

Josh, Gwen, and Josie Hoy: Ranch Life during the Pandemic

Video Transcript

JOSH: Alright. Well, I guess it has been an eventful year. Our lifestyle has actually greatly improved. We go to town a whole lot less, which is wonderful. And it's affected us very little on a day-to-day basis just because we're the only people here. We social distancing has been our lifestyle for quite a bit. The thing that changed for us was, of course, it bankrupted our guest ranch business almost immediately, and which we just suspended operations. But then once we did that, we had to cut insurance, we had to cut all these expenses and that we just couldn't afford to start back up without that income to support it. And once we'd been shut down for a month, we realized just how wonderful our lives were without having to entertain and take care of guests every weekend through the season when we were... Busiest times of year on the ranch are also the busiest times of years in the guest business. And so once we suspended that business, we could do so much more on the ranch, and it's just so much easier, less stressful.

It's still stressful trying to figure out how we're going to place the replace the dollars, but we're finding ways around that and cutting expenses. And just not going to town once a week to buy supplies for the guest ranch business keeps us from going to a restaurant or buying things in the store that we don't need, just little habits like that. Fuel and everything else.

GWEN: Well, and that small that break, like Josh said, that month long break, just let us kind of reassess and take time to reevaluate how we wanted to spend the, I guess, the rest of our working lives there again.

JOSH: And we also realized that we just had not been doing the kind of selfcare and things like that that we should have been all this time. We've just been grinding it out with our head down, of course, and...

GWEN: And chasing money.

JOSH: If you have your head down pushing forward, all you're doing is digging a long grave if you're in a rut.

GWEN: And it was good to us. It was great.

JOSH: Oh, my gosh. If we hadn't had the guest ranch business, we'd never would have made a single bank payment.

GWEN: Right.

JOSH: We couldn't have bought this place and...

GWEN: Met wonderful people and made all kinds of connections and that are so valuable.

JOSH: Oh, absolutely.

GWEN: You know.

JOSH: And I think we had a big impact on the community too.

GWEN: Yeah.

JOSH: The urban areas around us, I think, are more aware of the value, the intrinsic and value of the Flint Hills than they would have been without us, having brought thousands of people here over the years, both for the guest ranch but also for our events like Flames in the Flint Hills.

GWEN: Right where we got to talk about conservation and why we burn and just kind of get a message out to a lot of people that would never have heard it. So, yeah, it's awesome.

JOSH: My cousin, Warren Cruise, and I partnered on this place in 1996. I'm fifth generation rancher in Flint Hills. We leased my parents' place down in Cassidy, but Warren and I bought this place in '96 and added some more to it. We took our first guests in in '98 and on a small scale to start, and then by 2002, we were doing quite a bit more. We were doing a lot of bus tours, things like that.

GWEN: Yeah.

JOSH: And then when Warren died in 2004 in a plane crash, I had to go in and borrow way too much money on a handshake deal when you could still do that. And on paper, it never worked. Never penciled on paper from the very beginning. There's no way we were going to make that first payment. But desperation drives, and so we just ramped up the dude business. And we've honed our cattle business and ag business as tight as we can, and we're squeezing the widest margins out of that we can, and always have. But that's a very limited margin.

GWEN: It is.

JOSH: And the dude business has almost the exact opposite margins of agriculture. Instead of a 90% cost and 10% margin at best, you got 90% margin. So that's why the dude business worked.

GWEN: So about twenty-one years is how long we had guests here.

JOSH: 2004 is when we really ramped it up. So sixteen years of really intense business.

GWEN: Intense business, yeah. All these people are just kind of out and about and throwing caution to the wind and everything. And, I mean, who knows, maybe there won't be another resurgence, but when there is, I'm sure it'll be pretty, you know, severe.

JOSIE: That's what happened with the Spanish flu.

GWEN: Yeah. But who knows? You know.

JOSH: It's been an interesting mix. Seems to be political, politically motivated, largely. Although, some people that have family members in the health care industry have stayed much more attuned to the dangers and the necessities.

GWEN: Or if they know somebody.

JOSH: Or if they know somebody that's gotten sick or something. But in Chase County, I think we've only had three cases still.

GWEN: I think so.

JOSH: Which is partly due to our lifestyle and population and everything else.

GWEN: So not much has changed.

JOSH: So, yeah, very little's changed. Early on, people were really respectful of distance and really, you know, kind of concerned about the elderly and the, you know, vulnerable in our town and our county. That's kind of disappeared. Now, more and more people are just no masks and kind of rude about social distancing and offended if you don't shake their hand or something. But there's still a lot of people that are paying attention.

GWEN: I think it just varies on, you know, like I said, if they know somebody or if they work in the health industry.

JOSH: Economically, it hasn't had much impact here, I don't think. Early on, our stores got emptied out by foreigners from Wichita, Topeka, and stuff. And so then people had that don't normally leave the county at all, had to go to Emporia or Wichita to get toilet paper and supplies. And that was very stressful and expensive for people. This is a very poor county. We have very low income.

GWEN: But one thing that did affect it was the cattle markets were affected.

JOSH: That hasn't really been felt yet, though.

GWEN: That's true.

JOSH: Yes, the cattle market's as bad as they were in the in the Great Depression. But it's a short-term crunch and it looks like it'll pick back up in the fall, maybe winter, and kind of regain some of those... I think it won't regain the losses, but at least get back to kind of a normal. And some of that will change because when the plants have all closed down, a lot of imports has taking place of domestically produced beef. And, you know, so we've lost some market share and it's going to get tighter. It's a lot like the hog and chicken industry back in the '70s and '80s. It's just shrinks a little bit more every time something happens.