KASSI LANEY

RICHARD PIPES/JOURNAL

Kassi Laney shares her love of ranching with the schoolchildren who participated in Ranch Days at McKean Ranch near Alma.

Harvesting a *career*

Reserve teen determined to put a professional face on 'farmer person' organization

You have to travel to New Mexico's hinterlands to meet a young woman like Kassi Laney. And it would probably be worth the gas money.

Kassi comes from generations of ranchers, people who were held fast to the land by more than gravity. Lots of denim, dirt under her fingernails, cattle, horses, pigs, agriculture — and training in parliamentary procedure, public speaking and leadership. They all come together in Future Farmers of America.

"Most people see FFA as a farmer person activity," says Kassi, who is vice president of New Mexico FFA.

But for some people it's also a launching pad. Kassi has traveled all over the state, given presentations, taught, gone before her school board for funding, set up and run committees, held fund raisers and worried about budgets. In fact, Kassi Laney is credited with breathing the life back into Reserve High School's FFA, which was gasping for breath when she entered high school. It's thriving now, thanks in part to the professional face she's put on that "farmer person" organization.

Still, the farming and ranching element is where a lot of the fun happens. Members learn to judge livestock, and chapters compete against each other. Professional livestock judges oversee their judging standards.

"As I started traveling to competitions, friends would see it and want to join," Kassi says. "As I became an officer, we were able to implement committees, do stuff we hadn't done before. People saw it as a real organization."

County and state fairs are what many people associate with FFA, and they're a big part of it. Members show livestock they've raised and groomed, and for Kassi, the livestock of choice is the pig.

"Pigs are great," she says with more enthusiasm than most people can muster on the topic of swine. "They're one of the most misunderstood animals to show and one of the smartest mammals there are."

Last semester, Kassi committed a full week every month to two months to FFA business outside of school. Last semester,was more like two to three days every three to four weeks.

"Ever since I was little, I wanted to be a state officer," she says.

Being like that takes some growing, and holding an office is like forcing a bulb.

"I've grown up a lot. When I first started, I was pretty shy, not very good at being in front of people. But being an officer puts you in that position. You grow into a leadership position, become more open with people. It's a big confidence shift."

In the fall, Kassi will leave her world of varsity basketball, volleyball, track and field, National Honor Society, Teen Health Council and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes to head off to New Mexico State University.

"I plan to become an agriculture education teacher and an FFA adviser, maybe coach high school basketball," she says. "I think I'll stay in New Mexico, and coming back to Reserve would definitely

Sharing a life of passion for agriculture

By Connie J. Suarez
Ag Journal regional correspondent

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Janet Witte calls herself a wannabe country girl. She grew up in the North Valley of Albuquerque and longed to be like her country cousins.

Perhaps it is that longing that has made her such a tremendous advocate for agriculture today.

Witte tells about her childhood growing up in the city and of looking forward to spending time on her aunt and uncle's farm. When not spending time with her cousins Witte followed her aunt into the fields and learned to look for bugs. Witte used that early experience to good purpose as she earned Bachelors and Masters degrees in Entomology at New Mexico State University.

Early on Witte's grandmother instilled a love of music and agriculture and culture. Her grandmother stressed manners and etiquette. Witte recounts the story of people stranded in a snowstorm who came to the door one Sunday. They reportedly were shocked to find in a rural setting Sunday dinner complete with linen tablecloth and napkins.

Witte carried on her grandmother's love of music as she studied violin. Throughout her years at New Mexico State University she played in the symphony orchestra.

As a child Witte wanted to be around and ride horses. She says, "I would have joined 4-H but I thought that I had to have horses to be a part of 4-H."

Childhood observations gave Witte an early understanding of the natural conflict between agriculture and non-agriculture. Witte's father was a general contractor and she saw the encroachment of development on agricultural land.

The lessons of Janet Witte's childhood have perhaps enriched the lives of many children in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Today, Witte invests herself in bringing agriculture to elementary students who might not otherwise have an understanding of farming and ranching. For the last seven years Witte has organized an Ag Awareness program in elementary schools in Las Cruces.

