

STAND FOR THE BRAND



An Oregon ranching family united after a tragic loss fosters faith and fortitude while raising versatile ranch horses and hardy cattle at V Box Land & Livestock.

Story and photography by JENNIFER DENSON

After spending the winter on the high desert, mares are gathered horseback in May or June and brought into the corrals with foals by their sides.



**“Continue to enjoy
the relationships you have built
for that is all you can take to heaven.”**



—From rancher Mike Bentz’s Code of Ethics

Linda Bentz has rallied to maintain the ranch and lifestyle she and her late husband, Mike, established.



On the morning of May 14, 2015, Linda Bentz could hear the buzz of her husband Mike’s Citabria airplane in the distance as he flushed cattle out of the brushy folds of a pasture a few miles up the road in southeastern Oregon’s Juntura Valley. Their oldest son, Ethan, and the family’s longtime employee, Bernardo DeSantiago, were horseback gathering cattle and moving them to another pasture. Linda was at the house, preparing to host a grade-school graduation party for their youngest son, Joseph.

An experienced pilot, Mike had gathered cattle from the air for nearly 10 years. On that fateful day, however, his airplane collided with a power line and spiraled

to the ground. Ethan and Bernardo were the first to arrive at the scene. They pulled Mike from the wreckage and administered CPR until paramedics arrived. “It’s the call you never want to hear,” recalls Linda. “It was a fluke deal. He was a good pilot and knew where the power lines were.”

Mike passed at the scene, embraced by his oldest son and his wife of 25 years. In the face of tragedy and difficult decisions, Linda, with her binding faith, along with her five children, worked together to develop a plan to carry on the horse and ranching legacy she and Mike built. They applied a code of ethics that Mike followed in his daily life and business pursuits; it hangs in the house today. The first principle on the list is:

“Trust God and believe He has a plan. Pray and know that He will open or close the door in all your endeavors.”

“He was a respected rancher, cattleman, horseman and steward of the land,” says Linda. “He never passed up an opportunity that would improve the land, ranching industry and his community. He taught us everything we needed to do to keep this ranch going.”

“Have a vision, make goals and know there will be bumps along the way.”

PRIOR TO THEIR FATHER’S DEATH, the Bentz’s grown children were pursuing their own ambitions. Ethan lived on a small ranch in Vale, Oregon, with his own cattle and real estate business. Garrett and his wife, Alex, lived down the road in Harper on one of the family’s ranches, where they were starting to raise their own horses and cattle. Daughter Erika attended Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado, while her younger brother Britton was graduating high school and on his way to the University of Wyoming in Laramie. Joseph, the youngest, still lived at home.

Even though Linda never asked them to return to the ranch, they have all stepped up and found their niches there. Ethan moved home and manages the Black Angus cattle operation, which includes selecting 300 to 500 heifers raised on the ranch to sell at the annual Ranchers Heifer Sale, held in November. His wife, Emily, oversees registration papers and photography for the sale program, while caring for their 1-year-old daughter, Blakely.

Garrett and his wife, Alex, and their three sons still live on their own ranch, but always help at the family operation.

After graduating from CSU, Erika, who has a passion for land restoration, came home and started developing marketing and social media strategies. She also helps Linda with bookkeeping and works to improve outreach for various agricultural and natural resource-based organizations. Last year she married Sam Fitzpatrick, who Mike had taken under his wing, taught to rope and work cattle, and hired to work on the ranch when he was in high school. They live on the ranch and are expecting their first child in June.

Britt, who is now engaged to marry his fiancé, Karly Thompson, in August, also came home after graduation and is in charge of farming. He and Linda dedicate much of the summer to irrigating meadows and harvesting hay to feed livestock during the winter. Joseph helps with all the daily operations and starts the colts with coworker Frank McKay.

“Dad put this together for all of us,” says Ethan. “You see a lot of families tear each other apart during the suc-



Garrett and Alex’s 3-year-old son, Wade, represents the sixth generation of ranchers in the family.



Erika (Bentz) Fitzpatrick catches the heels of a calf on a horse from her family’s breeding program.

cession of ranches. Our main goal is to keep everyone involved.”

“Respect and enjoy the land you live on.”

A FOURTH-GENERATION RANCHER, Mike grew up in Drewsey, Oregon, with his parents, Ken and Anne Bentz, and six older siblings. During the 1940s and ’50s, his grandfather, Paul Stewart, bought and sold ranches in the region until his last purchase of the historic Whitehorse Ranch located in southeastern Oregon.

