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Award-winning farmer credits family for success

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18 Jul 2015 | Written by Brandon Davis | Published in News |

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Lee Neel has never wanted to live in the city — even when he was accepted into the Georgia Institute of Technology to study civil engineering.

“I was just sick to my stomach thinking about living down there,” he said, referring to Georgia Tech’s location in central Atlanta.

But then again, he’s not much of a conventionalist, anyway. Neel, a row crop farmer who was presented with the 2014 Farm Family of the Year Award at the 2015 Bartow County Farm Family Banquet last month, prefers a lifestyle different from most. He goes to work on a 770-acre farm on Reynolds Bend, just off U.S. Highway 411 near Kingston. And that’s the way he likes it.

“Everything else that I ever did just kind of seemed just not quite right or normal ..., but this, to me, just kind of seems normal,” noted Neel,



Bartow County Farm Family of the Year, the Neels, from left, Lee, Case, Erin and Wyatt pose for a photo in one of their soybean fields.

who makes a living harvesting corn and soybeans.

When he says “everything,” he certainly means a little bit of everything. Upon graduating from Cartersville High School in 1998, Neel, who grew up in White, attended the University of Georgia and received a degree in finance. During the summers, he worked in general stores at Yellowstone National Park. Afterward, he came back and worked as a real estate developer, then took a job as a banker. When he realized a future in banking wasn’t for him, he moved out to a ski town in Wyoming and worked for a hotel. Eventually, he moved back to Georgia and became interested in civil engineering. It was at this time that he applied to and opted out of further study at Georgia Tech and instead went to work for a civil engineering firm in Marietta. While Neel enjoyed working at the firm, back home in Bartow County, things were becoming difficult. In 2007, his grandfather, Holmes Neel, was placed in a nursing home and Lee’s father, Robert, was taking care of most of the work on the family farm. It was going to require extra help to stay afloat. So Lee Neel began working part-time on the farm, eventually making it his full-time job by 2009.

And it wasn’t easy. But luckily, he noted, available work has gradually increased since that time.

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“That first year that I was on here full-time, [I] was ... struggling to really make sure I had something worthwhile to do. And since then, now it’s just like, how did that ever happen? There’s way too much to do to ever get it done.”

For the past six years, day in and day out, Neel and his father have dedicated their working lives to the farm, which has land in both White and Kingston. The Kingston location is referred to as the “river farm,” due to its close proximity to the Etowah River. The two men handle irrigation and perform harvesting, as well as performing all the maintenance on their equipment. Neel said that the maintenance can be more taxing than the field work itself.

“You ever been to crank up your lawnmower and it won’t work? And you get all mad, like, ‘Man, I was just going to mow my grass.’ That is a whole more complicated than a lawnmower,” he said, pointing to a massive combine harvesting machine under his shed. “Corn and soybeans are abrasive. You’re harvesting 15,000 pounds of grain an acre — fast.”

The Bartow County Farm Family Banquet, which is hosted by the The University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences Bartow County Extension Office and the Bartow County Farm Bureau, recognizes the Farm Family of the Year Award winner, as well as local students who have made accomplishments in the field of agriculture. The students recognized this year included Ezra Hall and Madison Holman, who received the 4-H Excellence in Agriculture Award; Lacey-Mae Arnold, who received the Family and Consumer Science Award; and Brady Gentry, who received the Outstanding Future Farmer of America Award.

According to Bartow County Extension Coordinator Paul Pugliese, the winner of the Farm Family of the Year Award is selected by the combined decision of the past three recipients of the award. Many of these past recipients have been involved in Bartow County farming for quite some time, and the extension office keeps a list of each of the winners of the award.

“[The list] goes back to 1962 ... and it’s kind of the ‘who’s who’ of

farming and agriculture here in Bartow County and those families who have had a huge impact on types of crops and the significance of the farming industry that we still have here today in Bartow County,” said Pugliese, who noted that local agriculture recently saw a boost in production. “This year, our total production value of agriculture in Bartow County has gone up. We’re up to \$107 million in agricultural commodities grown right here in Bartow County.”

Neel said winning the award was exciting because of its history.

“The neatest thing to me about it ... is the list of people [who have won the award] before,” he explained. “I thought that was a really neat list to look over. Because, I mean, I know a third of those people ... and some of them are still farming, some of them aren’t.”

Neel would likely say it’s fitting that the award’s title has the word “family” in it because that’s exactly what he values most. He and his wife, Erin, have two sons, Case, 3, and Wyatt, 1. Lee Neel’s father and mother, Janet Neel, often help take care of the children during busy times of the year.

Neel said he once saw a sign in a restaurant that read, “Behind every successful farmer is a wife who works in town.” And, he noted, he believes that is true. If he had remained a bachelor, he imagined, his life would be quite different.

“I just think that was ... the most real sign ever made. It would be one thing if it was me trying to survive because I could go to Wal-Mart once a month and buy toilet paper and frozen meals. And live in a dark cave and try to get my utility bill paid on time,” he joked. “But man, if you’re going to have kids ..., it takes everybody to help you doing this. I’ve got a very industrious, very together, very hard-working wife. And that’s her, professionally, and watching the kids. I’ve got really good parents that help out ... It’s like everybody pulling together to get everything done. [When my wife is] taking care of the kids for three weeks straight while we’re harvesting, I’m not hardly seeing her. That’s hard.”

Neel noted that his son, Case, even at 3 years old, is already beginning to take an interest in agriculture.

“He knows the different types of headers for combines and what they

are called. He loves riding in the combine, and about every 10 seconds he says, 'Is it full yet?' the entire time. He does not like getting out of the combine and going back home," Neel said. "He has corrected his mommy when she has said, 'Look, Case, a bulldozer,' to which he replied, 'No, mommy, that's a loader,' and he is generally always right."

Neel credits his own positive memories of working on his family's farm — which was once a dairy farm — as well as the mentorship of his father and grandfather, for the love he still has for agriculture in the present.

"I generally spent as much time as I possibly could on farm equipment growing up, be it in tractors planting with my dad, silage machines with my grandfather, trucks [or] combines. That's where the action is on a farm, and I think, for me as a boy, it was the appeal of big equipment doing an important job that needed to be done. I couldn't wait to grow up so I could do it, too."

Now, over 30 years later, a grown-up Lee Neel is an important component of the local agriculture scene that he fell in love with as a boy. And his farm family keeps growing.

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