

LIVING LIFE

Ripe and Full

On Blueberry Ridge Farm in Mineola, there's a family of five that's squeezing just about every drop out of the fruit of life—and that makes for some juicy times. Parents Jill and Jerry Graves, along with their children, Breeann, Jared and Abby, ages 14, 12 and 10, respectively, don't ever really seem to stop, but they also don't ever seem to be in a hurry either. In addition to the five humans who live in the plantation-style house on Blueberry Ridge, a sassy little fox terrier, a satisfied cat and two horses roam the 68 acres that make up the farm and orchard. Theirs is a full house, which makes for a full life.

The Graveses' story begins with one of those infrequent East Texas snowfalls on the day when Jill and Jerry, who were then teens, met. Jill says that they'd gone to the same high school in White Oak, but with Jerry being two years older, they never really ran in the same social circles, even though they only lived two doors away from each other. They credit that snowfall and the exuberance of youth to their introduction, when all of the neighborhood teens decided to frolic in the snow. One or two snowballs later, Jill and Jerry's love interest was ignited. A few years later, in 1981, they got married.

Along the way both of them received their bachelors in marketing management, with Jerry first earning his from the University of North

Texas. Jill's degree came a little bit later, fit in between marriage, work and a few moves. Her degree ultimately was awarded from the University of Texas at Tyler. By 1985, the couple was back in White Oak, where Jerry put his degree to work in the telecommunications industry for GTE, and Jill put hers to use at STEMCO, a large truck-equipment manufacturing company. As those careers begin to take off, the family also started expanding with children, and it was not long before Jill realized she did not want to be traveling all of the time, which is a common requirement for marketing jobs. So she went back to school to get her teaching certificate and is now well into that career. She worked at both Mabank and Edgewood prior to her current position in Grand Saline. There, she teaches computer classes and journalism.

Jerry, meanwhile, has had a long and successful career in telecommunications. He still does some consulting in that industry, but recently he turned his main energies into building his own All-state insurance agency in Longview.

In 1992, the Graveses bought Blueberry Ridge Farm to fill up their "spare time" with a pick-your-own organic blueberry farm and bed-and-breakfast. Jill says it works out perfectly with their lifestyles, since they have more guests in the summer.

Blueberry Ridge Farm, according to the Graveses, is the oldest organic blueberry farm in Texas. In the beginning, the Graveses commercially harvested their



The Country Store should be the first stop for blueberry pickers. It serves as a place to get a cool drink and a nice rest stop after time in the fields.

blueberry crop and sold to organic food stores throughout the western United States. In fact, at one point in the late 1990s, their organic berries were being sold in every state west of the Mississippi River. Jerry and Jill are constantly working to further develop their blueberry fields, shaping and replanting where needed. Jill laughingly says that when they started growing their family, the dynamics may have changed a little and says, “Just ask Jerry and he’ll say he lost his best farm hand when I started having babies.”

Another chapter of the Graves family’s blueberry business began to be written in 1999. To make a place for all of those babies, and also to fulfill a dream to open a bed-and-breakfast, the Graveses built a plantation-style home on the elevated ridge (where else?) of their 68-acre property. The home overlooks a hay meadow serving as front yard, and the back view includes blueberry fields, woods and a stocked pond. But the biggest draw for their guests is the organic blueberries that are just ripe for picking.

If you’ve gone to other “you-pick-em” farms, you might be a little bit surprised at this one, because it offers such a relaxed atmosphere. Basically, visitors stop at the little red barn up front, also known as the Country Store, and get themselves a bucket. Then they’ll be directed to drive themselves to the fields, and maybe given a tip about where the fattest berries are at the moment. But otherwise, Jill says, “We just let them all roam and pick for themselves,” but she also chuckles, “I may give them a tongue-in-cheek warning that I’m going to weigh them before going into the fields, and also before coming out.”

One of the biggest pleasures she and her family receive is from the visitors after they’ve been to the fields and have come in for weigh-in. She said that “blue tongue” is a common condition that happens when people visit Blueberry Ridge Farm, since most can’t resist trying a sample while they are picking. But many of the visitors don’t realize that they have tell-tale signs right there on their smiling faces (and teeth!) for all to see. Invariably, everybody ends up getting a good laugh. This relaxed attitude is probably why there are quite a few repeat berry-picking customers, plus those at the bed-and-breakfast.