School children are primed for Ag Awareness Week with a book-reading contest and storytellers during the preceding week. Then Witte brings in a broad array of individuals involved in agriculture to give twenty-minute presentations in a rotation that gives each grade level the same information. Speakers come from local farms and ranches, the New Mexico State University and Department of Agriculture, state boards and forestry people, 4-H and FFA leaders and students. A mobile dairy classroom brings a live cow and milking machine to the schools.

The week is capped off with a fast-paced fun day as students are exposed to ten-minute stations that include: rodeo clowns, fiddlers, hay rides with antique tractors, rope makers, branding and a petting zoo complete with a horse.

"Some just want the antique tractors, the fun part of agriculture," says Witte. "But we want to show that it is a business— a way of life."

Her support of Ag Awareness Week is just one of several compelling reasons that the New Mexico CowBelles awarded the 2002 CowBelle of the Year Award to Witte. The Santa Fe RoadRunner CowBelles nominated Witte, who is a member of the Mesilla Valley CowBelles in Las Cruces. Witte got her start with the Santa Fe group due to the influence

Janet Witte

of her mother-in-law Fita Witte. Fita brags about the accomplishments of her daughter-in-law in CowBelles and as a wife and mother. She said, "Janet is an excellent hostess and wonderful mother. She makes time for her family."

Welda Grider, New Mexico CowBelles President, talks about Janet Witte's involvement, "She didn't just follow her mother-in-law, she forged her own path." Grider speaks admiringly of Witte's working sometimes with "baby on hip."

Witte's nomination for CowBelle of the year mentions numerous achievements. She co-chaired the Region VI American National Cattlewomen's Conference in 2001. Participants attended from Utah, Texas, California, Arizona and New Mexico.

Witte has helped with the Rotunda

See *Salute* page 14

Wyoming rounding up horse herds

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Bureau of Land Management will cut the number of wild horses on Wyoming public lands in order to settle complaints from state officials, who claimed mismanagement was hurting rangelands.

The bureau needs to round up another 2,200 horses in order to reach previously set management levels, said Cindy Wertz, a BLM spokeswoman in Wyoming. There are now about 5,400 wild horses in Wyoming, Wertz said.

In May, state officials said they intended to sue the bureau, claiming it had mismanaged wild horses to the point that grasslands were overgrazed, hurting deer and elk herds.

They asked the BLM to keep the number of horses at appropriate management levels. The agency has agreed to do so by December 2004, according to a settlement announced Wednesday by the Justice Department.

"The basic, bottom line here is that the state of Wyoming and the U.S. Department of the Interior have avoided long-term, costly litigation," Tom Sansonetti, a federal assistant attorney general for natural resources, said at a state press conference Wednesday.

Wyoming Department of Agriculture Director John Etchepare said some ranchers, especially those near southwest Wyoming's Adobe Town Wilderness Study Area, have been unable to graze cattle in certain areas because wild horses have eaten too much grass.

"The other problem we have now is we have to wait for that to begin to recover," he said.

REWARD

The Colorado Junior Rodeo Association directors and members would like to offer a

REWARD OF $250.00

for the return of the silver headstall believed to be taken from a trailer at the benefit barrel race at the Colorado State Fairgrounds in Pueblo on Thursday night August 7th. This headstall belongs to Kelly Yates and has tremendous sentimental value. There were many people at the fairgrounds, and if anyone has any information please contact the CJRA office at 970-842-4048.

There will be no questions asked if the headstall is returned.

WENDIE DUNCAN-REESE
BENEFIT ROPING
(proceeds will be donated to WENDIE'S M.S. Treatment fund)

Salute: Paving the way for youth

Continued from page 6

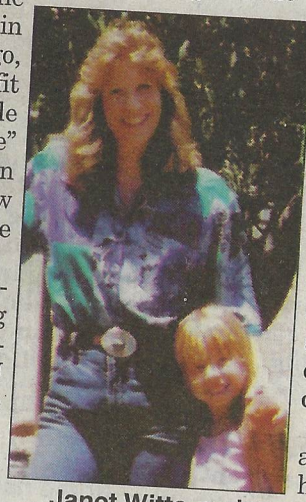
Dinner for New Mexico State Legislators. The buffet meal is served annually to legislators as a reminder of the importance of the industry.

