

'I ♥ Cows'

A cattle-crazy teen leaves a growing legacy for other young folks.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**



April 4, 2000, started out as a typical day at the Worthington household. Seventeen-year-old Dustin Worthington and his buddy, Dale Goodpaster, 16, were heading out in Dustin's Ford F-150 pickup to buy cattle feed and to measure gates. Since Dale's brother, Austin, had been killed in a wreck two weeks before, Dustin and Dale were inseparable. Dale had even spent the night with the Worthingtons.

"I stepped out on the porch and told the boys 'be careful — I love you,'" recalls Dennis Worthington, Harrodsburg, Ky.

Later that morning, Dustin lost control of his pickup on a curve and hit a tractor-trailer head-on. He and Dale were killed instantly.

Source of healing

"My best friend, Jerry Smothers, held me up during the funeral home visitation," Dennis says. "He said he wanted to start a scholarship in Dustin's memory. A couple of weeks went by. It was like Dustin spoke to me — 'Dad, you know how much I liked school.'"

"He told us in kindergarten he wasn't going to college," says

Dena, Dustin's mother.

"Dustin loved to fool with cows," Dennis says. "The message text on his cell phone said 'I love cows.' It is also on his tombstone."

"That is all he wanted to do," he continues. "He wanted to buy, sell and trade cattle. That fella liked to have worried me to death because he wanted a four-wheel-drive truck and a trailer."

Dustin reached his goals. Between homeschool activities, he began going from stockyard to stockyard, buying, selling and hauling cattle — and making friends. "His friends were 10-

12-year-olds to 70-year-olds," Dennis says. "That was evident at the funeral. Men from the stockyards in Indiana came."

The result of Smothers's idea is a made-for-Dustin scholarship. Instead of college money, the 4-H and FFA kids who submit the winning essay in their county are given a show heifer. The essay subject is, of course, "Why I Love Cows."

"A thousand dollars is a drop in the bucket for college. But give a kid a cow when he is 10 or 11 years old, and he can have a herd by the time he goes to college if he invests his money wisely," Dennis says.

"It is my way of introducing people to Dustin," he adds.

Idea in motion

Once the scholarship ball started rolling, it gained momentum rapidly. By the time school was out in the late spring of 2000, Josh Jackson of Mercer County and Adam Gordon from Boyle County both had an Angus heifer.

Celebrity Rick Dees of the "Weekly Top Forty" show, who is also the owner of Sweetbrier Farm, Danville, bought the two heifers from Anderson Circle Farm, Harrodsburg. Dees pledged to continue to donate a heifer to a Boyle County club member each year. He also conducted a fund-raising golf tournament for the scholarship.

"Dustin Worthington was one of the finest, most energetic, full-of-life people I've ever met," Dees says. "He represented the true spirit of American youth."

In 2001, in addition to Sweetbrier Farm, Angus breeders Ashley Davis of Davis on the Highlands, Springfield, and Anderson Circle donated heifers. In 2002, Sweetbrier; Davis on the Highlands; Briggs and Beth Cunningham of Cliffside Farms, Lancaster; and Anne Clark of S&C Farm, Sharpsburg, are donating heifers to the program.

Continuing the chain

With the donations from two start-up operations and four farms, six counties will be able to offer heifer scholarships. "Both

► **Above:** Dennis and Dena Worthington set up a heifer scholarship in memory of their son, Dustin.

young men who won the year before last in their counties are donating the offspring of their heifers back,” explains Dana Anderson, 4-H agent for Mercer County.

Well, sort of. Danville producer Adam Gordon is actually keeping his heifer calf to show during the summer. The 14-year-old is donating a home-raised registered Hereford heifer to the program instead.

No matter the breed — a young person in Lincoln County will get a heifer from Adam. “It is a good cause,” Gordon says. “The program needs to grow, and Lincoln County needs a heifer.”

“The heifer chain is not a mandatory thing,” Dennis emphasizes. “I would rather it be voluntary. I want them to do it because their hearts told them to do it.”

Elda Jackson, mother of Josh, one of the winners of the first two Worthington heifers, says her son’s heart is definitely in it. “This year we are hurting for heifers. We have three sons who show and only three heifers, but that is what Josh wanted to do.”

