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Footsteps Worth Following

Fathers, sons hold fast to similar careers.

by **LAURA CONAWAY, KATRINA HUFFSTUTLER & MIRANDA REIMAN**, *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

A love for cattle, the continuation of a dream — those are often shared, later passed from one generation to another. Yet that spark extends far beyond ranching.

Evident in the packaging, sales and product marketing throughout the beef community is a world marked by men and women who first observed and then added their own talent to an existing framework.

There's benefit in history and

confidence in longevity. These are just three examples that prove it.

Better than law school

Eric Sarrazin landed a “cool job” with a digital ad agency right out of college, but for all the modern perks of his Washington, D.C., office, he felt the call of the meat-cutting business.

Today, he and his dad, Marc, manage the family's specialty meat company. DeBragga & Spitler, Jersey City, N.J., just outside New York City, was one of the first licensed to sell the *Certified Angus Beef*®

(CAB®) brand. Eric grew up making emergency deliveries out of the back of the family's van and riding along to keep his dad awake when a midnight freezer alarm demanded attention.

Decades earlier, Marc had swept loading docks, answered phones and cut bones as his dad, Marc Sr., was buying into the business, working his way up from meat cutter.

“For our staff, for them to see that there's a third generation in the business, they feel good,” Marc says. “They feel like there's stability, security ... a future.”

When he graduated college, there was a need to grow the sales force.

“My father was a little old-school. His way of teaching was just to throw you in the deep end of the pool and have you kind of figure it out,” Marc says.

In turn, he encouraged Eric to get outside experience. The 2008 economy called for that, too, as many of DeBragga & Spitler clients are white-tablecloth restaurants, and their success correlated with Wall Street's.

“When you have a good year, you have a really good year,” Marc says. “When you have a bad year, it's not an okay year. It's a bad year.”

Businesses loosening the reins on expense accounts a few years later opened a door for Eric. His month-long stint in operations turned into the place where he shines. At 4

Above: Eric Sarrazin (right) and his dad, Marc, manage the family's specialty meat company. DeBragga & Spitler, Jersey City, N.J., just outside New York City, was one of the first licensed to sell the *Certified Angus Beef*® brand. Eric grew up making emergency deliveries out of the back of the family's van and riding along to keep his dad awake when a midnight freezer alarm demanded attention.

a.m. each day, he arrives to manage logistics.

“This business is driven by what goes on the truck and the quality of what we're pushing out the door,” Marc says. “Having somebody with interest looking and seeing what goes on in the back of the shop is invaluable.”

During the October–December holiday rush, the same staff might double sales.

“There really is an exhilaration with being in the center of that,” Eric says, recalling his first season running out of product to load. “I ran to the butcher room and there was none available, so I'm sitting there at a saw cutting 4-inch marrow bones and I'm thinking to myself, ‘Man, I'm glad I didn't go to law school or something like that. This is the kind of work I was meant for.’”

Not coincidentally, Marc also craves the crunch time.

“When I've put in a stupid-long day, be it inventory or mail-order

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The father-son meat-cutting duo Steve (right) and Matt Kotuba both work for CAB-brand licensee Giant Eagle, a supermarket chain with stores in western Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia and Maryland.

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in November and December, at the end of the day when you close your eyes and you're like, 'Wow. That was a job well-done and a good day.' That's the most rewarding feeling of all time," he says.

They know cattlemen can identify.

"When you see the care they give their animals, I hope that they realize on our

end we give the same care to the product," Marc says. "We take a lot of pride, and without ranchers and people doing the right job on that end, we have no job."

More than a job

Matt Kotuba can still remember the smell of meat on his father's hands when

his dad would come home from work every night.

"It wasn't a bad smell," he says fondly. "I love that smell."

His father, Steve, still comes home sporting the familiar aroma. Nowadays, so does Matt.

The father-son meat-cutting duo both work for CAB-brand licensee Giant Eagle, a supermarket chain with stores in western

Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia and Maryland.

Steve is a meat team leader at the company's Settler's Ridge location, while Matt is the same at store No. 43 in The Township of Pine Market District, both in Pittsburgh, Penn.

As second- and third-generation meat cutters, respectively, both got their starts early and knew there was no other career for them. Matt remembers working in his grandfather's butcher shop, alongside his dad, as young as 12.