Other mentioned services include Witte's help with the National Beef Cook Off in Santa Fe several years ago, her phone work to benefit the Children's Miracle Network "Stockmen Care" program and participation in the Southern New Mexico State Fair CowBelle booth.

Witte has located educational materials, willing helpers to educated the public and 4-H and NMSU students to demonstrate roping and other fun skills. Witte gives similar help at the New Mexico State Fair.

Organization is the key to Witte's success. She is in her element when she can pull together others to stand in the spotlight. Witte has served as Secretary, Treasurer and District Representative with CowBelles.

When Janet married Jeff Witte she married into the agricultural life, almost. Her husband grew up on a ranch. However, the struggle for ranchers to survive influenced his decision to choose a career of supporting agriculture. He currently serves as Assistant Director for the New Mexico Department of Agriculture. She helps with her husband, Jeff's, brainchild – the Ag Fest. The Ag Fest is a food fair for State Legislators, which demonstrates the many ways that New Mexico agriculture provides retail products for consumers.



Janet Witte and daughter, Jennifer

So Witte is still a wannabe country girl. She and her family frequently spend working vacations helping on her husband's parents' ranch. Her mother-in-law, Fita, says the wannabe cattlewoman Witte becomes a regular hand as she helps with vaccinations, branding, and pushing cattle through the shoot. Antique oil lamps and wheels capture the attention of Witte who describes herself as an outdoorsy type.

Witte doesn't have specific agriculture aspirations for her children, Jeremy, 10 and Jennifer, 4. "I want them to be thoughtful of agriculture" as they consider careers, Witte states. She notes that they both like to play with bugs. Perhaps they will follow in their mother's footsteps.

What does Janet Witte have planned for the future? She has developed an idea for a program within the schools that might be like 4-H. It would involve children in the Fairs. Witte says the program would make a way for students to be excused from school for such activities.

One thing seems clear. Janet Witte is forging the way for future wannabe country girls and boys.

AT HOME ON THE RANGE: Debbie Lee stands on the back of her pickup to count the heifers so she will know how much feed to leave. "Sato just *knows* how much to leave," she says of her father-in-law. "But I have to stop and think about it."

DIVINE PRECEPTS OF THE

Cow Belle

SISTERHOOD

WOMEN WHO RANCH CELEBRATE HARD WORK AS WELL AS THEIR COMMITMENT TO LAND AND EACH OTHER

Story by **POLLY SUMMAR** ■ *Photographs by* **KITTY CLARK FRITZ** ■ *Of the Journal*

TENDING THE LIVESTOCK: Debbie Lee feeds an orphaned calf, Phildene, a bottle of milk. Later that day, Lee's chore was to move the calf's mother, who had died while giving birth.

It's a typical work day in the city: You have to pick up the kids, finish that report at work and call the mechanic about the new noise in the car engine.

Here's a recent work day for Debbie Lee: There's a dead heifer in the pen at the family ranch near Mountainair. It died giving birth less than 48 hours before to a calf. Lee has to get the heifer out of the pen, but it's facing the wrong direction. So she's turning the problem over in her mind out loud: "I think if I use the four-wheeler, I can turn her around. But if I turn her around and I get her hung up on a fence, then I'm in a jam."

Feel better about *your* day?

For Lee — a former Catron County treasurer who remembers the days when her hair, her clothes and her nails were her biggest concerns — moving a dead heifer is a challenge, not a problem. "Once you get a taste of this life, you think, 'Why did I waste all those years working inside?' " she says.

"When I started doing this at 35, I felt like I came alive."

Lee, 41, still clings to one vestige of her former life, though. The second Tuesday of every month, she paints her nails, does her hair a bit fancier, puts on her going-to-town lipstick (Opulent Wine) and heads for a CowBelles meeting.

That's right ... CowBelles.

In case you've never heard of the state's most famous CowBelle, former New Mexico first lady Alice King, the organization is a group of female ranchers who promote and support the beef industry.

Chances are, you've seen at least one or two CowBelles at the New Mexico State Fair, where they always staff the New Mexico Beef Council booth.

"My father-in-law marks the monthly meeting on his calender," says Lee of her boss, Oliver "Sato" Lee III, the owner of the spread she works on. "We're around men out here working all the time. And CowBelles is my day with the girls. Sato has actually scheduled things around it for me."

