

A STORY OF A  
**STEAK**  
RESPONSIBLE BEEF

- PART ONE -

# Foundations of leadership

By Martha Mintz

**T**he road home for 22-year-old Reese Tuckwiller twists and turns, weaving through dense hardwood forests as it climbs the western slope of the West Virginian Alleghany Mountains. As Tuckwiller overtakes the pass summit, his home—the Greenbrier Valley—unfurls before him gloriously green, expansive and bursting with potential. Much like the fertile valley stretching out to the distant mountain-lined horizon so, too, stretches the limitless potential of the young beef producer's future in the industry he's grown to love.

Nine generations of Tuckwillers have made Lewisburg, West Virginia, their home, including many generations involved in livestock production in various forms. Having family roots dug to the lowest stratum of the earth's crust in a community and in an industry gives Reese a deep sense of belonging, pride and ownership.

"Our family legacy is our family farm and our family name. It's something you can stamp on your hat and it can't be taken away," he says. "We've been in the exact spot for nine generations, every one of us coming over the same hill and knowing where the old fencelines were, the orchards and the grist mill. There's a history here as well as forward movement. We're moving forward in technology and practice, transferring knowledge to the next generation, which is my generation. It's my job to keep the family

legacy going."

For Tuckwiller, that legacy includes living up to the firmly ingrained values of hard work, community service and leadership. These values were not only taught, they were demonstrated by his parents, Jackson and Kathryn, and his grandfather, John, along with other family members. They're lessons so frequently practiced they are simple muscle memory at this point, almost applied without thought to his various endeavors such as showing Angus cattle, and hogs, judging livestock through high school and now collegiately at the University of Nebraska and in his service on the 2015-2017 National Junior Angus Association Board of Directors. And he will likely continue to add strength to those lessons as he continues forward in life working to improve his family operation, his community and, through leadership, the beef industry as a whole.

Tuckwiller's experiences and the influencers that have impacted him seem to be molding him to be the sort who ends up in leadership positions. And leaders from the local to the national levels are those often responsible for guiding and shaping the beef industry. Leaders embrace new technologies and practices, push other producers to improve their herds, guide policy, help bridge the gap between producers and consumers and, ultimately, help beef producers make an even better steak.

So what goes into making a great leader? Well, for Tuckwiller—who seems to be on that path—it includes some great examples and lots of hard work.

## Developing a passion

Passionate is a description often used to describe great leaders. Those in the beef industry are passionate about cattle, and Tuckwiller is no exception. "Give me a pedigree and I can talk about it with you all day," Tuckwiller laughs. "I can always talk cows."

That's probably because he grew up surrounded by them. "Our house is literally in the middle of a pasture, there are cows all around us," he says. His father and uncle run 260 registered Angus cows and 40 Herefords cows, and sell stocker calves, bulls and bred heifers that spend their days grazing the lush clover and grass-covered meadows of the valley floor. It was from these herds that Tuckwiller selected his first show animal. He got his start in the National Junior Angus Association at 9 years old. He and his brother, Slayter, attended shows, hitting as many as they could on the East Coast when they were getting started.

"We didn't always walk out of the ring with a purple banner, but those are material things. The friendships, networking and the family you

build, that was the real prize," he says.

There was plenty of learning, too. "When we came out of the ring and didn't do the greatest, my dad was always ready with a positive perspective on the experience. He would say, let's look at it and see what we did right and what we can do better next time. He was very supportive," Tuckwiller says. It wasn't just talk. His father also demonstrated positivity, volunteering as a livestock judging coach, helping out with church upkeep and supporting the community.

His father also made Tuckwiller and his brother take full responsibility for their show animals. They rose early in the morning to feed their calves, put them in the barn and do whatever other chores might be necessary. "I hated it when I was growing up," Tuckwiller recalls. "I didn't realize until I was older how simple it was and how much I miss it now that I'm in college. But it was necessary. Those were my projects, my responsibilities. Yet at the time I didn't realize that's what my dad was teaching me."

His grandfather taught him the power of earning knowledge and developing skills. "He never told you every little detail of how to do a task—he was more the type to make you pick things up as you went, learning from your mistakes and figuring everything out eventually," Tuckwiller recalls. "He was also one of the most caring dudes in the world."

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Tuckwiller remembers every Sunday his grandpa would hop on his old John Deere model LA mowing tractor and mow the ditches of the roadside pastures throughout the community for the neighbors. “He cared about what things looked like and how they were presented even if no one else was paying attention. He took pride in his community,” Reese says. He also took pride in his young grandson. “When we started showing cattle we weren’t sure how we would work out having my cows on the farm, and what rent would cost of the livestock. Yet, he said get as many cattle as you can. We’re here to support you. Take advantage of the opportunities people give you now so you can give those opportunities to others later. He was always willing to take a chance on something or someone.”

One such case was when John let a friend of Reese’s brother show one of the farm heifers as a project. The kid didn’t grow up on a farm and had no experience, yet Tuckwiller’s grandpa John gave him an opportunity to step into the industry.

## Guiding hands

A love for the industry and a good work ethic certainly provide a couple layers of bricks in the foundation of a future leader, but there are some skills that help push a person from a solid member of the group to a leader of the masses. Tuckwiller picked up a few of those skills under the tutelage of his father when he started judging livestock.

“My dad was a volunteer livestock judging coach for 25 years,” Tuckwiller says. “He was intense and had high expectations. I wanted to make him proud, so I spent long days judging livestock and gave reasons late into the night.”

While being able to look over a class of cattle and rank them based on phenotype and expected progeny differences and other observations is certainly useful to any beef producer, livestock judges pick up a few bonus skills that are certain to be valuable in leaders.

“It forces you to make decisions. Once you’ve turned in your card you can’t take it back. Then when you give reasons you have to back up that decision whether it’s good or bad and take responsibility,” he says. It’s hard to argue the negatives of having a decisive leader capable of explaining his decisions and who is accustomed to being held accountable for those decisions. “Reasons especially also help you become a better communicator. You walk into a room and have to tell a complete stranger what you did and why. You have to be able to effectively communicate.”

Developing these skills takes work. As Tuckwiller moved on to judging at Joliet Junior College in Joliet, Illinois, and eventually the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, he was faced with balancing full credit loads at school along with a demanding schedule. “We travel every weekend and miss about three weeks of school annually. That

makes you really develop some time management skills,” he says.

But Tuckwiller was sure to never slack thanks to some lessons learned at the kitchen table back in West Virginia. “My mom was pretty tough. She was of the opinion if you didn’t help out and do your fair share you didn’t eat,” Tuckwiller laughs. Fortunately, Tuckwiller never went hungry and continues to apply the skills he picked up from family, coaches and his ever-growing network of influencers in the beef industry to continue stepping up and stepping out as a promising young leader.



Built in 1944 by Tuckwiller’s grandfather, this barn was where Tuckwiller learned hard work and responsibility caring for his show animals and toiling in the hot hayloft stacking alfalfa square bales. It’s also a representation of his family’s legacy in the valley, one he hopes to add to through his work in beef production.