

A great cow man, a better person

The legacy of Michael Heath

By Danielle Nauman

“When you reach for the stars you may not quite get one, but you won’t come up with a handful of mud, either.” — Leo Burnett, American advertising executive

WESTMINSTER, Md. — Genuine, passionate, enthusiastic, determined, dedicated, honest, caring, encouraging, incredible and legend — all adjectives used to sum up the person Michael Heath was.

“Michael was always honest with people,” said his father, Billy Heath. “When he started in the cow business, I told him, ‘You better be honest, because it’s not going to take people long to figure you out if you aren’t, and once you get the title of being a dishonest person, it never leaves you.’ He remembered that.”

Michael became a legend in the business that raised him — but those who knew him best said he never fully grasped his status among those who admired him.

“Michael was passionate about everything he did,” said Kelly Barbee, close friend and business partner. “What was so cool about him — he didn’t realize the impact he had, the almost iconic status he had in the industry. He looked at himself as just another Jersey breeder.”

Michael passed away March 23, 2023, after suffering grievous injuries sustained in a farm accident on his family’s beloved Spring Valley Jersey Farm, near Westminster, in the rolling hills of Maryland’s Carroll County.

Michael’s memory will be honored at World Dairy Expo, by his family and friends, with the presentation of the Michael Heath Overall Fitter award, presented to the top participant in the Youth Fitting Contest. Michael’s legacy to the Jersey breed will be honored with rosettes presented to the best bred and owned entries.

“Everyone was sad and distraught after the accident — I was the first day, too — then I came to the realization, what was I doing sitting here, feeling sorry for Michael?” said Kelly. “He’s what everybody wants to be. He’s never actually worked a day in his life — every single day of his life, he has done exactly what he loves, and he died doing what he loved. How many of us can say that? What a better life to live, than that?”

Michael was born with his passion for registered Jerseys — and everything associated.

“Billy was a technician for Curtiss when Michael was little and he rode all around with Billy, seeing all kinds of cows,” said Michael’s mother Betty Heath. “Then, when he got older, he would go around and look at cows with his Uncle Wayne. He said Wayne was the one who taught him to go roading.”

From a young age, Micheal was driven to soak up knowledge, said his family.

“His first year to show in Louisville, we’d have to go get him from the Canadian aisle all the time,” Betty said. “We’d apologize for him bothering them, but they seemed happy to answer his questions. I later heard him tell somebody the reason he wanted to be in their aisle was because they won everything, and he wanted to see what they were doing.”

That desire to learn carried over to judging.

“Billy was the judging coach, too, when Michael was little, so he went to all the judging practices with him,” said Betty. “Then when Michael was of an age to judge, Billy quit coaching because he didn’t think it would be right to coach his son — back then there was a large number of kids, it was stiff competition.”

Michael’s uncle Allen Stiles recalled a young Michael asking him to put together classes of cows during milking.

“He’d come over while I was milking and say, ‘Uncle Allen, pick me a class to judge,’” said Allen. “So, I’d do that, and we’d talk about those cows. Then my dad would come in the barn and wonder why I wasn’t done milking yet. That got Michael banned from the barn while I was milking for a couple of months!”

Those classes placed during milking served Michael well. He was selected for a spot on the highly competitive Maryland State 4-H Dairy Judging team in 1980, his first year as a senior.

“He was an amazing youngster, well beyond his years with his enthusiasm, discipline and perseverance,” said Bonnie Remsberg, who coached Michael on the Maryland judging team. “He would give reasons with such conviction, such a strong voice. He talked cows the way I talk cows, and we just gelled. His parents asked me if I thought he was ready, and I said yes, absolutely he’s ready. The rest is history.”

Michael placed 11th overall in the National 4-H Dairy Judging Contest that year, and was second individual in Brown Swiss, while his team won the breed.

“You just never know at that age,” said Bonnie. “It’s like the Olympics — do you hold somebody back?”

That appearance judging on the colored shavings at age 15 ended Michael’s 4-H dairy judging career but opened the door for him to venture into livestock judging, making the state 4-H livestock judging team and judging livestock at Hawkeye Technical College, where his father said he even won a national barrow judging contest.

“Michael gave reasons like livestock judges give reasons — strong, loud and convincing,” said Bonnie. “He always wanted to learn, to be better. When you can judge and give reasons in one species, they can easily train you for another — he must have been magnificent.”

That enthusiasm is what struck Callum McKinven the first time he met Michael.

“We had a group of Jerseys from my family’s farm at the Big E — we had some pretty good cows there,” said Callum. “One day, here comes this kid from the FFA judging contest, walking through the barns dressed up in a brown blazer. I had never met him, but he came up and started talking about the cows. He knew everything about the pedigree of every cow — he knew our cows better than I did!”

The next meeting between Michael and Callum, at the Ontario Summer Show, would become the one that cemented their relationship.