GAL POWER: A mug proclaiming, "A Gal's Gotta Do What A Gal's Gotta Do," was a gift to Debbie Lee from another CowBelle.

Sticking to CowBelles

If you're picturing a bunch of gals gussied up, pulling their covered dishes out of the car (or truck), you will have to adjust

See **DIVINE** *on* **PAGE E6**

DIVINE PRECEPTS OF THE CowBelle SISTERHOO

from **PAGE E8**

your vision a little.

These CowBelles don't do potlucks. There are other surprises, too. They worry about beef safety (not just "101 recipes with beef"), and they're not about to take the new name, American National Cattlewomen, that the national CowBelles organization has adopted.

"We don't want to change our name," says Toni Barrow, who lives north of Belen and is president of the Chuckwagon chapter for Valencia and Torrance counties. "The older group is definite about it. They joined as CowBelles, and even though the younger ones get teased about being 'cow bellies,' we decided we'd stay that way. We voted as a group to maintain the name."

As for the prevailing anti-potluck mood, Barrow says, "CowBelles are very good cooks. But if you've done it every day, three times a day your whole life, you get tired of it."

So the Chuckwagon chapter hires Mary Jones at the Methodist Church of Mountainair to cook for their monthly meetings. The menu — well, need you ask? Hunks of beef or corned beef, or green peppers stuffed with ground beef.

And beef safety? It has become one of the most important issues that CowBelles deal with. "We work hard to assure the public that raising cattle is done in the best possible way — that most ranchers don't give growth hormones that damage the meat," says Barrow.

"I haven't heard of anyone in years who uses growth hormone."

Besides getting the word out about beef safety, Barrow says the state organization has a legislative chairwoman to keep the chapters informed of any votes coming up affecting ranchers — water issues or private property issues — and members are encouraged to contact their legislators about their views.

KITTY CLARK FRITZ/JOURNAL

NEVER-ENDING CHORES: In her kitchen on the family ranch near Mountainair, Debbie Lee mixes a bottle of milk for an orphaned calf.

The CowBelle Creed

"Believing that the livestock industry is of basic importance to the world existence, we, the New Mexico CowBelles, dedicate ourselves to support it with our labor and finances, to promote it through information and publicity, to encourage its producers with our understanding and love, to do all in our power to instill in the coming generation the love of the land and of life, the humility and awe before nature and the hope and faith in the future that is inherent in cattlemen and cattlewomen."

Genora Moore, the state president of the CowBelles and a fifth-generation rancher who lives outside Santa Fe, says the key issue facing all 25 CowBelle chapters right now is the environment. "We consider ourselves the first environmentalists," Moore says. "We were the first ones taking care of the land — Earth Day is every day for us."

Moore says wolves are a big issue for the CowBelles. "Not that we're opposed to wolves, per se," she says, "but we want more control of them when they're on our property. If a wolf passes over from BLM property to our property, we want to be able to get rid of it without tremendous red tape and paperwork.

"We feel like a lot of the endangered species, clean air and clean water acts are taken to the extent that it makes farming and ranching so difficult, it pushes people out of the business."

Show of solidarity

But being a CowBelle is about more than cattle or the environmental issues that affect them.

"It's a sisterhood," says Chuckwagon chapter member Judy Chilton, who lives just west of Mountainair. "They're all dressed up here at the meetings, but you know they're all out there stepping in the muck, just like you are."

At a recent monthly meeting, the tables at the Mountainair Methodist Church were decorated with Kerr mason jars of jelly beans and hard candies, small squares of pinking-sheared fabric and calendar photos of Western paintings. Different members sign up for decorating duties each meeting.

During the roll call, members update their lives to the group. Barrow mentions she's been taking care of a sick husband and tending a bunch of baby calves. Sue Harvey, who lives near Estancia, announces that she and her family will be going to basketball games in Capitan. Kay Lindsay, who hails from the Claunch area, says her llamas and miniature donkeys are doing well.

Their familiarity and concern for each other is evident. "It's the way they care for each other," says Chuckwagon member and Albuquerque writer Sharon Niederman, in trying to explain what impresses her about the CowBelles. "The way they carry on, even in difficult circumstances. Their assumption that hard work is a reasonable part of life."