“It is the least I can do,” Josh says. The 17-year-old Mercer County producer named his heifer Worthy, after the Worthington family, and says, “Having the Worthington heifer has been an opportunity to expand my herd. Also, it has been a lot of fun working with and showing Worthy.”

“Donating Worthy’s heifer back to the program will help expand the Worthington scholarship and give someone else a chance to become more involved in the beef project like I did,” he continues.

Along with having fun and gaining show experience, Josh and his family pitched in to promote the scholarship wherever they showed. Josh, his parents, Jack and Elda, and his brothers, Justin and Joey, set up a display for the scholarship at



► Dennis Worthington (right) admires Worthy, the heifer calf donated to the I Love Cows scholarship in memory of his son, Dustin. Josh Jackson won Worthy by writing the winning essay for his county.

each of Worthy’s shows, as well as at the Kentucky Angus Preview Show and the Kentucky State Fair. Josh also used his television interview time at the state fair to promote the scholarship program.

“We’d like to go to every county in the state,” Dennis says. “And if you read the essays, you’d love to give every kid a calf.”

With the help of other Kentucky Angus producers, the Worthingtons

hope to be able to spread Dustin’s love of cows to all 120 counties.

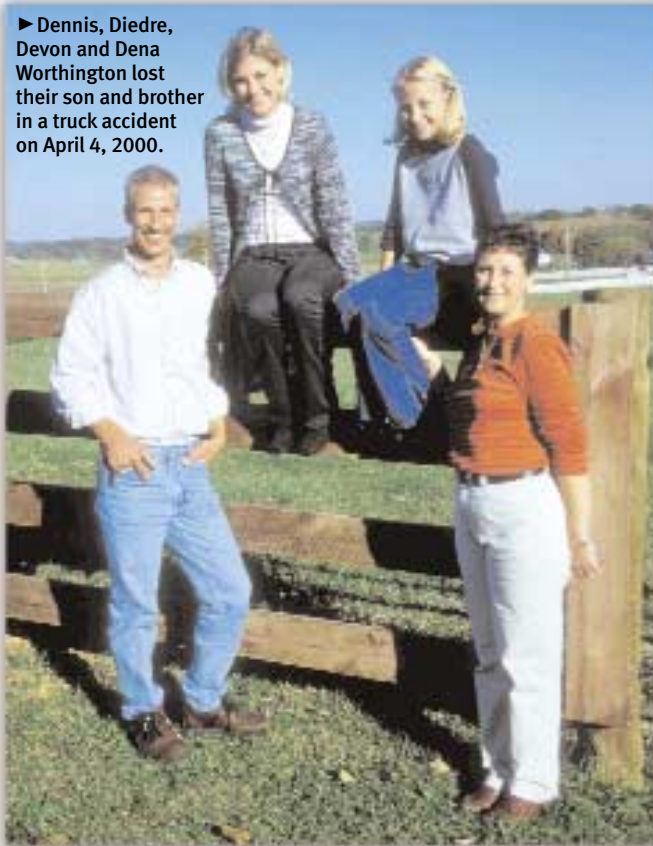
The scholarship isn’t limited to Angus cattle but, Dennis says, “So far the Angus people have been the generous people.”

Sharing opportunity

Briggs and Beth Cunningham, Cliffside Farms, fit that description. “My husband and I are big promoters of youth,” Beth says. “This scholarship is a great way to give some kid a chance to get started in farming who might not have that chance otherwise.”

She continues, “If we donate a heifer to a 4-H or FFA member, he or she can get an education or start a breeding program.”

The Lancaster, Ky., producer also says Cliffside Farms will donate a quality heifer. “It will be the quality we would keep for



► Dennis, Diedre, Devon and Dena Worthington lost their son and brother in a truck accident on April 4, 2000.

ourselves,” she stresses. “If you give a child a mediocre heifer, he or she has no incentive.

“With a quality heifer, if they want to show, we’ll help them. If not, it will give them a great start on their own herd. And hopefully, they’ll donate a heifer back to the program.”

That will enable the memory

of Dustin Worthington and his love of cows to grow, along with the fledgling herds and scholarship program.

For more information about the scholarship program or making a donation to the program, the Worthingtons have set up a Web site at www.dustinworthingtonmemorial.org. 