. The driver slept there overnight, and they loaded 165 heavy hogs the next morning.

“As they drove away, I thought, ‘wow, that’s really something.’ It just came from the goodness of his heart. He didn’t have to do that for me,” he says.

For Rommereim, age 60, farming and raising hogs has been his life. His feeder-to-finish operation runs about 5,000 head at a time — a plan that got incredibly disrupted during COVID-19. Having raised pigs for many years, news of a new virus was nothing new. When he heard about novel coronavirus, he thought it would be like the flu.

“I didn’t get too panicky,” he says. “Then I started hearing about problems in China, and before I knew it, they were closing down U.S. harvesting facilities.”

That’s when the panic set in. When the Smithfield plant he contracts with closed down in Sioux Falls, S.D., Rommereim had 12 loads lined up to go to market in the two-week period the plant was shuttered.



Read how Smock Farms survived the plant closures:

1. Scan the QR code
2. Visit this link.
[Smock Farms](#)



Photos: Ashlyn Imus



“All of a sudden, you’re asking yourself, ‘What does this mean not only for me, but for everybody else in this industry?’ Panic is the best word,” Rommereim says.

Market Disruptions

After Smithfield shuttered, more plants began slowing down or closing due to COVID-19 outbreaks among employees and absenteeism.

“All of a sudden you’re in this situation you’ve never been in and are trying to manage your way through it,” Rommereim says. “Slowing down rations, stacking young pigs and coming up with strategies around maintaining and getting through the week.”

With 12 loads canceled, an entire barn, he was forced to make decisions.

“I kept thinking, ‘I’m going to have to dig a hole.’ That was just unbelievable to have to think that way,” he says.

They bought a little time because of the double-stocking taking place in nurseries. They also marketed a few pigs across state lines.

The market disruptions have led to many unanticipated events. He says it’s time to find solutions to the fragility of the pork chain and the fact that packing plants mean everything to producers.

“What will we do to safeguard that system? That’s hard to answer,” he says.

Farming in the Future

Dramatic changes to the pork industry will happen because of COVID-19, Rommereim says. He believes the unprofitability farmers are wrestling with now will lead to more integration. He views natural integration as a move toward efficiency but says what’s happened here is not natural.

“My hope is this is a one-off event, not one that will lead us down a trail where there’s no coming back,” he says.



Always Audrey

How Audrey Angus fought cancer and found a new perspective on life

By Jennifer Shike ✉

Audrey says cancer taught her a lot, but especially to be more empathetic to what others are going through in life.



Audrey says the last thing she wanted was special handling as she went through chemotherapy. She planned her treatments so she could continue working when she felt the best.

Photo: Betsy Jibben

It was a morning from hell. Literally. Jason Angus raced to a landlord's farm to put out a fire, while his wife, Audrey, put their boys on the school bus. From out of nowhere, the family's 6-month-old puppy ran under the bus chasing after a corn husk and was killed instantly. As Audrey soothed her tearful boys and Jason fought a fire, neither felt prepared for the biggest battle they would face next.

Audrey's first day of chemotherapy was not off to a great start.

When the unexpected knocks

In fact, the entire situation was like that — unexpected. When Audrey turned 40, she was encouraged to get her first mammogram. She was young, healthy and active. Between balancing her most important job as mother to two boys (Alex, 7, and Theo, 5), serving as a swine specialist with Furst-McNess and working as a farm wife, Audrey says it was months before she actually found time to make the appointment.

"I thought nothing of it," she says, recalling her mammogram on Halloween, and so she went back to her busy life. She was in Chicago touring a museum with her sister on a Saturday morning when her doctor called. She remembers bits and pieces of the conversation. Stage one, grade three. Highly aggressive. Oncologist. Treatment plan.

"Oh, that's a big life change," Audrey says. "You really don't see that coming. I had stage one, grade three, triple negative breast cancer. Don't Google it. It's nasty stuff and by far, the most aggressive kind with the highest chance of recurring."

That's also hard news for a husband to take, Jason says. Telling the boys was the hardest part.

"We didn't know what they would understand and what they wouldn't," he says. "We talked with a lot of people about how you tell kids this news. The boys' responses were drastically different. Alex was scared. Theo was like, 'let's move on and do this.'"

Stepping into the Ring

Chemotherapy started almost immediately. Audrey's oncologist started her on a five-month plan. Despite all the treatments and appointments, Audrey refused to let cancer define her and told few people about what she was going through.

In addition to family and close friends, only a few feed customers knew. She wanted to keep working and planned her treatments so she could work when she felt the best and crash on the weekends.

“I didn’t want to be looked at as ‘the cancer person,’” she says. “I just wanted to be looked at as Audrey.”

