

Faith, Hope and Love

The loss of a child helped one Hereford family strengthen family bonds and their faith.

by **Christy Couch Lee**



The Lowdermans have many items throughout the house with the simple word "Believe" attached. Sherry says this simple word reminds them to believe that they will once again be united with Cory, who passed away after a tragic car accident.

Lossing a child is a pain that no parent expects to experience. A pain no parent thinks can be endured.

For the Lowderman family of Macomb, Ill., that pain was a reality. In one moment, Jack and Sherry were the parents of four healthy boys — Monte, 23, Brent, 21, Cory, 20, and Cody, 12.

In the next instant, their world was turned on its head when Cory was involved in a car accident that resulted in a near-comatose life until his passing nine years later.

What could have resulted in the tearing apart of a family turned into a strengthening of family bonds — which were forged even stronger by the support of their family and Hereford industry friends — a faith as rock solid as ever and a belief that a higher power was truly in control.

Life as a Lowderman

Monte says growing up in the Lowderman household brings back fond memories of laughter, mischief and fellowship around the supper table.

"We often had the whole family sitting around the table at night — and we always had something to talk about," he says.

The family's fondest memories often revolve around county fairs — camping in the stock trailers and

making do with the allowance Jack and Sherry had left them for the week.

"There were six or seven families that we camped and traveled with," Monte says. "And a bond still exists through those parents and kids to this day. We learned responsibility, work ethic, friendship and taking pride in our work."

At that time, Monte says, cell phones didn't exist. So he and his brothers were forced to solve problems and work together to get the job done.

"There were four of us boys between 8 and 16 years old," he says. "If there was a problem, we had to take care of it. I credit Mom and Dad for raising us not to be sheltered."

And, when the stories turn to Cory, smiles, laughter — and a few tears — are common.

Cory

Sherry says, in his short time on this earth, Cory taught many valuable life lessons to those who knew him.

"He had a rock-solid faith in Jesus; a love for family, honesty and truthfulness; and the desire to compete with everything he had," she says.

Jack agrees.

"He was very upbeat," he says. "He was a leader. He was a true believer. And, he was full of mischievousness."

Sherry recalls that mischief with a smile.



Cory



The Lowderman family (left to right) Monte, Carrie and Rhett; Jack and Sherry; Cody and Abby; and Kris, Morgan, Brent and Blake all have retained Cory's spirit and strength in their lives today.

“He had a smile to indicate he was always thinking,” Sherry says. “For example, one Sunday morning, he placed a thumbtack in the church pew where Jack was going to sit. The minute Jack made contact with that thumbtack, he turned around and looked at Cory. Something was always turning.”

Sherry says Cory's inspirational side encouraged those around him. He often carried quotes and poems to inspire himself and others, and he had filled the covers of his judging notebooks, while judging at Black Hawk College — East Campus, with quotes and one-liners.

One such poem titled “Don't Quit” is framed in the Lowderman home office as a reminder of his strength, Sherry says.

“He always found a positive comment to use as an incentive,” Sherry says. “One favorite: ‘Watch your thoughts, for they become words. Watch your words, for they become actions. Watch your actions, for they become habits. Watch your habits, for they become character. Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny,’ now is on our website to encourage us all.”

Cody says Sherry continues the inspirational tradition, sending small notes containing quotations with the Lowderman men as they leave to judge a show or compete in an auctioneering contest.

“When I was in junior and senior college, before every judging contest, Mom would write an inspirational quote for me,” Cody recalls. “Today, she still does that. That all relates back to Cory. We just can't go somewhere without them.”

Cody says Cory possessed a confidence unlike most others — a confidence without arrogance.

“There was something uncanny about the way he had so much confidence and how he knew no matter what he was doing — showing cattle, livestock judging — that he was there to win, but he wasn't there to ‘beat’ anyone,” Cody says.

The competitive side of Cory caused him to strive to do his best in livestock judging. And it was just after a livestock judging trip with Black Hawk College — East Campus when the accident occurred that would forever change life for the Lowdermans.

“He had just been at the judging contest at the Houston

Livestock Show in 1991,” Sherry recalls. “The team had just won high team in beef, and Cory was high overall in that contest. A week later, the wreck happened.”