“After the show, we started chatting and it was an instant friendship after that,” Callum said. “He started clipping for us, then we started partnering on some cows. We owned some pretty special ones together.”

'Roading' became a hobby Michael embraced, likely traveling millions of miles throughout his life, seeking out special animals — particularly those he called 'diamonds in the rough.'

"A lot of guys can go to a show and find a nice heifer, fitted up," said Allen. "Michael could go out into the pasture and find one in her work clothes."

Allen recalled one of Michael's early roading trips, just out of school, to Canada, where a friend showed him different farms.

"There was a Jersey farm Michael saw and asked about," Allen said. "His friend said they didn't have anything. Before he came home, he went to that place — that is where he found Glenyle Jodys Eleanor. She ended up being National Junior Champion in 1986."

That herd became a favorite for Michael. He later returned and purchased Glenyle S J Hetty, who would become the dam of Heaths Imperial Helen and the granddam of Pleasant Valley Primetime Heather — cows that would be impactful in his career as a breeder.

"When Michael sold Helen to Piedmont Jerseys in Canada, that gave him the opportunity to start getting more into marketing," said Allen. "Michael was a top-flight fitter, like his dad was — that is where he learned that from; but he knew he didn't want to be a fitter his entire life. Marketing cattle became the next step in his career."

Joining him on many roading trips, Kelly said Michael's personality shone while visiting farms.

"I liked his interaction with the farmers," said Kelly. "A lot of guys who do what he does, with the reputation he had, they don't seem to have time for the little guys. Michael liked talking to the normal farmers, about their cows and their breeding programs."

Ricky Allyn, a friend and partner, said the interest Michael paid to the breeding programs of farmers they visited helped earn him the reputation he developed.

"He had this thing about him, he could stand behind a cow and make a one-liner about her and lift you right off the ground," said Ricky. "The positivity of his comments, you'd see these people light right up. He made them feel really good about what they had accomplished with their cows. Michael was in and out of more barns than anyone I've ever known, and people looked forward to his visits."

Callum concurred, recalling his friend with a smile.

"A lot of good times and memories, he'd come to the farm, we'd go roading everywhere," Callum said. "We did that for years. All the farmers would love him, he'd tell them what bulls he thought they should be using. He knew the pedigrees of a lot of their cows, and they'd be shocked. I never knew a guy that knew pedigrees like Michael. It was amazing — not just Jerseys, he knew about everything. That always impressed me."

That ability to recall served Michael well throughout his judging career.

"I think he probably had a photographic memory — the way he knew cows, the history, the pedigrees," said Bonnie. "He could see a diamond in the rough — that's the best kind of judge, the one that can go out in the field and find the best one."

Over the years, as he watched the cows Michael bought and sold, Billy said he never once questioned why Michael had purchased a single one.

"I do know I owned cows I never even knew I owned part of," Billy said, laughing. "If he needed some money, he'd go to his mother, he'd never come to me. Mindy — the cow that was National

Champion — I didn't know I owned part of her until she won at Louisville as a three-year-old, when they announced her name. Betty said, 'That's our cow!' She told me Michael needed some money to get her bought, so she got in on her."

When Michael saw an animal he liked, he tracked down information about her and would persist in convincing his friends to join him in purchasing. Typically they were never disappointed.

"One of the first well-known cows we partnered on was Friendly Acres Linjet Murphy," said Callum. "Michael called me from the Illinois State Show in 1997 and told me he had a cow he thought we should buy. Then he told me I had her dead-last at Madison the year before, so I probably wouldn't like her. I remembered her, and told him I had loved her, but she was fat and her pins were high — but I could see her making a heck of a cow. I agreed to partnering and bringing her to my place. Turns out, they had loaded her on the trailer and were headed home — he ran after the trailer to catch up with them and got her off the trailer."

Callum recounted the sale of Murphy to Gene Iager, and the trip to deliver her to Ronnie Heffner's farm, where Michael met him with the prospect of another cow — a young, fresh heifer to go look at.

"That fresh heifer turned out to be Chief Adeen, and we bought her that morning," said Callum. "We partnered on quite a few after that. If Michael called me on one, I didn't have to see them — I knew they would be good."

Another long-time friend and business partner, Nathan Thomas, recounted an impactful cow who came into his life because of Michael's persistence — Starmark Ad Hotstuff-Red, a cow they owned with Will Iager.

"Michael's Spring Valley sale was on Friday and March Madness was on Saturday," Nathan said, recounting how Hotstuff came to Triple-T. "We got back out to the fairgrounds Saturday, and there was this transit dry cow there, that caught Jenny's eye. I just wanted to get loaded up and headed home, I didn't pay much attention. A couple hours later, Michael called and said, 'Man, there's a heck of a red cow here, a transit cow.' I told him that Jenny had liked her a lot. He said no one seemed to know what she was or where she was going, but he got to figuring all that out."