Audrey’s colleague and friend, Fredrik Sandberg, says she displayed nearly superhuman strength in continuing to work despite the severe chemotherapy treatments she had to have.

“It humbles me to think she kept pushing on when a lot of people would have hidden behind closed doors,” Sandberg says.

She didn’t want the Furst-McNess team to ‘let up’ on her either, he says. They honored her wishes by moving ahead with things, even though they expected her to take time for herself.

An Unusual Twist

Not long after her diagnosis, Jason’s farming partner’s wife was diagnosed with a second case of breast cancer.

“Two business partners watching their wives suffering from basically the same thing ... it was ironic,” Jason says. “We made it through 2018, but it did not go as we expected.”

Eventually, Audrey had to deal with the hard questions. What if things don’t work out?

“Not to be morbid, but you have to get OK with an early demise. I certainly



Photo: Russ Hnatusko

don’t want to go early — I want to see as much of our kids’ lives as I can,” she says. “The thought of not being there for my kids’ graduations, weddings, etc., is horrible. But they would get through it. You just don’t want them to have to deal with that burden, in addition to figuring out how to grow up.”

A World Pork Expo to Remember

After completing chemotherapy, Audrey went in for the first of two surgeries in early June

2018. Two days later, she left for the World Pork Expo. While visiting with her old boss, she was interrupted by a phone call from her doctor.

“The doctor said, ‘It’s gone. I don’t get to make many of these calls — only 13% of people get a pathological complete response, Audrey,’” she recalls. “They found no residual cancer in my breast or lymph nodes, which meant a significant reduction in recurrence rate.”

As soon as the expo wrapped up, she went home for the second surgery, followed by 36 straight days of radiation. Her prognosis is good, she says. Every six months, she has diagnostic scans and visits a cancer specialist.


“Cancer causes you to self-reflect. It’s very humbling,” Audrey says.

Audrey views life a little bit differently now. “I think I needed more empathy. Maybe cancer was God’s way of saying, ‘Hey, you need to be knocked down a notch and have a little more empathy,’” she says. “I treasure my time with my friends and family. I don’t work as much as I used to, and my work does not get my whole heart and soul all the time.”

[Read Audrey’s whole story here.](#)

From Tragedy to Opportunity

Missouri hog producers rebuild after a devastating fire

By Jennifer Shike 



After a fire in 2018, (from left) Janet, Jerry, Jordan and Kylie Epperson rebuilt their hog barn.

Sometimes you just know when something's not right. Anthony Russo, general manager of Spring Lake Pork, awoke to a call on May 19, 2018, from the farm's alarm system.

"I remember feeling like something was definitely not right, but I had no idea how not right things really were," Russo says.

He called the Curryville, Mo., farm's manager to go check on the barns. "I distinctly remember where I was and what it sounded like when the farm manager called and said the barns are fully engulfed," Russo recalls. "There was nothing left."

Up in Flames

A multimillion-dollar hog facility and 18,000 animals went up in flames in less than two hours. Despite the despair of that tragic moment, Russo will always remember the calm demeanor of Jerry Epperson, co-owner of Epperson Farms and Spring Lake Pork.

"It was a mess. But Jerry led us by example. His attitude was 'let's not feel sorry for ourselves, but get to work dealing with it,'" Russo says.



“Our employees suffered from this tragedy just as much as we had.”

Four days after the fire, the Eppersons organized a job fair for their employees at their church. The only employees they could afford to keep on were the managers.

“That was one of the toughest days,” says Kylie Epperson, Jerry’s daughter-in-law and co-owner.

“Our employees suffered from this tragedy just as much as we had.”

For three months, the team cleaned up from the fire and composted pigs. Luckily, the building’s deep pit barn and the concrete below the ground level were still usable. They rebuilt on the existing footprint, which saved money, and the site was already permitted.

Rise from the Wreckage

The fire allowed the Eppersons to reevaluate their setup. They made it more employee friendly, increased biosecurity and found other efficiencies. Now, pigs are filling the barns and business has resumed.

Kylie encourages farmers to regularly evaluate their insurance coverage and avoid the ‘it will never happen to me’ mentality.

“Our family, and farmers in general, keep pushing forward when tragedy strikes,” Kylie says. “Instead of feeling sorry for ourselves, we began looking for the next opportunity to make our operation better. After a tragedy like the fire, we had nowhere to go but up.”



Real stories. Real farmers. Real inspiration.

Grit with Grace highlights farmers’ resilience in the face of adversity. Read their stories at

AgWeb.com/Grit-With-Grace

True Grit: A Tribute to Ranchers Who Weathered the Extremes



The record cold temperatures and extreme weather had a major impact on ranchers across the country, but through it all, the men and women showed what the true definition of a rancher is. Scan the QR code to join Tyne Morgan in looking back.