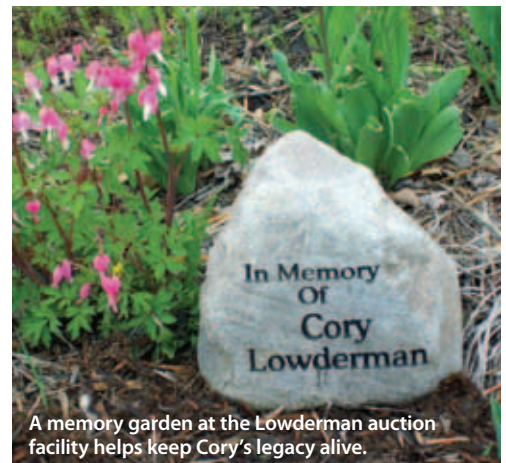
Lives changed forever

Cory was involved in a car accident that resulted in 10 months of hospital stays. He returned home in the spring of 1992 in a near-comatose state. Each day, Sherry and Jack cared for his every need, as he was only able to communicate by blinking his eyes.

Sherry and Jack maintained hope that Cory's condition would improve. Sherry kept a daily log of activities so Cory would be able to catch up when he awoke, Cody recalls.

“Every day — for nine years,” Cody says. “I think that's amazing.”

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A memory garden at the Lowderman auction facility helps keep Cory's legacy alive.

Cody says, as difficult as it was to witness, he was often inspired by his big brother's strength.

"He was here as I was growing up — while I was in junior high and high school," Cody says. "To have to walk by that room where he was, every day, it reminded you that he wasn't going to quit."

And, Sherry says, he fought that battle for nearly a decade.

"We had him a little over nine years, and he passed away in 2000," Sherry says.

The legacy left behind

Although Cory is no longer with the Lowdermans in body, he most certainly is a part of their everyday lives.

Monte says his time with Cory inspired him to live for each moment.

"I've learned to never take anything for granted," he says. "I've also learned to develop core values and beliefs that are fair. To always remember where you came from, and never tell anyone you're better than them. Cory was Cory. In everything he did, he was the backbone."

As a visual reminder, Sherry has planted a memory garden at the auction barn filled with the plants from Cory's funeral.

"We were worried when we first built it that the public would not respect it," she says. "But, we've never had any instance where people have been disrespectful. We've actually found remembrances there, and to this day, we don't know where they came from."

When the garden was built, Jack chose to occupy the office facing the garden so he could see it daily.

"I wanted my office to overlook the garden," he says. "It's something I can look at and remember him — another way that we know he was loved."

Another visual reminder occurs each Christmas, as Sherry and Jack present each family member a decorative item that simply says, "Believe."

"That's a way we incorporate Cory and a way for us to remember," Sherry says. "That was his belief and ours — that we'll all be together again."

Reminders of Cory even appear to the family through songs on the radio, Jack says. "The Dance," by Garth Brooks was played during Cory's funeral and also serves as a reminder of Cory's life.

"We have heard that song many times since his passing," Jack recalls. "It's quite breathtaking when we hear it. And, there is usually some sort of joy that comes just after we hear the song."

And, quite simply, living life reflects Cory. Cody's wife, Abby,

says she sees Cory in the actions of Cody every day.

"Whether or not he realizes it, Cody uses the lessons learned from Cory every day," she says. "I've known both of them since they were kids. Cory has become such a part of Cody, without him even realizing it."

Sherry says although some families deal with grieving by not discussing the loved one lost, the Lowdermans talk about Cory often.

"I know of families who have lost a loved one, and that loved one's name is never mentioned again," Sherry says. "Many times, Cory's name is mentioned at a family gathering, and it's usually in some joking remembrance of something he did, or simply his outlook on life."

Finding the strength to go on

In fact, Monte says humor is a tool often used to lighten the burden during the difficult moments.

"If it wasn't for that — using that humor with friends and family — I'm not sure what we would have done," Monte says. "That's what helps us to continue."

Sherry says activities related to cattle also provided something to look forward to during those years of caring for Cory.

"Back in the very beginning, after the accident, we used many activities connected to the cattle business to anticipate and look forward to," she says. "It was a connection and a lifeline for me. And, it's still that way, today."

Jack says the cattle herd is a way for them to honor Cory.

"We have built our program in honor of him," he says. "This was the direction he would have wanted us to go."

