

FEATURE

# Exhibiting INSPIRATION

by Katie Maupin



**“The doctors will tell you a lot of things,” says Tom Illingworth. He and his wife, Kelly, have heard them all. When their eldest son, Ross, was born at 25 and a half weeks, weighing just a pound and a half, they even heard that he might not make it. But, they didn’t listen.**

PICTURED ABOVE:

Ross Illingworth, 11, is legally blind, but he enjoys showing pigs. Despite being visually impaired, Illingworth does all of his own chores and even walks all of his pigs on his own.  
*Photo courtesy of Katherinne Hartwig*



"We always had the attitude that may be the case if it were someone else's kid, not ours," Tom says. "The most important thing, to us, was not to have regrets. That was something we took whole heartedly, and we do whatever it takes and more. You have to make sure that you do everything you can."

Everything they can, to the Illingworth family, meant making sure that Ross would have the same opportunities they did growing up, no matter what. So, they met countless doctors' and specialists' pushback and naysaying head on.

Not that the doctor's fears were unfounded – Ross certainly had a shaky start in this world. At just a week old, he had open heart surgery, and that was just the beginning of what would be a laundry list of complications they would have to overcome. One such complication brought on by Ross' early entrance into the world was Retinopathy of Prematurity (ROP). ROP is when babies are born too early and the blood vessels in their eyes don't develop correctly, which damages the retina.

Such was the case with Ross, so when he was a few months old he went through several surgeries to try and correct his eyesight. Unfortu-

other kids would do," Kelly says. "He gets ready for school by himself and packs his own lunch. He walks all the pigs by himself."

He and his brother play on their Livermore, California, farm, and as Tom will tell you, Ross is even a bit of a daredevil – jumping off big, round bales and playing just as rough as any of the boys. But showing livestock brought its own set of challenges.

Both Tom and Kelly showed pigs in 4-H before they met at Modesto Jr. College, while studying agriculture. That's why, when Ross was born, they were adamant that he would have the same opportunities. So after testing the water with a poultry project as a mini 4-Her, they felt that Ross was



"I think going back to being raised in livestock, our attitude was always no matter what happened, showing pigs was something that Ross would do. We would be able to figure it out one way or another, and there would be an ag community there to do it," Tom says. "We've had that attitude since he was a baby. We knew that he wouldn't be able to do a lot of typical kid things, like sports, but we also knew that showing livestock was something he could do and be successful at."

nately, he developed cataracts that clouded his vision during the time infants learn to process images.

Today, at 11 years old, Ross is legally blind. His limited vision is based largely on contrast and shapes, and he reads and writes in Braille. But Ross doesn't let his limited eyesight slow him down. In fact, he does most things that any 11-year-old boy would do.

"Even though Ross is visually impaired, he probably does more than

ready to show pigs and lambs during his first year in 4-H, at 9 years old.

Out of the pig business for more than a decade, the Illingworth family went to Ottenwalter Showpigs and purchased a bred gilt so Ross and his younger brother, Braden, could raise their own projects. Ross and Braden worked hard with their projects, farrowing, feeding and getting the pigs ready to present. Nervous about

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their upcoming county fair, the family decided to take the pigs to a small, local jackpot show. Ross did great, but in a strange place it was hard for him to find the judge. That's when Tom and Kelly had an idea – the judge could wear a construction vest. The bright, neon vest would be easier for Ross to spot.

"We didn't want it to be too outrageous, but we wanted Ross to be able to do what he loves," Tom explains.

That didn't keep people from talking about the judge's odd attire though. The family has heard it all ringside, from comments about the judge going into construction work to questions about Ross' show techniques, but they don't let it get to them. Ross is able to do what he enjoys, and that is all that matters.

When their county fair rolled around, Ross won his class with his market hog, and with the new, bright construction vest, he even excelled in showmanship, since he was more easily able to spot the judge and drive his entries in front of him. But most importantly, Ross had a great time! So great that he took the money he earned in the premium auction, went back to Ottenwalters and purchased a gilt prospect for Cow Palace.

When the Illingworth family learned about the NJSA Western Regional, Ross wanted to go, but Tom had some reservations. His barn was empty other



Tom and Kelly Illingworth both enjoyed exhibiting swine when they were children. Today, they work together to ensure that all of their children can have the same opportunity.  
FRONT ROW (l-r): Braden, Quin and Ross Illingworth. BACK ROW (l-r): Tom and Kelly Illingworth.  
Photo courtesy of Katherinne Hartwig

than a couple of pigs that, frankly, weren't that good. Could they really attend a national show? What would people think of Ross and the judge's vest? A little hesitant, Tom talked to an old college friend, James Backman of Small Town Genetics.

"I talked to James and said, 'These pigs aren't worth doing anything with, but is this show really worth going to,' and he said, 'Even if those pigs aren't very good that's the show to go to – the fun one – the one show of the year that you shouldn't miss.'"

