

## 35 Keys to Success Youth Development



# No Crutch Needed

NJAA helps junior member overcome autism effects.

Story & photos by *Kasey Brown*, associate editor

**T**emple Grandin may be one of the most famous animal scientists in the world. She's also famous for another reason — autism. However, she's not the only cattle lover with autism. National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) member Dale Eastin, Gretna, Va., was diagnosed with autism at 3 years of age.

Kids normally start putting words together at the age of 2. However, Dale did not speak until he was 3, and that led to his diagnosis. Autism is a neurological disorder, present

from early childhood and characterized by great difficulty in communicating and forming relationships with other people.

Dennis and Kathy Eastin, Dale's parents, say autism has never been allowed to be a crutch for Dale, but Angus cattle have helped him overcome some of his developmental difficulties.

### Early development

Dennis has been the herd manager at Dalton's on the Sycamore for the past 25

years, so his kids, Dale and Callie Eastin, have grown up around cattle. Dennis says helping on the farm helped Dale learn his numbers when he was very young. Dale has always loved helping Dennis check calves, and he knew the tag numbers of the calves before he could really read the numbers.

Dennis says Dale was having difficulty learning to read numbers from left to right, sometimes reading them backward. By knowing the tag numbers of calves, Dennis says Dale learned to recognize the numbers through repetition. This repetition also helped him in school.

"He loves animals and enjoys working with them. Most kids don't like homework, but if you can create a way to engage them, they will learn. Dale was engaged with the cattle, and they helped him learn," Dennis explains.

This love of cattle never dimmed, and Dale started showing as soon as he turned 9 years old. Dale's first animal was a fall bull named Yu-Gi-Oh, after the trading card game and television show. Yu-Gi-Oh won fourth at the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS) that year, and he won his state show and Atlantic National Junior Angus Show.

Kathy says the doctors told them not to put Dale in the showring initially. They were worried the stress of the showring would set him back or cause extra stress.

"We took it slow, and with preparation, he can do it. He still has his good and bad days. He really loves working with his cattle, though," she notes.

Dale's early success just solidified his love of showing cattle, and he has showed every year since. This 2014 NJAS is his last as an NJAA member.

### NJAA involvement

Because this year's NJAS in Indianapolis, Ind., July 6-12, was his last as an NJAA member, Dale wanted to participate in more of the educational contests. He took the quiz bowl written test, qualified to compete at the National Junior Angus Showmanship contest and participated in the team sales contest.

Dennis is very proud of Dale for competing in the national showmanship contest. Dale tries hard and does his best in everything he sets out to do, and this is an opportunity that Dennis says he never did.

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Dale's sister Callie is also proud of him for competing in the showmanship contest.

"He gets in his head sometimes. You have to be patient to critique him on showmanship, but he loves his cattle and knows them well," Callie explains.

Sarah McCall, from Greenville, Va., and an advisor for the Virginia Junior Angus Association (VJAA), says Dale has made remarkable strides in the last two years especially. In team sales, she says Dale handled the pedigree portion of the presentation because he knows cattle pedigrees so well.

Dale's participation in the team sales is a big deal because one of the drawbacks of autism is a lack of social skills, says Kathy.

She says he does so well working with animals because, "Animals don't judge you. We've learned that Angus people don't judge you either, so he's in his element. That helps him in social situations.

"The Virginia Junior Angus Association has been so good to Dale since he started at 9. The advisor saw a spark in Dale when he was with cattle and paired him with an older buddy to help him get involved. Callie helps him be social, too. The other kids know to remind him about social cues every once in a while," she adds.

Dennis agrees, "The Virginia group has welcomed him with open arms, so he's not afraid to be a part of something. A lot of his friends help him be mainstream. We don't want Dale to use his situation as a crutch or as an advantage. We want him to function like everyone else; I'd say we're just more driven to get him those same opportunities."