It's also their self-sufficiency that Niederman admires. She recalls talking with a CowBelle once who said, "If I had to call somebody to shoe my horses, fix my plumbing, doctor my animals, I'd be broke." Although not a rancher herself, Niederman frequently profiles ranchwomen and was invited to join the Chuckwagon chapter.

And while there *ar* CowBelles who run t by themselves, Moor emphasizes that ranc family business. "On percent of ranches in Mexico are run by w she says. "And unless woman is widowed o daughter of a ranche women are married a family on the ranch."

'I can do it'

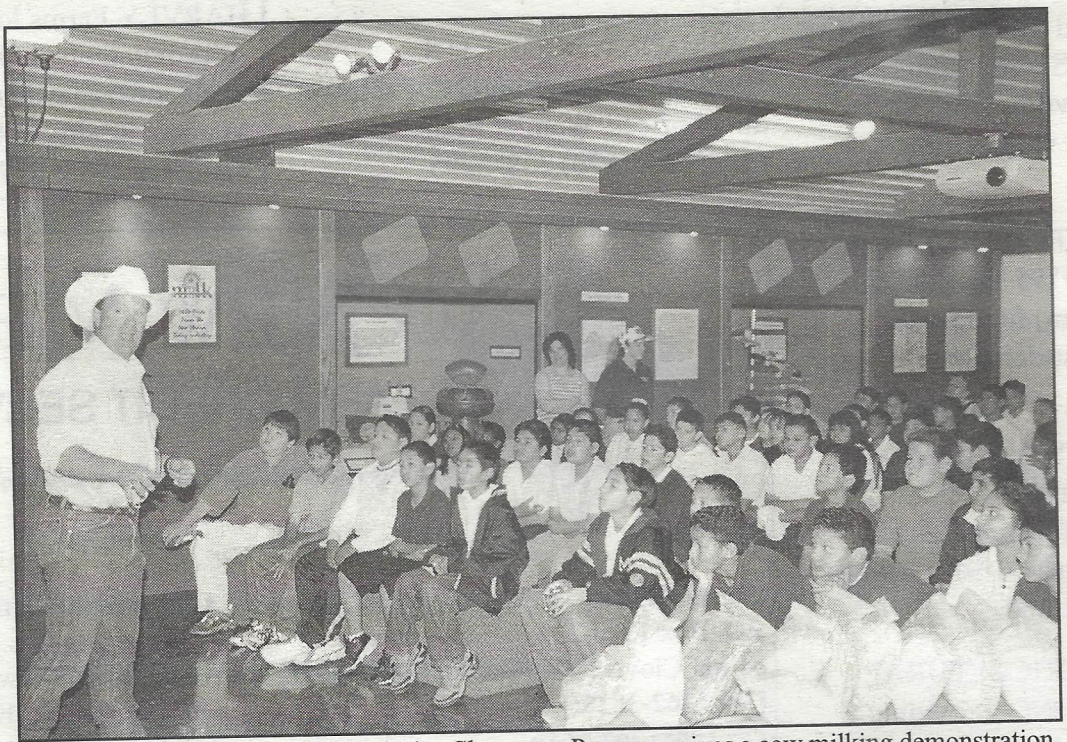
Debbie Lee started occasionally on her f law's ranch when her daughter, Tana, now junior CowBelle, was old. "I was kind of int since I didn't have a fledged ranching bac Lee says. "But when much help even a 4-y could be, riding a hor helping herd the cow thought, if a 4-year-o it, I can do it."

Lee's husband, Oliv "Grem" Lee IV, ranc his father, Sato, until Grem was diagnosed with multiple scleros he is working on stor illustrations about lif Catron County, as tol old-timers there.

The family moved southwestern New M the ranch near Moun about six years ago.