So, the family made the entries and headed to Modesto, California. When they arrived they were a bit intimidated. Here they were with pigs they were just bringing for the experience and some of the most competitive junior showmen in their region were unloading



Although Ross Illingworth and his brother, Braden, purchase some gilt prospects to show and put back into their herd, the boys raise most of their showpigs. At 11- and 8-years-old, the Illingworth brothers are well versed in breeding, farrowing and feeding swine.  
LEFT: Ross measures feed on a talking scale so he can mix rations himself.

their entries. The pigs were bigger and better, the show facilities were bigger and better, and they would have to ask the show managers to have the judge wear a construction vest for their class.

"That first NJSA show was actually pretty tough," says Tom. "It made me think, *Oh my God; what are we doing here?* But Ross was just so excited. He got second to last in his class, but he didn't care because he was having a great time and enjoying how fancy everything was. The judge talked the class all the way down to the bottom, and when he did, Ross came out and gave him a great big hug. That's when we turned the corner."

Watching their son embrace the judge, not because his pigs placed well but because he loved to show, not only touched Tom and Kelly, but everyone standing ringside. People that the Illingworths had only seen in show magazines came over to visit and the showpig community embraced Ross and his family. That network of ag people Tom and Kelly knew and leaned

on when they showed were now there for their son.

"Every show we go to, we kind of get to know everybody a little better, and they help us out," Tom says. "There are just plenty of people for our boys to look up to in this industry."

What the family didn't know was that while they looked up to those people grabbing banners and posing at backdrops for show after show, those very people they admired so much were looking to them as an example.

This spring at the NJSW Western Regional, Ross and Braden were taking their crossbred gilt entries to

**"Ross is a kid who loves pigs. He's just a cool dude, and that has nothing to do with the tough hand he was dealt."**

— James Backman



James Backman presented Ross Illingworth with the "Most Inspirational" award at the NJSW Western Regional, but as Backman will tell you, it's not about the awards - Ross just loves showing swine and making new friends.



Ross (l) and Braden Illingworth (r) both enjoy hitting the slopes. Their father, Tom, describes the boys as daredevils.

the wash rack, when they heard an announcement for the Illingworth family to report to the show ring. Kelly was changing the boys' little sister, Quin, back at the truck, and Tom was confused. The show hadn't started, so they weren't late for a class. The gentleman next to them on the rack said he'd watch their gilts, so Tom, Ross and Braden headed to the showring.

"We walk over, and I didn't see any pigs in the ring. Then, I see James standing in the ring, and I was wondering what was going on. Ross, Braden and I walk in there, and who knows where our pigs are at this point. James just started talking about this Inspirational Award that a lot of parents and their kids went in together on," Tom says.

This Most Inspirational Award was for Ross, and many of the show families in California had chipped in to make a beautiful, custom trophy buckle for him.

"We were always looking up to them, and here it was that they were looking at us in a similar fashion," Tom says. "When we switched the buckle on his belt Ross said, 'This is the best day of my life, Dad' with a big smile on his face."

Kelly and Quin, who had also heard the announcement, made it ringside just in time to see the presentation, and she had to dab her eyes along with everyone else.

"Ross is a kid who loves pigs. He's just a cool dude, and that has nothing to do with the tough hand he was dealt," Backman says. "That is the inspirational part of the deal; if he doesn't inspire you to the reason why we do things and the reason the NJSW is the NJSW, then I don't know what will."

Talking to Ross it's obvious he doesn't know what the fuss is all about.



Ross Illingworth exhibited a class-winning gilt at Cow Palace last winter. This was a big accomplishment because the boys bred and raised this female.

"I just like to show pigs," he says. "I like to show them. I like to raise them. We get in the top sometimes, in the bottom sometimes and in the middle, but it doesn't matter."

What does matter to Ross is raising and selling showpigs. Last year, the Illingworth brothers sold nearly 70 head to other 4-Hers. Ross is a natural salesman and will talk to anyone, according to Kelly. The boys work very hard on their project together. Little brother Braden even collects boars and breeds sows at just 8 years old. Together, the boys are a great team.

"Braden is a big help. He helps Ross a lot and gets him through a lot," Kelly says. "People don't see all the stuff that he does for his brother and all of the stuff he does for us. It also gives Ross more independence to have his brother help him, rather than needing us."

The boys are already planning the next step in their showpig business — a sale. Ross already has ideas for food and an auctioneer, and Tom and Kelly are happy that this livestock project has provided so many opportunities for him to experience new things and learn valuable life skills.

Perhaps, most telling of all was when Ross was asked who he looks up to the most, he just pointed to his dad.

Tom and Kelly spent more than a decade fighting for Ross and ensuring that he had every opportunity to do what he loves, but it's paid off. Not only has their son learned about stockmanship, sportsmanship and hard work, but when he looks for a hero, he points to them.

