

Fueling the Flame at Fire-Lake Jerseys

Sitting at the kitchen table of her Aunt Cathy Sanders' home in Turlock, Calif., Natalie Sanders paints a picture of the future she has laid out in the dairy industry. As the conversation turns to her academics and upcoming sophomore year at Modesto Junior College, you can see a slight and fleeting look of sadness flicker across the face of her sister, Nicole, as Natalie talks about her plans to eventually transfer to Cal Poly.

"I would miss you too much," said Nicole when her sister finished divulging her plan. Both girls and their aunt shared a little laugh and then continued talking about their Jerseys. Minutes later their cousins, Rebecca and Hannah, joined the conversation at the table as all four girls discussed their favorite animals to show.

Those six words expressed by Nicole are one of the sentiments that have made their family farm, Fire-Lake Jerseys, a successful place for the Jersey youth of their family and neighborhood.

Not only has the farm served as a launch site for show ring and youth activity success, it has provided many future prospects and endless opportunities for family bonding. With every

member of their family taking an active role in the farm, the Jersey youth at Fire-Lake have had infinite amounts of support as they pursue their dairy ambitions.

"We could not do any of this without our parents and grandparents who are all very supportive of our passion for the dairy industry and help us in any way we need them," said Natalie of the importance of their entire family's involvement.

Natalie, Nicole, Rebecca and Hannah all show in local, regional and national shows, while they also house animals for as many as 10 different youth interested in showing Jerseys, including the current California Jersey Queen, Karessa (Mann) Mast. Rebecca and Hannah also have three younger siblings, Noah, Josh and Leah,

waiting to take to participate in peewee shows and eventually move up the ranks to the junior shows.

Natalie is the oldest of the Sanders family youth, and was the first to enter the show ring and the Jersey industry after her aunt, Melanie Smith, Macksville, Kan., gave her four registered Jerseys. That gift began the invasion of Jerseys at Fire-Lake Jersey herd, transitioning the Sanders family from their previous Holstein persuasion. From those four Jerseys began a shared bond between cousins that spans both business and recreation.



The Sanders Family at Fire-Lake Jerseys has accomplished more than champion quality animals, they have built a family bond that has inspired those around them to explore the dairy industry. Pictured above, from right to left, Natalie Sanders, Karessa (Mann) Mast, Hannah Sanders, Rebecca Sanders and Nicole Sanders.

Fire-Lake is now home to 115 milking Registered Jerseys with 60 Registered Jersey heifers, with 245 total milking between the two breeds. While not all of the Jerseys are completely registered, it is a long term goal for Fire-Lake to have home-bred, quality, Registered Jerseys.

Building the Herd

Right now the many helping hands at Fire-Lake are working to improve the genetic quality of the animals they breed, having purchased most of their prominent cows. In order to help them reach this goal and other long term goals like genetic recovery, they have been doing significant amounts of flushing and embryo transfer work, including a purchase of five embryos

from The 2009 All American Jersey Sale.

"The embryos were 'Blackstones' out of the 'Fantastic' family," explained Natalie. "We thought this family was impressive and wanted to add some new genetics to our breeding program."

Those five embryos all resulted in pregnancies and produced four heifers and one bull. All four of the heifers are due to calve this March.

"It was a very good buy and all four heifers are bred and ready to calve with what looks to be great udder promise," said Natalie. That "great udder promise" is also a testament to the promise this family has made to develop quality animals with the Fire-Lake prefix.

They also made a purchase during The 2007 All American Sale, SSF Belmont TGIF, Excellent-92%, to boost the genetic base of their herd and simultaneously increase the competitive level on the national show stage as they want to be able to compete on all levels of the show circuit.

As for the short term goals at Fire-Lake, Natalie, Nicole, Rebecca and Hannah just want to continue what it is they do best and enjoy the most: showing their Jersey cows.

"We like to go to shows as a family," said the "ringleader" Cathy of her nieces and nephews. "They enjoy competing and we stress it's not always about a blue or purple ribbon. It's about participating."

They all enjoy working with their cattle in the show ring so much they never shy away from an opportunity to hit the tanbark, even if it means they will be competing against each other. Showing multiple Fire-Lake animals in the same class is not an uncommon occurrence, especially when they take nearly 50 animals to their local fair to be shown by family and neighborhood youth.

While they might view it as simply having fun with their family and friends, the opportunities they help provide for those

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interested in showing Jerseys, but may lack the capacity, are the ultimate promotional activities for the growing Jersey breed.

Promoting the Breed

In addition to her involvement in the show ring, Natalie, 19, is currently serving as the California Junior Jersey Association President and recently finished her term as the California District 6 Dairy Princess. Natalie was a member of the inaugural Jersey Youth Academy in 2009, along with Karessa, and made the trip to Ohio to take part in the second Academy class in 2011.