"Sato probably wis a guy sometimes," sa daughter-in-law. "Bu I'm better than nobo

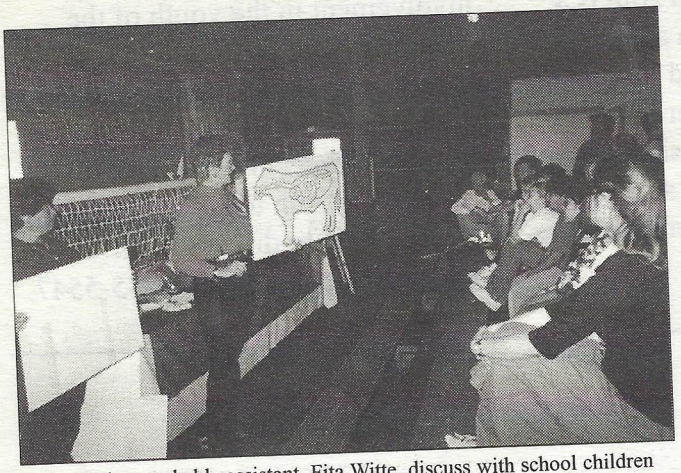
BEEF COUNCIL
bullhorn
"Your Beef Checkoff Dollars at Work"



Francis Paneral with the Mobile Dairy Classroom Program, gives a cow milking demonstration to Las Cruces area students during the Annual Kids and Kows and More program at the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum. The program continues to gain statewide popularity with venues in Albuquerque, Clovis, Roswell, Las Cruces, Belen, Odessa, Lovington and Tucumcari. Photo by Chris Coon.

KIDS LEARN ABOUT "KOWS"

The New Mexico Beef Council once again sponsored a speaker at the series of "Kids and Kows" events held across the state. Nearly nine thousand school children and teachers participated in the events which are sponsored by the NM State University Cooperative Extension Service, Southwest Dairy Museum, and other local sponsors. Kay Lindsey presented, "New Mexico Beef Producers . . . Caretakers All" a glimpse of how producers take care of their livestock, the wildlife, and the land & water. She also discussed the healthfulness of beef and conducted a show and tell on the 'tools of the trade' including a saddle, rope, bridle, chaps, syringe and other equipment and supplies needed to keep livestock and ranches healthy.

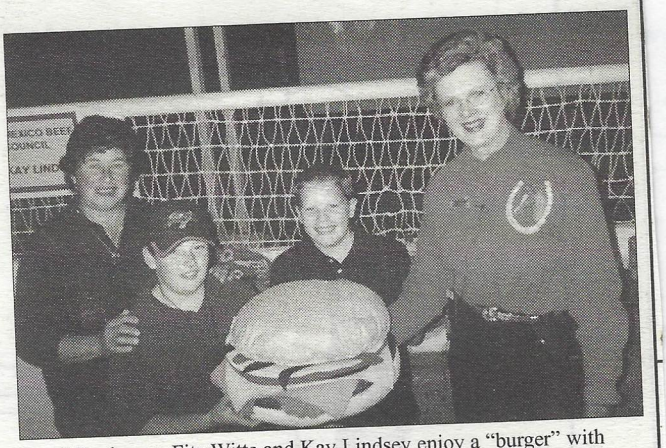


Kay Lindsey and able assistant, Fita Witte, discuss with school children how the chambers in a cow's stomach are similar to pockets in their jeans.

The "Kids and Kows" events were held in Bernalillo (Albuquerque), Curry & Roosevelt (Clovis), Chaves (Roswell), Valencia (Los Lunas) and Dona Ana (Las Cruces). NM Cowbelle President, Genora Moore, and Fita Witte presented in Las Cruces while Kay Lindsey spoke at the other four events.

Each child attending receives a take-home-bag of goodies donated by the sponsoring organizations. In addition, the NMBC donated a free beef teaching kit, "Things you learn from a Cow and a Worm" to all the participating teachers.

The "Kids & Kows" format is a fair-of-sorts that includes a series of presentations with the children rotating to hear each presenter. The presentations are kid-friendly and cover topics such as beef, milk, the petting zoo from the Girls and Boys Ranches and other agriculture products specific to that locale. "Feedback from the events was very positive", said Kay Lindsey. "The teachers thought it was a valuable learning experience for the students and the children raved about the fun they had. One child wrote in an essay, 'that day was the best day of my life!', you can't beat that", concluded Lindsey.



Beef Producers, Fita Witte and Kay Lindsey enjoy a "burger" with Albuquerque students at a recent "Kids & Kows" event held at the State Fair Grounds.

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