A couple of hours later, Nathan said his phone rang again.

"He had found out that Richard Green had just sold out of her, and Derek Page was hauling her to Missouri," Nathan said. "She was Good Plus as a two-year-old. Michael thought we should buy her, but they wanted what I thought that was a lot of money for her."

Never one to take no for a first answer, Michael persisted, said Nathan.

"He told me she'd be going right by my place, why didn't I meet Derek by the highway and take a look," Nathan said. "So that night I drove the trailer back down to the highway, looked at the cow, in the dark, with a flashlight at 10:30 p.m. We bought her off the trailer. We made a lot of money on that cow."

Billy said he considered the most definitive purchase of Michael's career to be the purchase of MD-Delight Durham Atlee, a granddaughter of Chief Adeen. Michael owned Atlee with Ricky Allyn and Jason Lloyd.

“The money that Atlee reaped — that was iconic,” said Ricky. “Hindsight is 20/20, you never know how these things are going to turn out. I nearly turned the opportunity to partner down, it was a lot of money for a springing heifer — a huge gamble and risk. I was nervous, even after we took on Jason as a third partner.”

Atlee was purchased by the trio the day before she calved.

“Michael called me the next day and said, ‘Well she calved — she had a heifer calf and she has white milk in all four quarters,’” Ricky said, recalling the relief the conversation brought. “I just said hallelujah!”

Just two weeks fresh, Atlee made the journey from North Carolina to the Massachusetts State Show, where Ricky was working. Upon her arrival, she caught not only his imagination, but that of Donald DuBois, who was working with him that week. Michael had stopped in at the show, hearing that Atlee was on her way.

“Donald stood looking at her as I milked her that night,” Ricky said. “When I finished, I told him I was going to take her out to the washrack to rinse her down. He told me to scrub her — that we’d come in early in the morning and clip her, and not to milk her in the morning. When we got there in the morning, the night person said she’d been up, eating all night. She had quite a fill on.”

Washed and clipped, full of milk and with a full belly, Atlee impressed everyone who saw her that day.

“Donald asked me who was going to lead my cow,” Ricky said. “I told him he could lead her, if he would like. Brian Craswell was judging. After he won with her, he went over and told his father, who’d traveled to the show with him, to go buy that cow. He didn’t know that Athol had already asked for a price that morning.”

After the show, Ricky told Michael about the Craswells interest in the cow and was shocked at the reply.

“He said, ‘Nope, we ain’t selling her,’” Ricky said, smiling at the memory. “I was astounded. He said, ‘Ricky, we ain’t selling this one right away — she’s got future written all over her.’ That might be the only time Michael ever said those words. Any other time, they all had a price, and they all got sold.”

The rest was history, and Michael’s prophecy was fulfilled. Atlee went on to be named the Reserve Intermediate Champion the next year, at the 2005 World Dairy Expo, after topping the senior three-year-old class.

“She calved right before Madison, she was 21 days fresh when we stood at the end of the ramp of the pot, trying to decide whether we should load her or not,” said Ricky. “I said I’d rather have her with me, so I could take care of her, than wonder how she was doing for the next 10 days, so up the ramp we went. When we got there, she was tired from the ride, but she never missed a beat. She had a phenomenal week, eating and coming up on milk every milking.”

After her win, Ricky said the demand for embryos and sons was instantaneous.

“It was like something you dream of happening, but never thought could actually happen,” said Ricky. “It took us to a level I don’t think any of us were even prepared for at that point. That flush to Goldwyn — she made 50 eggs on just a conventional flush, back before IVF — was phenomenal, it put

us on the map, it was like getting an ATM card handed to you. She changed all our lives, for the better; and none of it would have happened if Michael hadn't called that day and kept calling until he convinced me to get in on her."

Michael began building the foundation for the marketing aspect of his career, becoming involved in managing Holstein and Jersey sales in Maryland, before launching the Spring Valley sales series. For over 30 years Michael would apply his marketing know-how to a variety of sales, including a ten-year run of the successful Best of Triple T & Heath sales series.

"Michael was passionate, not just about buying and selling cows, but placing cows in the right home for each one," said Kelly. "He would try to place a cow wherever he thought she was the best fit."

The Best of Triple-T & Heath sales series was born of a friendship and partnership created of similar goals.

"We had always owned cattle together and went on the road together, even before the sales," Nathan said. "We always wanted to sell them. They all have to have a price and be marketable. That's the goal — market your animals, take that money and invest in something else to make more money. That's why we got along, we had the same goal."

That interest in marketing led the pair to partner to host the first of the successful sale series in 2014, featuring Holsteins.

