



**TANNER HENTO**  
Hento Bros.  
Avon, South Dakota

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# NEW LOVE FOR THE FARM



**G**rowing up on his family farm, Tanner Hento, Avon, South Dakota, yearned to explore science and step away from agriculture. As an adolescent, he saw the struggles his parents faced—the compounding stress of loans coming due, the death of cattle, drought, diminished prices, unrelenting weather, depression and mental-health issues—and decided to spare himself from it.

“Agriculture was always embedded in my life, regardless of the times I wish it had not. Becoming a physician was my absolute priority,” Hento says.

With backpack and books in hand, he went off to college in 2008 to pursue his dream.

Then, two family tragedies back-to-back sidetracked his plans but, in the process, helped him regain his love for farming.

## WAYWARD JOURNEY BACK

Double-majoring in biology and English, Hento had finished his undergraduate degree and was ready to start graduate school in the fall of 2012. Like unrelenting weather, family issues started gaining pulse on his first day. He sensed something was wrong when he answered his phone.

“My mother called reminiscing on all the good she’s ever done, and how she’s always been proud of who I am as a son,” Hento recalls. “I knew I had to race home before it was too late.”

He says his mother ended her own life on that day, finally leaving her pain behind.

With his mother at peace, Hento’s heart began to shift in good ways only a few months into grad school. His once tumultuous relationship with his father had begun to disentangle, and he would feel a sense of peace coming back to the family farm on weekends.

“I viewed the farm in a new light after my mother’s death. Suddenly, the turmoil and adversity I viewed the farm in became positive. I found myself leaving school on the weekends more and more; I craved seeing the corn fill the combine hopper,” Hento says.

Some 3½ months after his mother’s death, Hento’s father went in for a routine surgery but didn’t recover. He passed away that December.

Tanner Hento and Kristin Vanwyngaarden farm outside Avon, South Dakota. Hento left the farm for a time, but as he visited more and more, he began to understand agriculture just felt right.

*After tragedy, this fifth-generation farmer finds his way home.*





“Unlike the death of my mother, a guiding force overcame me immediately. Not of grief or sadness, but one of hope and comfort,” Hento recalls.

Within hours, Hento and his brother, Scott, who worked as a power lineman, were back on the farm batching their first load of feed for the bred heifers that would soon calve. On this day, the two decided to leave their respective fields and choose agriculture.

“We had each other and very little else,” Hento says. “There were no calluses on my hand other than [from writing with] pencils up until that day. But, choosing agriculture, it felt right.”

## ON THE OTHER SIDE

The brothers started the new year wanting to make a name for themselves as they jumped in headfirst to manage the 1,000-acre farm, a rotation of corn, soybeans, alfalfa and a cow/calf operation.

As time progressed, strengths and weaknesses of the operation and the brothers’ became evident. Decisions on economics, scale and logistics were rearing their heads—specifically, the struggle to continue the cow/calf operation.

“Weeks of tears, anger and disappointment finally led us to the decision that cattle might not be part of our narrative ... Out of the first 10 calves that were born, I think we lost six of them. Anyone who knows anything knows that’s a bad rate,” Hento says.

The brothers decided to focus on their strengths, which meant letting go of the cow/calf operation. With new opportunities on the horizon, the brothers’ ability to work together and present a united front gave them an advantage.

“It was 2014, where after we were done combining, we saw our yields and were like, ‘There may be something here,’” Hento says. “Every year after that, we started making good impressions with bankers and the community, and I started talking to different landlords.”

Over the last 10 years, Hento and Scott have grown the operation, rented land to expand crop production, invested in seed partnerships with Pioneer and rented out part of their land and facilities once used for livestock production. Together, they farm 2,200 acres of soybeans, corn and alfalfa.

“I look at every field now like I can make something of it,” Hento explains. “I know I can do this versus the 22-year-old that was running around pretty much terrified.”

## MENTAL HEALTH

As Hento walks through his fields testing the soil or checking yields, he remembers the good his father had done and how close of a relationship he had with his mom.

“My father inspires me during my lowest points. He was working for something greater than himself,” Hento says. “He might not have been flawless in how ➤



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he expressed love, but he was a man who worked with drive, passion and a desire to not let everything that came before him be in vain.”

Hento’s parents divorced long before their deaths, but he says losing both in the same year made his transition to agriculture more difficult. And, he makes taking care of his mental health a priority.

“I really knew my mom well, and I saw the path she went down. If she would have been able to tell people she’s not OK, that would have made a big difference. Her time might have passed, but there’s so many people that can be saved yet,” he says.

Hento’s message on mental health is that it’s OK not to be OK.

“There are days where it feels like you lack purpose, or some days you wake up stressed, and you’re not sure why. The worst part some days about farming, the tough days, you know you should be OK, and you’re not. And, it’s almost worse having that feeling.”

## SCIENCE AND COMMUNITY

When not on the farm, Hento invests time into what drove his love for science at a young age: the school’s science fair.

“I volunteer my time during the local science fair, both in crafting and fine-tuning the projects. I judge the projects both on local and regional levels. Showing children that are at such malleable moments in their life that knowledge and adaptability are lifelong journeys



Tanner Hento and his brother, Scott, farm 2,200 acres.

brings me such an immense amount of joy,” Hento says.

He also is an emergency medical technician (EMT) in Wagner, home to the Yankton Indian Reservation. He’s assisted women in emergency births and has responded to a host of other traumatic health events on the reservation.

“I know I had a past life, and an EMT is not a physician, but it does help me keep a connection to what I once wanted to be, so that brings me a lot of peace,” Hento says.

His involvement in the agriculture industry included applying for the Corteva Young Leader Program, which helped get him connected to the South Dakota Soybean Association, where he currently serves on the board of directors.

“Thinking of the generations that came before me, and even more so the generations coming after me, causes me to never waste a moment. This life I’ve been given is such a privilege. And, I never forget that,” Hento says. ///

Watch the Video



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