



# Beginning His Beef Business

Photos and Story by Lauren Neale

Above: Eli Dotson with his herd that began with the TCA/Farm Credit-Mid America Heifer Initiative Scholarship.

A few years ago, Eli Dotson of Petersburg, Tenn., sat down at his table and filled out a scholarship application. He didn't know then what a huge impact it would have on his life.

Dotson, who is now 15 years old and a sophomore at Fayetteville High School, was awarded one of six Heifer Initiative Scholarships from Farm Credit Mid-America and the Tennessee Cattlemen's Association. This prize was given to students who desired purchasing show heifers and/or beginning their own herd. Dotson wanted to do both. He purchased a commercial crossbred heifer from Shane Williams of Athens, Tenn., selecting the heifer based on her confirmation and her ability to work as both a show animal and after her retirement, work well in the field.

Since then, Dotson's original heifer has produced several offspring for a total of twelve head. Of those born, Dotson retained the females and sold the steers. The females have had calves themselves, with three due to calve soon, and the money from the sales of the steers has helped Dotson to expand his farming operation and repertoire.

One way he was able to increase his farm was by purchasing a dairy cow. "She'll let anything nurse her," said Dotson. "When I figured that out, I knew I could use her to graft either twin calves to or purchase calves at the sale barn and grow them using her."



Above: Dotson with the granddaughter of his original heifer (which was purchased with the scholarship funds). She won Reserve Grand Champion Commercial Heifers at the Lincoln County Fair and was in the group of three heifers in the State Junior Feeder Calf contest.

Through a grant from the National FFA Supervised Agricultural Experience, Dotson attended the Select Sires A.I. School at the Middle Tennessee Research & Education Center in Spring Hill, Tenn. He is hoping that this skill will open up a business opportunity for him. "I'm wanting to have farmers bring me their cattle and I will A.I. them," said Dotson. "This would help supplement my income and provide them with a service."

In addition to managing his herd, Dotson is involved in several extracurricular activities. He has a meat goat project and is a member of both FFA and 4-H. He is currently the vice president of the Fayetteville FFA chapter and will compete in the National FFA Agricultural Issues Competition at the 2017 national convention. He has previously won the Youth Speech Contest at the Cattle Industry Convention and Trade Show when he was just ten years old.

His parents, Philip and Rujena Dotson, and grandparents, Phil and Betty Dotson, and Ruble and Jean Beaty, are very proud of his accomplishments at his age. "We just want to teach him to work for what he wants and have skills to do anything he sets his mind to," said Rujena. "We all are excited to see where it takes him."

While it's apparent that Dotson is passionate about producing cattle, he is thankful for the help he has received to get him started. "The Heifer Initiative Scholarship gave me a kick start into farming, basically from the ground up. The heifer I purchased with the award money made me a farmer."

Dotson has plans to attend Tennessee Tech University for a pre-vet degree after he finishes high school. "I just love working with animals and being involved in agriculture," said Dotson.



Left: Dotson leads his cows to feed on his parent's farm near Petersburg, Tenn.

## HOW YOU CAN WIN

For the seventh year, Farm Credit Mid-America and the Tennessee Cattlemen's Association is offering the Heifer Initiative Program Scholarships. Six deserving youth will be awarded either \$2,000 or \$1,000 to purchase a heifer of their choice, for a total of \$9,000.

"Farm Credit Mid-America is proud to support the next generation of cattle producers and partnering with organizations like the Tennessee Cattlemen's Association that share the same sense of purpose has been a great way for us to help young farmers pursue their dreams in the cattle industry," said Shane Williams, senior financial officer.

There are three categories of winners: Junior (4th and 5th grades), Junior High (6th, 7th, and 8th grades), and Senior High (9th, 10th and 11th grades). Each of those categories will have a first and second place award. Applications for this scholarship are due by December 15, 2017 and can be found on the following page of this issue of the *Tennessee Cattle Business*. It can also be downloaded from <https://e-farmcredit.com/heifer-initiative>.

"Take every opportunity you have to try and become better," said Dotson. "Don't let something like this intimidate you. You never know where it can lead you."



Above: Another Heifer Scholarship Winner, Emily Johnson, with her heifer she purchased from Walt Dickson of Smoky Mountain Farm & Ranch.