"That first sale averaged just shy of \$10,000 on like 110 lots and grossed just shy of \$1 million," said Nathan. "We went on the road, we had fun doing it and it went well, so we decided to do another one the next year, selling Jerseys. That one went well, averaging close to the same, and we sold a record-breaking Jersey cow — Payneside Mac N Cheese — for \$267,000."

While buying and selling cattle became Michael's bread and butter, he found joy in judging dairy cattle shows.

"He loved to judge, his enthusiasm was palpable — 100% he loved to judge," said Nathan. "It didn't matter if it was a county fair or Expo — he loved to judge shows."

Billy recollected taking Michael with him when he judged shows.

"I judged a lot of county shows in Pennsylvania and Maryland and Michael would tag along," Billy said. "On the way home, he'd tell me which ones I'd placed wrong. He'd say if he agreed, but he'd let me know if he didn't. He learned from watching, and he had a good eye. From very little on, he was cow crazy."

Billy enjoyed swapping roles with this son.

"Whether I agreed with him or not, he always placed them the way he saw them — it didn't matter who was leading the cow or what she'd done before," said Billy. "He had cows he had won with at one show, then the next show he'd put her down. People would get mad at him sometimes, but it didn't bother him — he had the guts to do it."

Michael's presence as a top-level judge did not surprise Bonnie.

"His enthusiasm, style, flair and energy were all so genuine," Bonnie said. "When he slaps his champion at Expo, it's genuine — he feels it, he loves her."

Michael's unique panache for giving reasons when he judged caught the attention of both spectators and exhibitors.

"He didn't have fancy reasons — he said what he thought, and people took to it," said Billy. "That was the difference between he and I — I would judge because people asked. I liked doing it, but not to the degree Michael did — he loved it."

With the passion he had for cows, Michael impacted registered dairy cattle breeding — particularly the Jersey breed — in ways his friends and family say he might not have even realized.

"He was like a figurehead of the breed," said Nathan. "He was the guy everyone went to for advice, including myself, especially on breeding cows and cow families."

His Uncle Allen agreed with Nathan.

"Every time a cow comes in heat, Wayne and I look at each other and wonder what we should breed her to," said Allen. "We have a bunch of embryos in the tank, and we've been putting them in, but I guess when we run out of embryos, we'll have to figure it out."

Kelly recounted a story that shows the respect Michael's Jersey intuition garnered.

"A herdsman at Vierra Dairy couldn't think of Michael's name one day," Kelly said, laughing. "He called him Jersey Jesus — he said, 'The guy, when he speaks, everyone listens — like when Jesus talked.' It was true — when Michael spoke, everyone listened, because of his honesty, integrity and passion."

That verve Michael approached anything cow-related with was echoed in the way he lived life, and the kind of person he was.

"Michael wasn't always on top — he got knocked down sometimes, but he never gave up," said Betty. "He always said it made him want to win more, to work harder. He encouraged people to keep trying, he always helped the person that was down. He felt comfortable with everybody."

Betty continued, adding that helping young people learn was something near and dear to Michael's heart.

"He would remember all the people that had time for him when he was young — like those Canadians at Louisville," Betty said. "It was important to him to give that back. His faith had a lot to do with that, he learned first to love everybody. He was very loyal to his friends."

Ricky recalled his first meeting with Michael, working for a Jersey string at the Big E in 1985.

"I was just getting started, trying to learn how to clip," said Ricky. "I was hired to help out their lead fitters — who ended up being Billy and Michael. When I watched those two clip, I was just amazed. I had never seen anyone clip like that. That was right at the beginning of plucker blades, everyone in New England was still brush-block clipping, and here they were, going all over the bodies with these plucker blades. I couldn't wait to get home and order a set of those plucker blades."

In those five days, Ricky said he learned more than he probably learned throughout the rest of his career.

"They took me from a kid who hardly knew anything to that," Ricky said. "They included me in their deal and treated me like I had been with them forever. Michael and I were very close in age and from that point on, we became lifelong friends. I don't know how my career might have gone

differently, if I hadn't taken that job and met them at that point in time. I will be forever indebted and grateful to them for helping me at that point in my life when I was trying to learn."

The impact Michael had was immense, Kelly added.

"Forget about the crazy number of cattle he bought that were one-name cows, or the number of cows he mated," Kelly said. "His most important legacy was the way he treated people, he always had time for everybody."

Through the years and miles traveled with Michael, Ricky said he never tired of his company.

"It was always a treat when he'd call and say he was going to be in the area," Ricky said. "I'd get excited, and when he left, I'd be revved back up, he always gave me that shot of, 'Okay, get out there and make it even better.' He was always blunt and honest with me, but he was always supportive, too. You take it for granted, you don't realize what that really meant until it's gone."

With a catch in his voice, Nathan summed his friend's life up.

"Michael was a genuine guy, one-of-a-kind, there'll never be another one like him," Nathan said. "That is what people need to remember — he was a great cow person, but at the end of the day, he was an even better human being."