The B&B offers two rooms that accommodate two people each. Those rooms each have a private bath and a queen-sized bed, ceiling fan, and all of the amenities of a standard hotel room, like radio/alarm clock, hair dryer, ironing board, coffee pot and other items. One of the rooms is really more of a suite and features a Jacuzzi tub, a sitting area and a refrigerator. Also, guests have the run of the living area with free reign over the television and DVD player.

Guests can relax on the front porch, stroll around the property or fish in the private stocked pond. Nature-watching is also a great pastime on the farm, as the Graveses claim visits year-round from deer, which also seem to get their own “blue tongue” syndrome. Other services can be arranged upon request, including horseback riding or setting up golf tee times. And, of course, let’s not forget harvesting of bucketloads of blueberries, and in the morning, a



From Top: Jerry Graves—dad, innkeeper, farmer and insurance business owner—admires the ripening blueberries on a 28-year-old organic blueberry bush while he contemplates what he thinks will be a very good season. Mom Jill, with Jared, Abby and Breeann, enjoy their spacious farm and plantation-style home, as well as the guests of their bed-and-breakfast. But most of all, they like life with blueberries on top!

homemade breakfast to include some of that fresh fruit, or possibly another treat made with them, like muffins or jam.

Jill says their guests typically come from the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex and are looking for a quiet weekend in the country to haunt the antique shops or just enjoy nature. It’s clear that the entire family very much enjoys playing host and meeting new people, and the children especially enjoy it when other kids come along. They also enjoy meeting the various interesting people like one guest, a Vietnam veteran, who was actually in the battle depicted in Mel Gibson’s “We Were Soldiers,” or the lady who spends her own weekends picking blueberries to sell in her organic health store.

But more than that, Breeann says, she loves the place as her home.

“I like to have the space to ride my horse and have space to

explore the outdoors and fish,” she said.

Abby says she likes riding the horses, too, but her favorite thing about Blueberry Ridge is “eating the blueberries!” Jared very quickly and affirmatively seconded that.

Meet the family, and you’ll discover they are all active and accomplished, which makes one wonder where they find the time to do all they do. In addition to all of the kids being pretty good students in the Mineola school district, Breeann plays basketball and volleyball, runs track, plays the piano and is also a member of the East Texas Stampede 4-H equestrian drill team. Jared plays basketball and baseball and is looking forward to when he can start football. And Abby likes softball, basketball, and, of course, riding the horses. Mom and the minivan stay quite busy with all of that ... but she gleefully says that she’s got further plans for her “spare time” in the future.

Eventually, the Graveses plan to build a couple of little extra cottages on Blueberry Ridge, so guests can have other accommodation choices. In the meantime, they invite you to come out and share in their current country riches. When you get there, stop by at the little red barn to get your bucket. Then, on your way out, just stop back by the little red barn to weigh your organic berries, which sell for \$10 per gallon. While you are at the barn, you might also want to pick up some of the other locally grown produce like tomatoes, cantaloupe and whatever else may be in season. Also, there are always homemade jams and jellies for sale. Just call before you go to ensure that the berries are ripe, which happens from about the middle of June through late July, weather and blue-tongued deer permitting.

Blueberry Ridge Farm, 2785 E. U.S. 80, Mineola, TX 75773; (903) 569-1550; www.blueberryridgefarm.com

Open 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays.

Call first before you make a trip to ensure optimal berry picking. Berry picking is seasonal starting in June 9.

WCEC Awards \$15,000 to East Texas Students

There were an enormous number of worthy entries in the 2010 Power My World Scholarship contest, and the judges had a tough job making the selections. The independent judges comprised three WCEC members: Kendrick Stribley, Yantis; Barbara Fannin, Quitman; and Grady Fisher, Winnsboro. They used various criteria to pick the 10 winners, who were chosen from among 52 qualified applicants. The judges were each tasked with reviewing the submissions, accompanied by academic records and lists of civic and community achievements. Additionally, each student was required to submit an essay, and each judge read each one.

Based on their exceptional work and achievements, the 2010 scholarship recipients are:

Shelby Allen, Yantis; **Shelbi Carpenter**, Quitman; **Homero Flores**, Quitman; **Jonathan Hanson**, Harmony; **Kimberly Johnson**, Quitman; **Lauren Lowe**, Winnsboro; **Jana Monk**, Quitman; **Linda Roman**, Quitman; **Carrie Shirley**, Yantis; and **Maegan Spears**, Canton.

