

Growing New Roots



It was a typical afternoon until his arm tingled. He tried to shake it out, but his vision blurred and his head felt thick. He muttered something about going upstairs to lie down, but the words were difficult to say. It was not until he tried to climb the stairs but could not lift his foot that Weldon Warren realized something was terribly wrong.

"I turned to my wife and said, 'I think I'm having a stroke,'" Warren said.

As Warren's wife, Ann, drove him to the hospital that day, they decided to swing through a drive thru to grab a quick hamburger. Little did they know, this eating habit was the very thing that caused Warren to have a premature stroke in his mid 40s.

"When the doctors told me that my arteries were

over 50 percent clogged, I knew I had to make a dramatic change," Warren said. "Our oldest daughter was in second grade at the time, and I wanted to be healthy enough to watch my kids grow up."

Warren began researching ways to improve his health.

With Ann's help, the two discovered a new trend in ranching that were raising and finishing cattle on grass, called grass-fed cattle.

"We had been reading about grass-fed as it relates to my family's involvement in farming and ranching,"

Warren said, "and we just knew people were getting on a more healthy way to finish cattle on grass."

Several years later, Warren went for a health checkup and found there to be zero arterial blockage. He had made

a recovery that surprised even the doctors. Warren believes that this can partially be attributed to his transition to consuming grass-fed beef.

"That was the basis for Ann and me to decide if I were going to live long enough for the kids, we were going to change the way we were eating," Warren said.

After finishing a few head of cattle on grass solely for his family, Warren decided to expand his operation to make grass-fed beef available to others. He scouted a new place to move his family to begin the venture into the grass-fed industry, naming the company Holy Cow Beef.

"We're very methodical, we're very research oriented, and analytical," Warren said. "We identified four different areas around Dallas-Fort Worth that we might move to."

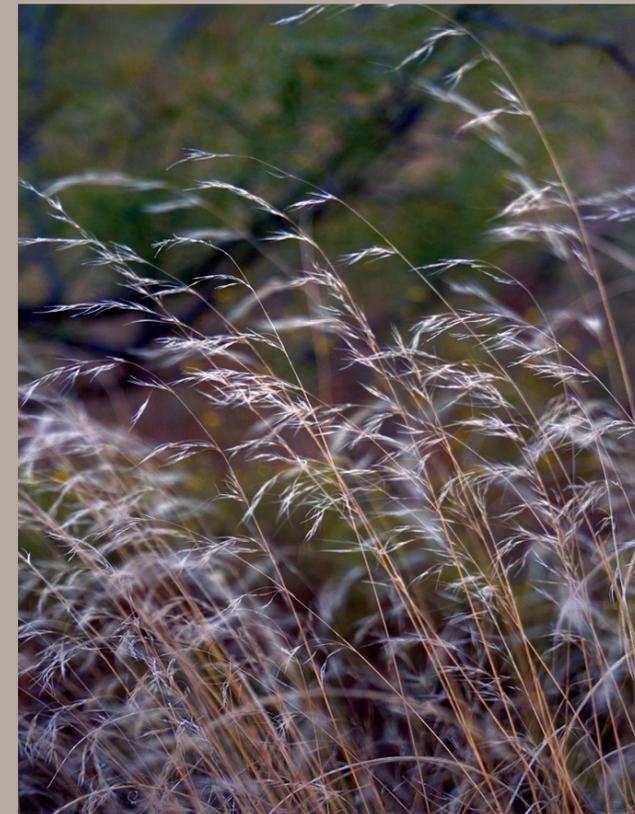
After a series of business deals and partnerships, Warren finally put roots down in Graham, Texas, where he raised his three children, Timothy, J.R. and Erin.

However, the concept of grass-fed was not met with open arms by all. Many other ranchers, including Warren's own father and brother, maintained skepticism about his grass-fed cattle program.

"We're innovative and going against the grain, but we're going back to what Mother Nature gave us naturally," Warren said.

Warren's first intention when going into the industry was to be a wholesale producer, with little interest in retail. In 2005, he reached out to Whole Foods Market, a grocery store chain, to gauge their interest in his product.

"The vision was large numbers (of cattle) to a lot of stores, because then you're dealing with cattle in truckloads," Warren said.



In the early stages of wholesale production for Whole Foods, the Warrens saw the value of personal interactions and relationships with consumers.

"We hope to educate the mainstream America that grass-fed isn't really that much different in flavor, but much healthier," Warren's wife, Ann, said.

After a few years, the Warrens turned Holy Cow Beef into the largest supplier of grass-fed animals to Whole Foods in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana. In 2011, their ranch in Graham, Texas, was impacted by the drought in 2011, driving Weldon back to his roots in the High Plains region, where he established a new home in Lubbock, Texas.

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"For us to survive, we decided fairly quickly to focus on the retail and market it up," Weldon said. "It took years."

Now back to West Texas, Weldon said his business has increased his consumer interaction.

"I think the future of our business as we move away from the actual ranching is the talking to people, educating people, and interacting," Ann said.

The family got involved slowly with restaurants and other producers in Lubbock. Holy Cow Beef is available in small natural grocery stores and the family travels to regional farmers markets, where the product is in high demand. The Warrens also have an online retail store that customers from all over Texas can order beef for pick up and delivery.

"It's become a very personal business to people's health," Weldon said. "All these families share their health journey and the progress they've made fairly quickly, so it's nice that what we do plays such an integral role in people's health journey."

Holy Cow Beef is now entering a new era. The Warrens recently purchased Gardski's, a restaurant in Lubbock. The family has been busy over the past few months remodeling the building to match the re-vamped menu featuring Holy Cow Beef products.

"Whole Foods is our wholesale channel, then we developed the retail channel, and now Gardski's is kind of a restaurant channel from the pasture to plate," Weldon said.

Weldon went on to say he is excited to raise his level of consumer education of grass-fed beef, using the restaurant as a medium.

"We have the restaurant to take it to a level of where it's fun," Weldon said with a grin. "We will spend a lot of time just talking to people and going from table to table."

Weldon reminisced on how his father was an innovator on their family farm, using test plots for selective cotton breeding.



“His desire to improve what he was doing was the same thing we are doing,” Weldon said.

Weldon said his favorite part of the grass-fed journey is seeing his product’s impact on everyone from complete strangers to neighbors.

It has been fourteen years since Weldon had his stroke. He stood and clapped while watching his daughter graduate from Texas Tech last year. He works alongside his oldest son on the family ranch, and attends Tech football games with his youngest son, a sophomore at Tech.

The Warren family has come a long way since picking up fast food on the way to the hospital.

“It’s not easy to be mindful about what you eat,” Weldon said, “But I never was one to take the easy way out.”

The life Weldon and Ann imagined for their family may have drastically changed after Weldon’s stroke, but now they live life differently.

“You have the opportunity to have a positive impact on someone’s health,” Weldon said. “That’s the reason we do what we do.” 🍴



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