Steve's recollection goes back even farther.

"I'd stand on a milk crate and do bones long before I could reach the counter," he says.

Even then, he had a passion.

"My dad put the love of meat in me. He would raise cattle and buy cattle, and I just couldn't wait to harvest them and see what they looked like," Steve says. "I guess I did the same thing to Matt as my dad did to me. He's got a real love for it, too."

In a time when meat cutters often hold the position temporarily or between other supermarket gigs, a passion for meat cutting could be a dying one.

"I've been with Giant Eagle 23 years, and I've probably gone through a couple hundred meat cutters," Steve says. "I can't say that I've found many who truly love it like we do."

Sure, they do their jobs and do them very well, he adds, but it's not in their blood as it is in the Kotubas'.

For Matt, leading his team is one of the most rewarding aspects of the job. Steve's pride is in educating his customers when it comes to beef buying and preparation — all in hopes that every consumer will have the best possible eating experience. Sometimes he'll even invite a guest behind the counter to learn.

"Every summer, I'll go to the fairs and buy the grand and reserve grand champion steers," Steve says. "Then I invite the exhibitors up here to talk to my customers about the beef they raised."

For both father and son, it's more than just a job. It's a career, closely linked with CAB.

"I've worked with a lot of quality beef, but there's nothing like it," Matt says, noting quality and consistency make his job easier.

"All I'd have to say to quality-focused producers," Steve adds, "is they're doing a great job."

An early taste of the brand

"It's always changing, but always for the better."

If Jeff Jones had to sum up the beef industry, say one thing about the arena he's poured his life's passions into, the one that's given him even more in return, that would be it.

"It's intoxicating," the Indiana emigrant to Michigan might add.

Catalogs of memories run vividly in his mind. From opening restaurants, doing sales for a small meat company that would later be acquired by US Foods, to serving as a Sysco CAB

specialist and now, finally, heading his own consulting company, Black Hide Solutions LLC. There have been plenty of reasons to celebrate along the way, but none come close to when Cody, Jeff's only son — and only child for that matter — began working for the brand.

The young man acquired an early taste for quality beef.

“Cody, he was born in '86, so by '87, when he first got his teeth, I'm shoving ground chuck into his mouth,” Jeff says through a laugh.

Lighthearted and joyful, Jeff spent Cody's early years leading by example and teaching him the essentials, like how to throw a pass, the importance of listening in conversation, and that subpar beef is unacceptable.

“Most kids, when they're growing up, go to McDonald's and play on the playground,” Jeff says. “Well, if you were rolling with me, we're going to our licensed customers that sell CAB, so that's what he was eating.”

For Cody, it wasn't until 2011, when he began selling CAB as a Sysco marketing associate, that he was able to wrap his head around the importance of the product that was a staple in his childhood home.

“He would never let me go out and eat bad meat anywhere, so I didn't realize that what I was eating was actually some of the best meat on the planet,” Cody says.

In school he played football, studied international relations and didn't necessarily think about the food industry as a career path. However, days spent as a kid visiting his dad's restaurant customers foreshadowed and prepared him for life today.

Jeff heard about the position available with CAB and told his son to consider it.

“I knew it was going to be a career, not a job,” Jeff says. “From coast to coast I've worked with ranchers and

restaurateurs connected to the brand. I said, ‘This is a great career path. This is something you can do the rest of your life and be proud of along the way.’”

As an executive account manager for CAB, Cody's territory spans California, Utah, Nevada and Wyoming. On opposite ends of the country — Jeff in Kalamazoo, Cody in Los Angeles — the two make sure to chat every week.

Every other phone call inevitably takes a turn toward beef.

In a way, life's come full circle as Jeff has now had the chance to sit in on a few of Cody's business meetings when visiting his son on the coast. To see him market the brand, or what he calls “dining room insurance,” makes him proud.

“I just see it, I hear it in his voice,” Jeff

says. “Boy, it makes a father just swell up. I tell you what, my cup runs over.”



Editor's Note: *Laura Conaway is producer communications specialist and Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC. Owner of Cactus Flower Communications, Katrina Huffstutler is a freelance writer from Electra, Texas.*



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