Ohio is not the only place on the promotional visit list for Natalie, though, as she is slated to attend the dairy judging contest in Scotland this coming year after her team from Modesto won their division at the World Dairy Expo contest. She also competed in the dairy judging contest during The All American weekend where her team placed third and she placed 10th individually.

As all four girls sat down to talk about their experiences and 4-H involvement, the conversation digressed to other various interests of these busy Jersey youths. While each girl clearly had her own specific interest off the farm, it was quite clear their passion for dairy is what allows them a shared hobby and connection.

"Rebecca is active in 4-H and the Hilmar FFA and is an expert quilter," gushed Natalie, pointing out the several beautifully crafted quilts throughout their Aunt Cathy's home.

Natalie continued to sing the praises of her family as she proudly described each person in the room, talking about the different officer positions her sister Nicole has held in their 4-H club and her involvement with the Stanislaus County 4-H drill team. Next she explained that her cousin Hannah is not just involved in 4-H and dairy projects, but that she is a "fabulous runner" as well.

Not only have they done well for themselves in their individual activities, these four young ladies and their devoted aunt, who serves as an advisor for the local youth, have been leaders in their community to those interested in learning more about the dairy business.

Their Winning Ways

Even though they stress the importance of participation and fun, this family is no stranger to the winners circle and blue and purple ribbons. They have done especially well at the California State Fair where Natalie's favorite cow, WF Axel Rosita,

Excellent-94%, was named the Supreme Champion of both the open and junior shows in 2010. That same year "Rosita" was named the Grand Champion of the Western National Show and was the Reserve Junior All American Aged Cow, in addition to countless wins from years prior.

On December 13, 2011, the Sanders family said farewell to "Rosita," who had lived nearly eight long years and been a big part of this tight-knit family.

"Rosita will be greatly missed," said Natalie. "However, she will live on through her many daughter, sons and granddaughters."

The other three girls also have favorite animals to work in the show ring. Nicole, 13, has had recent success with one of her favorite heifers, Shan-Mar Blackstone Faline-ET, who won the junior heifer

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-Cathy Sanders

class of the California State Fair open and junior shows, in addition to Select Minister Elodie-ET, the Junior Champion of the 2009 Western National Junior Show and Junior All American Summer Yearling in 2009. Rebecca, 14, has found her favorite cow in Cozz Mar Prime Suspect Magic, Excellent-90%, who placed second in the Junior 2-year-old class at the 2009 California State Fair. As for Hannah, 12, her favorite cows are Ranora Dino Racine, Excellent-90%, and Ranora Monster Racine—both of which have placed highly in shows like the California Spring Show, Western National Show and the California State Fair open and junior shows.

While they all may have their favorite animals and favorite place to exhibit, they know the work they do on the farm is just as important as their show preparations. The girls are all responsible for taking care of the calves and heifers and always help with the feeding. They also use to do all of their own milking, but with each girl being active in her own right with school and extra-curricular activities, they eventually hired someone else to take over that chore.

"We want to keep our whole family involved and always want this to be fun and have fun together," said Cathy as she looked around the room full of youth. "I want them to be able to always know they have worked hard to do their best."

The Jersey trend does not stop with the four oldest girls, though, as there are three more Sanders kids waiting in the wings to lead out their own favorite animals. Noah, 9, Josh, 6, and Leah, 5, are all eagerly awaiting

their chance to win a ribbon outside of the pee wee showmanship arena the older two have been exhibiting in, while Leah waits for her turn in the ring. The elder Sanders youth are very excited to help prepare this generation for what has been one of their greatest passions, and feel the Jersey association is the perfect venue for such.

"We really like the Jersey association and how youth friendly it is," said Natalie. "People always remember you and are so very welcoming. It really feels like a communal effort, everyone offers to help you and wants to help you."

Although none of the Sanders family participated in the 2011 All American Junior Show while Natalie was fulfilling her judging team requirements, they have all enjoyed the previous experiences at the most eventful Jersey weekend of the year.

"It was exciting to take our winning animals from Western National back east," said Natalie of their first national show experiences.

"Our first experience at Louisville was fantastic," she gleamed. "The vibe for juniors is awesome!"

That vibe is something the Sanders family took back home with them to California and has continued to build upon. With a passionate and enthusiastic group of Jersey youth at Fire-Lake, it is no wonder their interests have seeped into the lives of their friends and neighbors. That enthusiasm for the dairy industry and Jersey breed is something that will continue strengthening their family bond, and something the younger generation of the family can look forward to.



Showing has been an important part of the growth of the Jersey herd at Fire-Lake Jerseys. The family has traveled as far as Louisville, Ky., to exhibit their herd of cows. In 2010, Natalie and "Rosita" were rewarded with Junior All American Aged Cow honors.