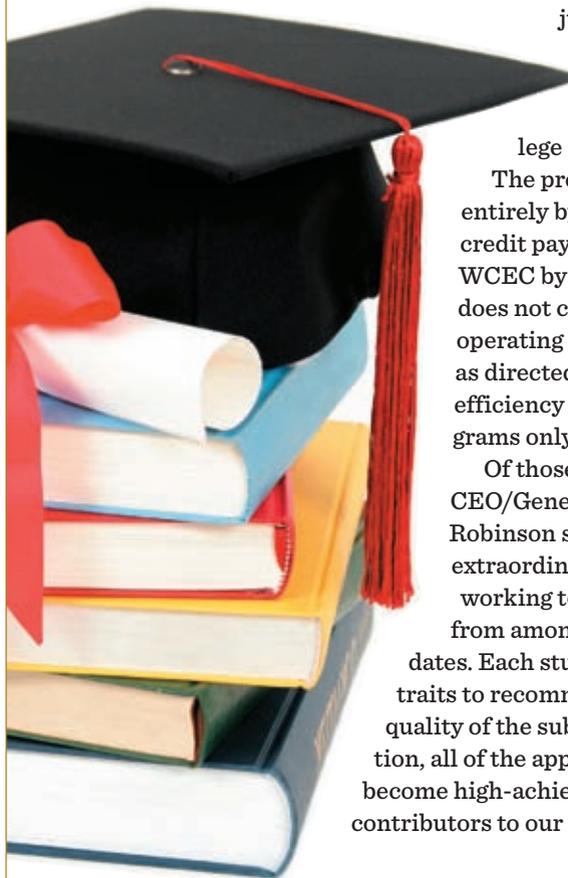
In addition, the winner of a \$5,000 scholarship reserved for a college junior accepted into an accredited engineering school is **Logan**

Thompson of Winnsboro. Logan is a junior at Texas A&M

University and is enrolled in the Dwight Look College of Engineering.

The program is funded entirely by unclaimed capital credit payments returned to WCEC by the state of Texas and does not come from WCEC’s operating budget. This money is, as directed by the state, used for efficiency and educational programs only.

Of those selected, WCEC CEO/General Manager Debbie Robinson said, “Our judges had an extraordinarily tough job this year working to select the 10 winners from among 52 very worthy candidates. Each student had remarkable traits to recommend them, and if the quality of the submissions is any indication, all of the applicants are destined to become high-achieving and productive contributors to our society.”





WCEC Line Superintendent Rusty Mask wins accolades and a new friend, ShugarPie, after being elected the WCEC hero to "kiss the pig." He gained the most votes in dollars for the honor. All the money went to the Wood County Relay for Life.

TO KISS A PIG

Wood County Electric Cooperative employees are well known for their good-natured dedication to the community. So in that spirit, they recently joined forces to raise money for the American Cancer Society (ACS), by supporting Wood County's Relay for Life. All funds raised in Wood County through the Relay for Life stay here to help our own friends, family members and neighbors.

To help out, our employees thought outside the pig pen ... so to speak. We were a tad unconventional and held a "Kiss the Pig" contest, whereby all employees became a potential pig-kisser. Employees, directors and members then voted with their dollars on the name of the employee that they wanted to become the pig-kisser. Then, the person whose name raised the most money was compelled to pucker up and kiss the pig. Over \$1,000 was raised by this event!

It's no wonder that one of our fearless leaders, and a well-known

community supporter, Line Superintendent Rusty Mask, took top honor. His piggy bank quickly filled to overflowing. And he gamely stepped up to the plate as our hometown hero. We offer this tribute with accolades and deep admiration (and maybe a few grins)!

Wood County Relay for Life's goal this year was to raise \$30,000 for local support. With a little help from WCEC employees and all of those in our community, Lucy Sanders, chairwoman of this year's event, reported the goal was topped by \$12,000 to bring in a grand total of \$42,000. Congratulations to them, and to all who supported the effort.

Special thanks to Jack and Carol Brock for escorting their companion and good friend, ShugarPie the pig, to our event in support of ACS. And we thank ShugarPie for his kind response to hero Rusty. ShugarPie is a fast friend of the co-op now, and he's got the hat to prove it!