

Legacy Beyond Land

Set examples for future generations by embracing values over assets.

Several weeks ago, I visited Joe Nichols, the owner of Seven Springs Farms, in Cadiz, Kentucky. In the course of showing me his office, which is full of pictures, agricultural symbols and historic artifacts, Joe pointed to a framed letter hanging on the wall—a note from a farmer/landowner for whom Joe repaired equipment, as the repair work allowed Joe to transition into farming full-time. When that farmer retired, he decided to rent his farm to Joe. That same landowner also lent Joe some equipment when he was just getting started and had almost nothing to his name.

Joe said by giving him a chance to farm, that landowner made an unforgettable difference in his life. “If the office were burning, that letter is the first thing I’d grab on my way out the door,” he explained. With those words, Joe told me the letter—and the opportunity it represented—had become an important part of his own legacy.

INTANGIBLES OF LEGACY

As I spent more time with Joe and began to understand what was important to him, the idea that one’s legacy reaches beyond physical assets—the land and the money—came into sharper focus. In Joe’s case, and for many of you reading this article, your legacy includes, but is so much more than, the farm, equipment and cash you leave to your heirs. Your legacy represents the values, principles and behaviors that have defined your life.

OPPORTUNITY

For example, the letter Joe showed me represented opportunity. In this case, the power of giving someone a chance to get started in agriculture and knowing firsthand the impact that act of generosity can have made Joe want to create opportunities for others. Paying opportunity forward has guided his interaction



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with family, partners and employees. Giving others opportunities to achieve their goals is now paramount in his life.

CARING FOR OTHERS

Another example of a deeper notion of legacy is caring for others. This might be helping those in need, perhaps during a medical or family emergency. Joe and several other farmers I know have helped people by providing money (often anonymously), the use of equipment, introductions or connections. Or, they have simply been physically and emotionally present when those they know have been beset by unfortunate circumstances.

RESILIENCY

Another aspect of legacy is bouncing back when you encounter difficult circumstances. Joe is not the only farmer who has been through tough times, but the way one works his or her way out of economic or environmental catastrophe—what many people call “resiliency”—is as much a part of who they are as any line

on a financial statement. It’s not the circumstances that define you, it’s your response to those events. And, that response is an important part of your legacy.

RISK-TAKING

A final component of legacy that I see in many farmers and ranchers, including Joe, is leadership and risk-taking. Making a decision, jumping in, standing tall for what they believe is right, even when it’s not popular or when it’s not the safest route to go, is something their heirs may also embrace. That doesn’t mean people have a license to act foolishly, but it does mean a personal investment and a willingness to push through uncertainty and act with resolve are what people will remember for generations to come.

Legacy is a multifaceted concept that is worth thinking deeply about. Though people in coming generations will certainly be thankful for the acreage you pass down, they will be even more blessed by the values you embrace and example you set for them today. ///



JOE (RIGHT) AND TODD NICHOLS

ROB LAGERSTROM