



DUAL CAREERS, SINGLE PURPOSE

Experts in efficiency, an Alabama father and son successfully run the family cattle operation while balancing full-time professional careers.

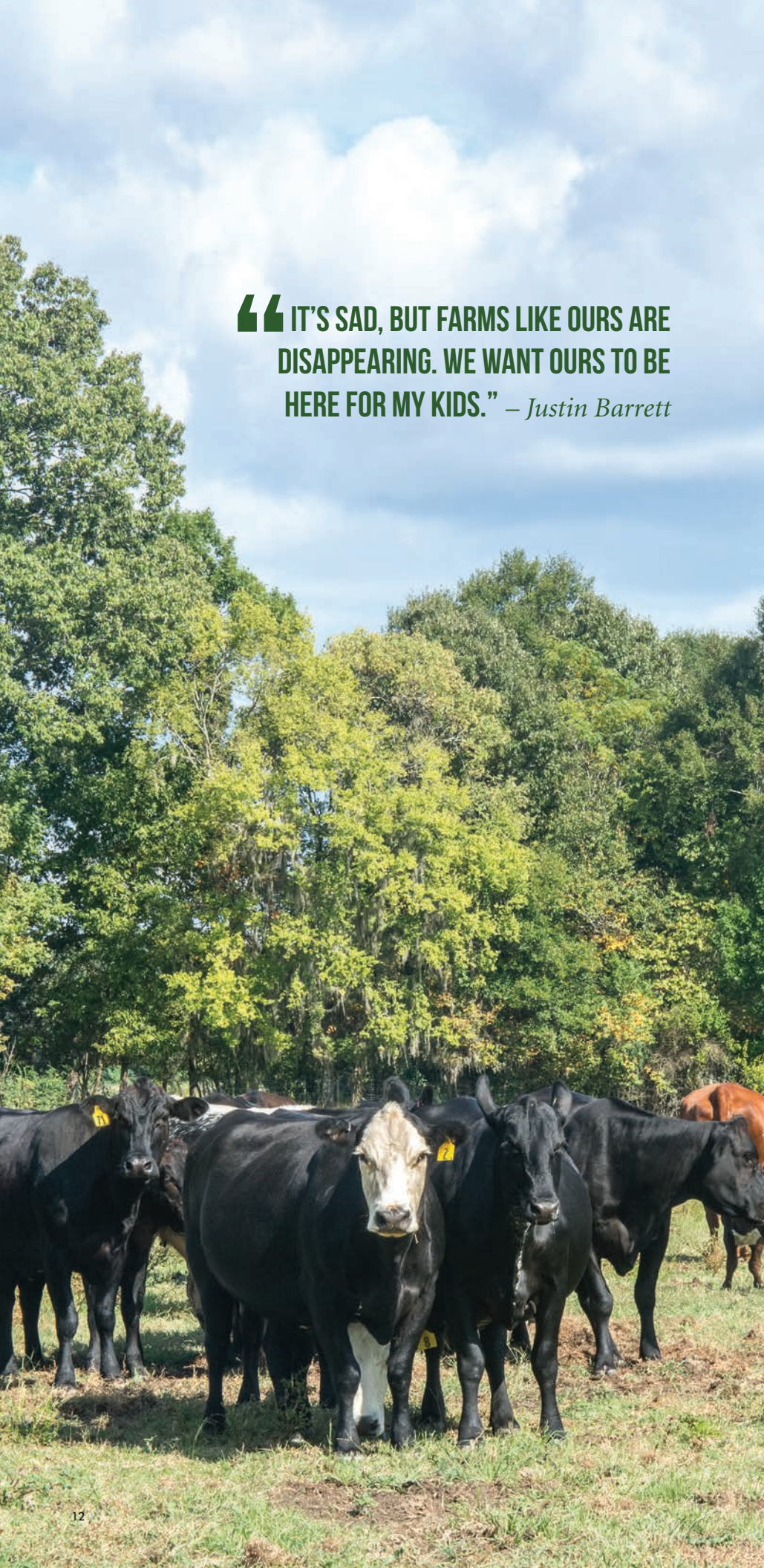
Three generations of the Barrett family include, left to right, Brantley, Justin, Jordan, Nealy, Jennie and Nealy Jr.

Spare time is a rare commodity for Justin Barrett and his father, Dr. I.C. “Nealy” Barrett Jr. of Wetumpka, Ala. By day, Justin, 29, works as a biosystems engineer in Montgomery, while his dad is the associate state veterinarian with the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries. After hours and before, the pair runs Bar Neal Farms, the east-central Alabama commercial cattle operation that’s been in their family for nearly half a century.

It’s not an easy balancing act. But preserving their agricultural lifestyle matters hugely to the Barretts, who are customers of Alabama Ag Credit — enough so that they devote any spare time they have to advocating for agriculture.

“My dad and I are third- and fourth-generation farmers and ranchers. It’s sad, but farms like ours are disappearing. We want ours to be here for my kids,” says Justin, 29, a father of two preschoolers.

Bar Neal Farms — a commercial cow-calf operation with just under 500 head — started on 40 acres purchased by Justin’s great-grandmother, whose husband died while driving cattle to the Montgomery stockyards. In the 1960s, her son Nealy Sr., now 85 and still active on the farm, purchased additional land. Gradually,



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the farm expanded to its present 1,100 owned and 1,400 leased acres after Nealy Jr. opened a large-animal veterinary clinic, which he operated for 17 years.

