



Paint a Legacy

Your canvas is more than just a collage of spreadsheets and legal documents.

Most of the tools normally used to describe a legacy are of a legal and financial nature. You review balance sheets, life insurance policies, land deeds, wills, trusts and operating agreements. All are certainly necessary and important when considering the transition of your wealth and your business because they provide an accurate description of your assets.

However, such devices do little to communicate what your legacy means. For example, what does land ownership really mean to your family? A land deed may symbolize generations of land stewardship; for a first-generation farmer, it may epitomize self-sufficiency and financial discipline. A legal entity's operating agreement may represent the value of keeping family capital held together for future generations and the hope that the next generation will choose agriculture as its vocation.

What if, instead of documents and spreadsheets to describe a legacy, we took an artist's blank canvas and

communicated our legacy through visual images? What scenes, landscapes or portraits might emerge? What events or experiences would make it onto the canvas? What values might those images communicate to the observer? I know several families that have had murals painted of their family history and their hopes for the future.

Here are a few examples:

► **PICTURES OF PLACES.** No matter the size of your farm or ranch, there are specific locations that mean something to you. It might be the land homesteaded by your relatives or the first 40 acres you acquired. It might be the pasture you explored as a child or the bluff from which you observe the sun rising. Those sites have provided memories, inspiration and a sense of calm or purpose, in effect a homecoming to your soul. Do future generations know the images of your special places? What would those pictures be for you?

► **PICTURES OF PEOPLE.** Famed psychologist Karl Menninger noted, "We are shaped by those who love us as well as those who refuse to love us." Parents, grandparents, neighbors, friends, coaches, teachers, business partners, pastors—many have contributed to our development and character. Whose portraits would you put in your family mural? Who are the people who have helped make you the person you are today? One family I know adds people to its mural as marriages and births occur, capturing the importance of all family members to the collective legacy.

► **PICTURES OF EXPERIENCES.** Like those who helped shape us, our memories are full of experiences. Many families have been shaped by trauma in previous generations—the Dust Bowl, floods and fires, crop failures or major accidents—and by the resilient responses to those events. Each year, we experience the bounty and accomplishment of harvest or the stillness of the land before an early morning hunt; the freshness of land after a rain or the endeavor of working together to brand or gather livestock. Each day, we witness our kids' interaction with the farm, see the progression of a crop and the rising and setting of the sun. Those memory-making events are centered on the land and the business, but the land titles and operating agreements don't communicate the value of the experiences. How would you paint these?

While having your financial and legal affairs documented is critical to the ongoing ownership and operation of your family's land and business, your legacy comprises much more than asset descriptions. The places, people and experiences that have shaped you are part of your gift to future generations. Capture those important images while fresh in your mind. ●



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