

## Diamond J brand stands for strength, resilience and quality in livestock industry and life

By Amy Blum

Forty years ago, Neal and Janet Johnson of South Hand County started their married life with nothing but each other and support from their families.

“We didn’t own even a single cow back then,” Janet recalled.

Though the multi-generation ranch has grown over the decades, the only number that truly matters in the diversified operation is the one representing how many family members there are.

“Our greatest accomplishment is definitely our three girls,” Neal said. “When I started ranching with Dad, I thought success meant having lots of money and lots of things. I’m pretty blessed to realize that definition was wrong all those years. ‘Successful’ or ‘rich’ today has nothing to do with money. It’s all about sharing our life with family.”

Neal joined his parents, Wallace and Darlene, after a semester at SDSU. Though his departure from college surprised others a bit, returning home to the ranch was always in Neal’s plans.

“This is where I’ve always wanted to be,” Neal said. “My goal from the beginning has been to be on the land and share what we’ve built with kids and grandkids.”

Janet added, “We couldn’t have done anything without Wally and Darlene. From the beginning, they’ve let us work with them and really been supportive.”

Since joining his father in 1973, Neal has prioritized building a quality cow/calf operation. Backgrounding calves became essential to the family’s model after the 1976 drought. By the mid-80s, AI technology grew in importance as a primary means to improve herd genetics.

According to Wallace, right now is the best set of cows they’ve had on the place, and he knows they’re only getting better. Given the elder Johnson’s reputation throughout the livestock industry as a respected cattleman and order buyer, such a statement is testament to Neal’s drive for quality.



The Hand County Livestock and Crop Improvement Association recently corroborated Wallace’s belief by recognizing Neal as the 2015 producer of the year during the association’s annual banquet. This was an honor bestowed on Neal’s father 50 years ago.

“I was surprised by the honor,” Neal said. “But, you

know, getting an award like that has never been a specific goal. I think the association is really a great group with lots of dedication to kids and community. I’m just glad to be a part of it.”

The association recognized Neal as a long-standing leader in the area—a leader synonymous with 4-H, hunting and volunteering.

“Family’s really everything,” Neal said. “My parents are supportive, and Janet is a great partner. She does anything that needs tackled around here and always has. Her patience and animal husbandry, especially with small animals, are amazing.”



Janet added, “We have a good life together. There’s lots of hard work; then we get some free time. I really love what we do, and I love even more knowing our girls and their families stay interested in and helpful with what’s going on.”

With 40 years of changes and challenges behind them, the Johnsons know life won’t always be rosy. But, they also know the life they live is a good one that they can’t take for granted.

“Calving has to be my favorite time of year,” Neal said. “It’s a new beginning. Things aren’t always good. Sometimes, bad stuff goes down. But, seeing those baby calves hit the ground reminds me there’s always a new day, a new start and always something to be grateful for.”