FOCUSED ON EFFICIENCY

Running a large cattle operation with almost no hired help requires ingenuity and juggling. Jennie, Nealy Jr.’s wife, and Jordan, who is Justin’s wife, keep the books and help out on the farm when needed. But Jennie also works for the Elmore County Public School System, and Jordan, who previously worked for the Alabama Cattlemen’s Association and the state agriculture department, is a full-time mom.

“We’ve come up with creative ways to get things done,” Justin says. “For example, we save time feeding our cattle during the winter by splitting up our 10 pastures and cross-fencing them. Then we spend about 15 hours on the weekends putting out hay. During the week, all we have to do is open the gates and feed supplements.”

Their professional know-how and individual expertise help, too.

As a veterinarian, Nealy Jr. oversees herd health and maintenance. Most of the cows have Brahman or Angus influence and are bred to produce black calves, which are preconditioned on the farm. Throughout the year, the calves are sold at local stockyards and by private treaty and then sent to feedlots in the Midwest. In August, the Barretts contract and sell 50,000-pound load-lots for delivery in September.

DATA DRIVES DECISIONS

Justin, drawing from his mathematical training, uses technology and data to boost the farm’s profitability and commercial reputation.

Five years ago, he would predict calf weights by gut feeling when estimating numbers per load at shipping time. In an efficiency move, he and his dad installed scales to measure weaning weights. Now, they use data to predict shipping weights based on feed consumption and conversion rates and historical data specific to their farm. They can also evaluate each cow’s yield, year after year, using her calves’

health data and weaning weights.

“We shipped four loads this year, and my predictions were within 1.3 percent of the estimated weights,” Justin says. “That kind of data gives us not only a good reputation among buyers and feedlots but instills confidence in the people we have representing our cattle for market.”

Besides producing cattle, the Barretts farm and bale their own hay, making 1,500 to 1,700 rolls a year. Six years ago, they improved efficiency in their haying operations by purchasing an 18-foot cutter.

“Before that, all three of us were on tractors, cutting hay with 9-foot cutters,” Justin says.

Since March 2012, the Barretts have worked with Ben Elliott, vice president and Montgomery branch manager at Alabama Ag Credit, as their lender.

“We’re fortunate to have a lending relationship with the Barretts,” Elliott says. “They’ve shown that they’re very progressive in their farming practices and are committed to educating the public and the next generation about the importance of agriculture.”

“We believe that our close working relationship with Alabama Ag Credit has enabled us to expand and operate the way we do,” Nealy Jr. says. “It’s refreshing to work with a company that understands agriculture and knows you as a friend, not just as a client.”

SPEAKING UP FOR AGRICULTURE

The future of farming worries the Barretts. Can a decreasing number of farmers meet the world’s growing demand for food? What about consumers who question the use of fertilizers and antibiotics?

Instead of shirking the issues, Justin, Nealy Jr. and Nealy Sr. are proactive in speaking



Justin Barrett checks a newborn calf born on the family ranch near Wetumpka, Ala.

up for agriculture. All three are active in cattle and farming organizations. They also host farm tours for high school agriculture classes and have hired a high school senior as a farm intern.

“We want to encourage young people to get into farming,” says Justin, who chairs the young farmers committee with the Elmore County Farmers Federation. “Around here, people my age have been removed from farming for a generation or two. They’ve moved away because they’ve lost interest in farming. When it’s time to take over the family farm, they don’t want it, so the land is sold for development or recreational uses.”

“That’s a problem when one farmer today feeds 155 people. By 2050, agricultural producers will have to double their production to feed the world,” he says. “As farmers, we’ve got to figure out how to produce more and be efficient in meeting those needs.”

THE ANTIBIOTIC CONTROVERSY

As both a farmer and an engineer trained to solve problems related to agriculture and the environment, Justin seeks to find middle ground when it comes to pesticides, fertilizers and other issues.

“Those things cost us money,” he explains. “On our farm, we only employ practices that will produce a healthy cow. Cattle have nutritional needs that are met by protein supplements, minerals, grass and hay. The only way we can produce a healthy cow is to provide a healthy environment.”

“A healthy cow doesn’t need antibiotics, but the public’s perception is that every calf gets antibiotics. My dad and I only treat with prescribed vaccines and antibiotics. Out of 310 calves that we shipped in August this year, we only treated less than 2 percent with antibiotics,” he says.

In 2014, Justin and a fellow producer marketed their locally grown, farm-raised beef under the River Region Beef label. The pair took orders through their website and sold packaged cuts at mobile locations in the area. Their sales pitches gave Justin and his friend a chance to educate customers.

ENVIRONMENTALIST AND CATTLEMAN

“As negative campaigns continue to surface against agriculture, I’ve always believed that a positive influence should come from a younger generation representing agriculture,” Justin says. “One positive influence can be face-to-face conversations to give consumers a chance to get to know a farmer and see that we are genuine people who really care for the food that we are producing. I want them to know that we use good environmental practices to raise our cattle and sustain our farm.”

Around town and on the job, people sometimes ask Justin how he can work in the environmental field *and* be a farmer.

“I tell them that I’m glad that I can give farmers a voice in my profession and that I can positively influence the industry,” he says. “I feel blessed to be able to work in two fields that I’m passionate about, and aspire to share with others the impact agriculture has had on my family and me.” ■ SSR