Sherry says going forward each day is sometimes simply a choice.

"It's a choice you make — is the glass half full or half empty?" she says. "All while we cared for him, the outcome was always in doubt. But, we got up every morning and said there's a possibility for today. If you got up and said there was no

"Don't Quit"

Author Unknown

This poem inspired Cory to be his best during life. And, it inspires his family now, after his passing.

When things go wrong as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high,
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest if you must, but don't quit.

Life is strange with its twists and turns,
As every one of us sometimes learns,
And many a fellow turns about
When he might have won had he stuck it out.
Don't give up though the pace seems slow,
You may succeed with another blow.

Often the goal is nearer than
It seems to a fair and faltering man,
Often the struggler has given up
When he might have captured the victor's cup,
And he learned too late when night came down,
How close he was to the golden crown.

Success is failure turned inside out —
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,
And you never can tell how close you are,
It may be near when it seems afar,
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit,
It's when things seem worst that you mustn't quit.

hope — I just can't imagine trying to continue with that attitude."

Cody agrees. Going on with life is sometimes a decision you make.

"Cory wouldn't want us to quit — he'd want us to keep firing away, doing the best we could do," Cody says.

In addition to the strength the Lowdermans found within each other, they also were provided tremendous support through their friends in the Hereford industry.

Helping hands of the Hereford family

Sherry says the Hereford community — across the state and the country — was a great source of support after the accident and Cory's passing.

Sometimes the support was monetary. The Illinois Junior Hereford Association made a significant contribution to the "Friends of Cory Fund," which was used to fund his care, Sherry says.

"While he was here at home, we purchased a handicap-accessible van with a ramp from those funds," she recalls. "Those funds came directly from the state Hereford juniors."

Monte says the support shown through cards and letters of concern were overwhelming.

"Mom kept all of the cards in a cedar chest," Monte says. "That

cedar chest is full. Mom wanted him to be the one to open them — and most remain unopened, today."

In addition, Hereford friends often made the trek to visit Cory and the Lowderman family in person — during the hospital stays and during his care at home.

"Joe Lemenager, Ashkum, Ill., would come and read to Cory at least once a week at the hospital," Sherry says.

And, Sherry says, friend and fellow livestock judge Mark Hoge, Macomb, Ill., brought each of his judging awards to share with Cory, while Cory was being cared for in his home.

The power of a pug

One of their greatest forms of therapy and support also came from friends in the industry. In 2000, during the Junior National Hereford Expo in Tulsa, Okla., Tommy and Trudy Williams presented the Lowdermans with a gift to allow Cory's legacy to live on — a pug named Okie.

"Cory liked to play with pugs when he was younger," Sherry recalls. "Okie turned out to be our therapy dog. Today, when Jack is on the road, he calls just to check on Okie."

Jack says Okie has brought companionship and joy to the Lowderman family.

"I often stop to think, I wish Cory could be with Okie — he would have loved this dog so much," Jack says.

Honoring Cory

The representation of Cory's life is present in many other areas, as well. In 2001 the Illinois State Hereford Preview show was dedicated to Cory.

In addition, Dan Hoge and Lee Denzer with the Black Hawk College — East Campus livestock judging team established the Freshman Challenge Award in Cory's honor. The award is presented to the team's outstanding freshman livestock judge.



A sketch of Cory during a 1979 regional junior Hereford show has been used on the JNHE "Chin Up" award and for a junior national fundraiser throw (pictured here). This drawing serves as an inspiration for the Lowderman family to keep their faith during difficult times.

Perhaps the most well-known remembrance was created by Hereford artist Bruce Huxol — a sketch of Cory at the Junior National Polled Hereford Show in Springfield, Mo., in 1979. This sketch, depicting Cory with his hand under his heifer's chin — working to hold her head up — served as an icon for the "Chin Up" award, which was given to Hereford youth participating in the 1980 junior national. And, it is the cover image for the Lowdermans' sale catalog and website, as well.

"During that show, he had such a time showing that heifer — she took off and ran the full length of the show arena," Sherry says. "When he finally got her to stop, he had to work to keep her head up. Someone took a photo, and from that Huxol created the sketch. That sketch represents the way he competed — the way he approached life. To be the best you can be."

