

HERO TO COWBOY

By Heather Smith-Thomas

“Every little boy grows up dreaming of being a soldier or a cowboy,” says Josh Eilers of Ranger Cattle based in Austin, Texas. “I wanted to be both.” Josh was still in grade school in Elgin, Texas, when 9/11 occurred, and, at that point, he made up his mind to become a soldier. He grew up believing that if you are going to do something, you should do it right and that you should do it to the best of your ability. The desire to be a soldier led him to join the Army, and his “be your best” attitude drove him to be the team leader of the U.S. Army’s elite First Ranger Battalion.

While in the Army Josh deployed for four tours of duty - three in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. Since he was either deployed or training to be deployed for many years, Josh was able to save a sizeable nest egg. He was wounded in his fourth tour, and he received a Purple Heart for his service to our country. Being wounded took an emotional toll on his family, and he decided to get out of the military. His sister and best friend, Jessica, convinced him to use the GI bill to go to the University of Texas at Austin (UT) where she was studying law at the time. Josh and Jessica met for lunch every week, but even with family support, Josh, like most combat veterans, struggled with the transition back into civilian life.

Transitioning back into civilian life from the military is a challenge. One reason is that veterans don’t have a lot of downtime. Josh went directly from service into school because he needed to get paid. Due to his military service, he was able to go to college fully funded by the GI bill. The government paid for his classes and for him to go to class. Josh attended classes and looked for a new direction for his life.

One night at a bar on 6th street, Josh remembers hearing a frat boy trying to impress a pretty blond. The frat boy was bragging about a \$100 Wagyu steak he had just eaten. Josh jotted it down on his phone. The next week he found the note as he was scrolling through his phone and decided to research the breed to see why this kid would spend \$100 on a steak. This curiosity and his decision that he “didn’t want to drink the money away like the other kids” led Josh to fulfill his second childhood dream – being a cowboy.

When Eilers began his agricultural adventure, he didn’t even own a truck. He started by doing some research that led him to a name that would greatly influence him...Bubba Kay of Kay Ranch in Manor, Texas. “I went to see Bubba Kay, and he told me he would teach me how to make money on Wagyu cattle. He literally taught me how to do it all. He has been an incredible mentor. My success is in large part due to him.”

Josh had many obstacles to overcome to begin ranching. Even though he had saved money, he didn’t have the capital necessary to go out and buy land. It was time for him to get creative. He found some land on the outskirts of Austin that was owned by commercial developers. As Josh explained it, “The developers are kind of in a holding pattern. While the land was just sitting there, they needed someone to maintain it, and they needed an ag exemption.” The developers let Josh use the land to run his cattle, and in exchange they get agricultural tax write-offs. Even though it is only a matter of time before the land gets developed, he hopes to continue to work with the commercial real estate company and move his herd with their land as they buy up tracts. One day, Josh’s dream is to be able to buy his own ranch, but for now, this creative solution allows him to do business. After finding land to run cattle on, he then bought sixteen bred heifers and began Ranger Cattle.

Not growing up on a farm created a steep learning curve, and looking back, Josh realizes that without a mentor and the benefits provided to him as a veteran, he would have had a much harder time surmounting the barriers to entry into ranching. Because of this realization he now advocates Congress to provide programs and support to young farmers and ranchers who would like to pursue agriculture as a career. He wants legislators to be able to understand the effects of the laws they are passing and how it trickles down to ranchers.

As a student, Josh learned about genetics and the importance of DNA cloning. He applied every lesson directly to his herd. Without a lot of bills, he was able to save money for a few semesters and purchase a fullblood female from Larry Tebben. He transferred a bunch of her embryos to Angus

surrogates. Although Josh majored in biology, his most influential class was entrepreneurship because he had to present his business plan. Josh recalled, “Investors highlighted my short comings and ripped my business plan apart. I had to contact industry leaders and local restaurants.” Josh realized several things with that business exercise. First, instead of selling his calves up north, he could keep them and finish them out himself for more profit. Secondly, the Austin market craves local-grown, farm-to-table products. Eilers focuses on selling his meat in the greater Austin area, and he caters to the health conscious foodie who appreciates knowing where his or her food comes from. One innovative way he does this is by feeding his cattle out with spent grain that he picks up twice a week from a nearby brewery for free. That gives his cattle a 28% protein finishing ration, and the area chefs prefer barley over corn as a finishing agent. After implementing his business plan, Eilers says with a smile, “It is almost looking like this might work.”

Right now, Josh can’t afford to eat his product because he needs to sell it. However, when he does eat Wagyu, a burger paired with an ice-cold beer is Josh’s favorite way to eat it. “If this thing is successful, it is gonna be because of the hamburger,” says Eilers. Routinely thinking outside of the box, being money-conscious, and always looking for the most efficient ways to get things done, have made it possible for Eilers to get into Wagyu without being independently wealthy or inheriting land. Josh makes every dollar count toward his primary goal. He says “I can’t see spending the money to attend conventions when I could buy another embryo instead.”

Josh graduated from UT a year ago December with a Bachelor’s of Science degree in human biology. The University of Texas does not have any agricultural degrees, but choosing human biology as his major allowed Josh to take as much biology and learn as much about cattle as he could at an urban university. “I was talking with someone from Texas A&M University, and I said that obviously I should have gone to A&M. He said that he was glad that I didn’t...that if I had gone there I would have learned traditional ways to raise commercial cattle.”

Josh still follows the Army’s motto of “do your best...be all you can be”. When he decided to raise cattle, he thought, “I don’t want to just raise cattle. I want to raise the best cattle.” He chose Wagyu and uses his education to make selections to breed in a positive direction. That is one of his marketing tools, and data is his proof. Josh believes that as a breed society, we need “massive data collection to be able to make informed decisions.”

Because of his honorably discharged veteran status, Eilers is able to use a special label on his products – Homegrown by Heroes. This labeling program was originally begun by the Kentucky department of agriculture but opened up nationally this year. The idea behind it is to help veterans set themselves apart in the marketplace by distinguishing products produced by veterans, giving shoppers the choice to support those who gave their time and service to defend our freedoms.

Looking back on his transitioning time, Josh said, “When I came home from the war, the members of the community that wrapped their arms around me...those are the real heroes.” Josh gives back to help fellow combat veterans who are struggling through the same transition period he experienced by providing them the opportunity to work with his cattle. “There is a therapeutic index to feeding cattle by hand. It makes everybody happy. Coming here is a way to let off steam not in the public eye.” Being only seven miles from the University of Texas, Josh is able to work closely with the UT student veteran association to identify those who could benefit from the opportunity of being outside in nature. “The same kinds of guys that are willing to go into combat are not the guys that want to sit behind a cubicle. I need help building a fence...they need a way out when they are stressed. Instead of feeling overwhelmed in a PTSD moment, they can take it out on a fence in the middle of nowhere when no one is watching.”

Ranger Cattle now has sixty to sixty-five mother cows and ten steers on grain and is harvesting about one animal per month. Eilers feels like he is set on the beef side and is planning to grow the seedstock part of his operation. His future goal is to get to 300 head a year for seedstock. Josh loves learning about and working with his cattle. The experience has humbled him and shown him how the world really turns.