Cattle, horses and hunting shaped Mike’s youth and defined his future. After attending California Polytechnic University, he returned to Oregon and married his high-school sweetheart, Linda Clemens, in August of 1989.

Mike’s family helped the couple get started on a ranch near Crane, Oregon. They ranched there for 11 years before selling the ranch and upsizing to another one about an hour northeast in the Juntura Valley.

A visionary, Mike could see the potential of nondescript properties, and would clean them up and make them productive. Through the years, he and Linda increased their holdings and formed V Box Land & Livestock.

“Mike always looked at a piece of property in terms of how he could make money off of a cow on that land,” says Linda. “He was always thinking and working deals, just like his grandfather.”

“We took a lot of risks building this ranch. Mike always said, ‘Debt keeps spending in check.’ I’d like to see all of our kids living here with their families, and have the same opportunities Mike and I had when we started out.”

“Do your math and figure out if a cow will pay for it, and make sure she gets bred.”

THE RANCH IS A PATCHWORK of deeded land and allotments leased from the Bureau of Land Management. The headquarters is nestled in the valley at 3,000 feet in elevation, flanked by lush hay meadows. Black Angus cattle and wildflowers dot the surrounding pastures that meander through red-rock canyon crevices and up into the high-desert hills at 4,500 feet in elevation.

Early in the spring, the family trails the cattle horseback from the headquarters into the hills, where they calve and spend the summer grazing.



Starting in May, they brand several bunches of cattle distributed in different pastures. Staying true to Mike's family tradition, they head and heel the calves directly from the herd and bring them to a real branding fire, rather than a propane-heated pot, where the calves are stamped with the V Box iron. The horses are marked on the left hip with a spur brand Linda designed.

The family rides horses raised and trained on the ranch. Most of them are sold during their Ranchers Horse Sale, held the first weekend of June in Juntura.

"In the springtime, our horses see a lot of hard days and wet saddle blankets," says Linda. "They know how to ride up mountains, through the brush and cross streams. We try to build equity in our colts for our annual horse sale and also get our work done."



"Be a leader of the family and community by your example."



STARTED IN 1994 by Mike, his brother, Jim, and respected horsemen Hoot and

Dick Raney, the Ranchers Horse Sale features a maximum of 35 ranch horses in their prime consigned by the Bentz family and other reputable horse programs.

"Dad really loved horses and started the horse sale to keep us kids well-mounted," says Garrett. "He knew there was a timeline on good horses, and if he was going to keep raising them he had to keep turning them. We sell our very best horses at the sale each year."

On Saturday, the horses are pre-viewed while gathering and branding a small herd of cattle, so buyers can see the horses in action. A few days prior to the sale, Ethan, Frank McKay and a guest clinician offer a youth-oriented colt-starting clinic. In the past, Idaho horseman and Road to the Horse competitor Wade Black conducted the clinic. Five teenagers from the community are chosen based on their interest in colt starting and are paired with 2-year-old fillies raised on the ranch. They work with the horses during the clinic and show them at a special preview the morning of the sale.

"Horsemanship was really important to my dad; he loved bridle horse tradi-



Garrett believes in sharing ranching traditions taught to him by his father, like heading and heeling calves at a branding, with his sons.

tions and was always wanting to learn from other horsemen," says Ethan. "We're trying to build the next generation of colt starters. It gives the kids a chance to gain knowledge they can take back and use to start their own ranch colts."



"Honesty and integrity are the foundations for life."



EACH YEAR, the family breeds approximately 25 broodmares that

trace to Colonel Freckles, Joe Hancock, King Fritz, Peppy San Badger and Doc Bar.

"Our program started with a stallion named Colonel Blackrock [Colonel Blackwell x Five Dot Chex x Chex Again]," says Ethan. "Dad bought the stallion for a reasonable price in California. He was jet black with a blaze face. We had him 15 years and he produced some big horses."

His influence is still seen in their breeding program today, with many of



ABOVE: The family purchased Cuttin Like My Dad to infuse contemporary cow horse bloodlines into their foundation breeding program.

LEFT: Garrett and Alex Bentz's 11-year-old son, Colton, learned to rope and ride on a 20-year-old ranch-raised horse that his father started in high school. When he turns 13, however, Colton says he wants to start his own colt.