Discovering your own strength

The Lowdermans realize that each family faces struggles and challenges of their own. However, Jack says, one thing is universal:

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"Okie," the pug, was a gift from family friends after Cory's passing. Jack and Sherry say this dog has been one of their greatest forms of therapy.

you can't give up. He says you must understand, despite the grief you may be experiencing, the pain will lessen with time.

Cody believes everything does, in fact, happen for a reason.

"The man above isn't going to put something on your shoulders that you can't carry or you can't handle," he says. "You wonder how you're going to get through it. But, you do."

Sherry says her faith helped her each day. And one Bible verse, in particular, gave her strength: Proverbs 3:5: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding."

"I carried that with me then, and I still do, today," she says.

Her faith and that verse helped her through her most downtrodden moments.

"I remember walking into the ICU waiting room at the hospital for the very first time," Sherry recalls. "The uncertainty of it all. But my comment to Jack was, 'No matter how this turns out, we'll know where Cory will be.'"

Monte says it's critical to not be ashamed of whatever help you may need to deal with the pain.

"Different people have different ways of dealing with tragedy," he says. "Whether it's getting involved

in something that person believed in, or whether it's getting help in many different ways. Find what works for you. It's not a question of right or wrong. It's what works."

Jack advises a person to not be afraid to seek professional counseling, if the need arises.

"Three months after Cory was hurt, I was really struggling," he says. "I realized I had a wife and three kids to take care of. So, I sought professional counseling."

And, with time, the Lowdermans say the strength you gain through the tragedy can serve as assistance to others, in their times of need.

"A close friend of Cody's passed away just after he graduated," Sherry says. "My boys were able to walk alongside his brother at that time, and they were probably as much help as anyone could be after losing a brother. It's not a position you want to be in. But, you are able to connect with other folks that walk in tough times."

Just be there

The Lowdermans say, when dealing with a friend who may be experiencing loss, it's important to be there.

Monte suggests keeping the communication open with someone who is grieving.

"A lot of people were hesitant to ask how things were," he says. "But that's what made us feel good — to have people around and to know he had such an impact on so many people. When our family and friends in the cattle business told us they cared and that Cory had made an impact on their life, that helped us."

He also recommends treating the grieving family as you always have.

"Don't treat someone different because of a tragedy," Monte advises. "That family doesn't necessarily need sympathy — they need support and understanding. Don't put them in a box."

Sherry and Jack say, although it can be difficult to find the words to talk with someone after a tragedy, the words aren't important. Being there is.

"For someone going through that situation, it's not the words you say," Sherry says. "It's the fact that you're there with them. Sitting beside them. Holding their hand — even in silence."

Jack believes Cory's passing has brought the Lowderman family closer.

"We have become a stronger family, and we were already strong," he says. "So many times, when a family does have a tragedy, they grow apart. I vowed that nothing was going to tear apart our family. That's not what Cory would have wanted."

Sherry agrees.

"Some folks are here longer than others, and some folks accomplish what they're here to do in a shorter amount of time," she says. "As a family, I believe it's recommitted us to always finding a way to stay connected and sharing, and supporting each other."

The Lowdermans have faced a pain no family ever hopes to endure. And, carrying the memory and legacy of Cory with them, they're moving forward with the ultimate faith that, one day, they will be reunited again. **HW**

A history of Herefords

Jack and Sherry Lowderman got their start in the Hereford business when Sherry's parents presented them with two Hereford heifers as a wedding gift. The cattle operation has both increased and decreased through the years, and today consists of 150 cows — 50-75 of which serve as embryo transfer donors.

In 2003 the Lowderman family began the Illini Top Cut Sale along with five progressive Hereford breeders in Illinois. Cows and heifer calves sold through this sale have gone on to produce class winners and champions at Hereford junior nationals and at state fairs.

As the Lowdermans grew their cattle operation, they also became devoted to growing their auction business. Each year, Jack and his three sons conduct 75-100 sales, with an emphasis on farmland and residential real estate. In addition, the Lowdermans sell monthly real estate auctions for Williams & Williams across the country.

The Lowderman businesses are truly family-run, and each family member plays a part: son Monte, his wife, Carrie, and their son, Rhett; son Brent, his wife, Kris, their son, Blake, and their daughter, Morgan; and son Cody and his wife, Abby. **HW**