Dale earned an "Angus Star" award from Belle Point Ranch both the first year they were awarded and this year, his last as an

NJAA member. Susan Taylor of Belle Point Ranch in Lavaca, Ark., says the McMahon family established the program in 2007 to create a tangible symbol that recognizes Angus juniors who try and do their best without regard to the result. She says there is no application, judging or campaigning for Angus Stars.

"We have developed a dedicated cadre of advisors and other adults who are directly connected to these amazing kids. They come to us personally and suggest the youngsters within their groups who deserve the award," Taylor explains.

Taylor continues, "In seven years, we have recognized over 500 Angus youth of all ages, from all over the nation. Every year, we get letters from Angus Stars that truly touch our hearts! Their simple words of appreciation are proof that kids are gratified to know that someone has noticed their hard work and cares enough to give them a pat on the back."

"Dale was in that first group of Angus Stars. He is quiet and kind, and completely devoted to his Angus project work. His parents, the Dalton family and all the Virginia Angus folks have done a phenomenal job teaching him a great work ethic, and his life has been enriched by being part of such a great farm family. It's clear he 'gets it,' because each year Dale helps us find other young

Angus breeders who deserve an Angus Star."

In addition to his participation at the national level, Dale serves as a VJAA director. McCall explains that directors are responsible for coordinating a show, and Dale immediately volunteered for the Virginia Junior Angus Breeders' Show in July. He was responsible for getting the awards, showing help and announcer.

### Future plans

"At a young age with autism, once you learn a routine, change causes rebellion. He's grown out of a lot of that. We've made him change some routines, and the junior program has helped with it," Dennis explains.

The NJAA has taught Dale many skills and has given him an idea of what he wants to do as an adult. Dale says he has always loved working with cattle, and wants to do that for as long as he can.

When he graduated from high school, he attended the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center (WWRC), a center that teaches vocational training for people with disabilities, Dennis explains. Unfortunately, they didn't offer an agriculture program. Dale participated in the life skills program, and all of his teachers heard about his cattle.

To help with job placement, his teachers agreed to find a co-op program, which meant

he would work for four months on various cow-calf operations, which included Dalton's on the Sycamore during the weekends and summers. Additionally, he traveled with a veterinarian every Thursday to gain veterinary applications.



McCall says Dale worked at her operation on the weekends while he was at WWRC to log enough hours for his program's diploma, which he did earn. He helped tag calves, tattoo, put out mineral and feed. He also helped in the show barn whenever possible and helped prepare for their bull sale.

"If you're working cattle, he wants to be helping," McCall chuckles.

While working on the weekends, Dale related well with McCall's two sons, ages 12 and 15. She adds that the VJAA members look out for him and get along well. They've embraced him. There are several that he communicates with almost daily.

One of those members is the new National Junior Angus Board Angus Foundation director Will Fiske. Fiske attends Virginia Tech University, which is near WWRC. Fiske



► Dale's (left) last NJAS could not have been so successful without the support of his family members Kathy, Callie and Dennis.

says he took Dale to several sales with him and enjoyed getting to hang out with him on weekends. They would help serve lunch and help during the sale wherever it was needed.

Kathy assures, "Dale is always allowed to go with Will to these events; we trust him.

They talk on the phone frequently, no matter how busy Will is with school or junior board duties."

It is obvious that Dale loves cattle and wants to work with them on a full-time basis. He earned his diploma, so he is certified to work on a cow-calf operation. Dennis adds that he loves genetics, breeding, vaccinations, anything to do with herd management. Dale is the first to pick up the *Angus Journal* when it arrives each month. He reads a little slower, but he'll ask questions, Dennis says. Dale is very mechanically minded.

Dennis says he hopes Dale has the opportunity to work on an operation, and ultimately become a full-time employee at Dalton's on the Sycamore.

Dale says as long as he gets to work with cattle, he will be happy.

McCall says, "He has talked to me about his love for his Angus family. Angus cattle are what he is good at and what he loves."