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LEFT: After his father's sudden death, Ethan, the oldest of the Bentz's five children, stepped in to manage the cattle operation.

RIGHT: Ethan's wife, Emily, has a passion for studying bloodlines and planning breedings for the mares and stallions.

the broodmares passing on his willing attitude and kind temperament.

Wanting to evolve the program with contemporary cow-horse bloodlines, they started turning out the majority of the broodmares with the red roan stallion Cuttin Like My Dad (Nitro Dual Doc x Hickorys Miss Jesse x Doc's Hickory), or "Tom." Mike and Linda had tried to purchase the stallion from Idaho cow-horse trainer Wade

Reaney, but the deal didn't work out until two years ago.

A few mares go out with the ranch's other stallion, Four F One (Figure Four Fritz x One Eighty One x Eddie Eighty), a stallion they acquired from Haythorn Land & Cattle Company in Nebraska.

"We want to produce a horse that we can take outside and do everything on and that has the stamina to go long days," says Garrett. "You can't always

trailer everywhere, so we need a horse to carry us up the mountain and back. We're really excited to see the movement and athleticism of Tom's babies."

Ethan adds, "We have clients that want performance horses and rope horses, or ranchers looking for solid ranch horses that can do any job."

The family primarily rides geldings, which are in high demand at the sale, but they also saddle their mares to know their athletic ability and disposition before deciding whether to add a mare to the broodmare band or sell her.

Pasture-bred, the mares foal between April and June. When all of the foals are born, the family rounds them up horseback on the desert and brings them into the corrals to sort them. The family then turns them back out with the stallion picked for next year's foal.

"Moving the mares and foals in the spring is like opening Christmas packages," says Ethan. "The mares have been turned out all winter and foal by themselves in the open desert. It's the first time we've seen the babies."

In October, the horses are gathered and the foals are weaned and halter-broken. Then they're turned back out to pasture to develop physically until they're at least 2 years old. The ranch starts about 24 colts a year, putting 30 days of light work on them as 2-year-olds and turning them back out until they're 3. As 3- and 4-year-olds, they're introduced to roping, branding and other ranch work.

"Everyone on the ranch has three to five horses in their string, and they're preparing them to put in the sales as a 5-year-old, unless it's a 'forever' horse," explains Ethan. "We like to get a couple of brandings in on them in the fall, even if it's just roping a few calves. Then we spend the winter practicing on the Heel-O-Matic, so they're ready to rock and roll the next branding season. If we don't think a horse is ready for a customer to ride, we'll hold it back another year."

Through the years, the sale has grown and now attracts up to 400 prospective buyers bid on the small group of horses. Many are repeat customers who trust the family's honest representation of their horses and consignor selection.

"We really pride ourselves in matching horses and riders," says Linda. "Buyers can go online and look at the horses and watch videos before they come to the sale. If we don't think a horse is suitable for a rider we'll tell them and suggest another one."

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"Remember the generations before you helped build what you have today."

LINDA IS PLEASED to have her children nearby contributing to the ranch with their diverse skills. So far she hasn't slowed down a bit, though. She still enjoys irrigating, roping with her oldest grandson, Colton, during branding, and watching her grandchildren grow up with the same dreams and values she and Mike instilled in their children.

"She's a very good leader who pulled us together during a tough time, without falling apart," says Garrett. "The vision she and Dad had stays with her, and she's keeping it alive for us with God backing her up."

With transition often comes turbulence, but the Bentz family has a policy of working together without arguing.

"You don't realize how fortunate your family is until you have a tragedy and see how it pulls you together," says Ethan. "We were always a pretty close family, but now we have an even stronger bond. Before his death, Dad was running the ranch, so we were all off doing our own thing. His passing brought everyone back together to carry on the work of a few generations before us."

Looking toward the future, Linda refers to one of Mike's cowboy codes. "He always said you have to 'Keep developing people, share knowledge and pass down traditions to the next generation,'" she says, adding that sharing knowledge is the key to a lasting ranching lifestyle. "If you hold onto it, it stops there and won't go any further." **WH**

JENNIFER DENISON is senior editor of *Western Horseman*. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com. At press time, the Ranchers Horse Sale, scheduled for June 6, was pending due to the pandemic. For updates, visit ranchershorsesale.com.

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