

# Kids With Grit

*Growing up in rural Montana takes tenacity.*

*By Jessianne Castle*

At 11 years old, Emmy Oberly is learning how to put tire chains on a truck by herself. Dylon Allestad, another 11-year-old, can drive a four-wheeler on her own.

The two girls know rural living and the solitude and freedom to roam that comes with having more cows than people as neighbors. Their families are accustomed to getting stuck in the snow, meticulously planning grocery runs, and keeping water buckets full should the electricity or plumbing fail. Their daily activities are often dictated by the weather and a trip to town is always multipurpose. These families are self-sufficient out of necessity.



## The Allestads

Dylon was born to parents living in the tiny town of Opheim, Mont., a dusty backwoods stop on the Hi-Line—the roughly 100 miles of Montana that lie south of the Canadian border adjacent to U.S. Highway 2. With a population hovering around 90 people in 2016, Opheim consists of a post office, bar, church and 35-student K-12 school. Dylon's parents moved north from Big Timber to start a cattle operation in the early 2000s, leaving behind family and friends for a fate unknown.

Without extended family close by, Dylon's mom, Britt Allestad, says child care for her three children is a full-time job. "All of our kids do everything with us," she says. "There aren't grandparents, there are no nannies or babysitters.... They're with us day in and day out. They have learned to adapt, they're flexible. They understand work, and they themselves work."

The kids say the work is more fun than a chore. "I love helping when I'm able to," Dylon says. "I'm proud I know how to saddle up my horse and go and help."



In the early years, Dylon and her eight-year-old sister, Tenley, attended a preschool in Glasgow, where their five-year-old brother, Tate, still goes two days a week. Glasgow is about 65 miles from the ranch, and Britt uses it as a supply run since Opheim doesn't have a grocery store.

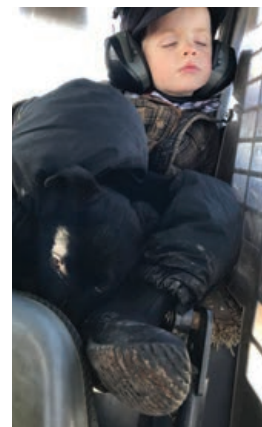
Britt says preschool was especially valuable for Dylon before she had a sister and brother. "We felt it was really important because she didn't have any interactions with other kids."

Dylon and Tenley go to school in Opheim four days a week and are one of two families that use the school bus. Living 40 miles apart, the parents trade off between using the bus and driving the kids.



PHOTOS COURTESY BRITT ALLESTAD

*FROM LEFT: The Allestad kids go everywhere with their parents, whether it's riding around in the truck or riding around horseback. From left: Dylon, Tate and Tenley. ▶ Tenley, 8, helps check a calf. ▶ Dylon, 11, loves to ride her horse, Cookie, which she can catch and saddle all on her own. ▶ Tate, 5, catches some shuteye with one of the family's five dogs while riding in the skidsteer.*



While still several years down the road, Britt says that deciding where the kids go to high school will be difficult. "We have amazing elementary schoolteachers, but high school staff turns over much more quickly," she says, adding that there aren't sports teams in the Opheim district either, because they would have to travel too far.

Many families in the area send their kids to high schools in Glasgow or Scobey, which are both over 50 miles away. These families usually buy houses in town to live in during the week and then go home for the weekends. "It's in the back of my mind, but I really want nothing to do with living in town during the week and coming to the ranch on the weekend," Britt says. "I love ranching and I love what we do. Our ranch is like heaven to me."

Dylon says she loves it too. "We have our family and don't get bothered by the city. We're in a spot where we can do what we want." ■

## The Oberlys

Emmy, her brother, Anson, and parents, Amber and Charles Oberly, live between Livingston and Big Timber. From their home—set among a network of houses belonging to Emmy’s grandmother, aunts and uncles—a narrow dirt road runs downhill, through a creek bottom and back up atop the wide plains before reaching the interstate and the 25-mile jaunt to Big Timber. In the winter, the dirt road becomes impassable without chains and in the spring and fall, mud grabs at the tires.

Whether it’s carpooling to get the kids to school, trading off on child care with neighbors, or having someone to call in an emergency, a support network is critical for the Oberlys. “It takes a whole community to grow kids,” says



In a matter of hours, Amber, Charles and Anson were on a plane to Denver for emergency heart surgery to remove the narrow section of the aorta.

“We had the clothes on our backs, that was it,” Amber says, adding that the experience would have been nearly



PHOTOS COURTESY AMBER OBERLY



*CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Oberly children have helped out with chores on the farm since they were very young. Anson (then a toddler, now 5) feeds his family’s flock of chickens. ▶ Emmy (then 9, now 11) feeds a bum calf, helps with the hay, and gives vaccinations to the dog named Pup.*

Charles, who grew up in Big Timber and now works as a Montana hunting outfitter. “If it wasn’t for family and friends, it would be very hard.”

Often, the Oberlys coordinate with neighbors in planning after-school activities so they can carpool together. Some of Emmy’s favorite activities include riding horses, rock climbing, soccer, and performing in the Missoula Children’s Theatre when the traveling circuit comes to town. She and Anson also play outside, no matter the weather.

“I like training my goat and feeding the chickens, watching the ducks swimming in the pond, and riding my horse,” Emmy says, adding that her favorite aspect of where she lives is having the space to ride her horse for miles at a time.

Emmy had just started kindergarten in Big Timber when Anson was born. She was in school when her parents took him to Billings for a 30-day checkup, where they learned that Anson’s aorta, the body’s main artery, was unusually narrow and restricting blood flow.

impossible to endure without their local support network.

Charles’ parents took care of Emmy, and Amber’s mother cared for the livestock and animals at home. The worried parents had no idea how long they’d be gone, and Charles had to cancel a client’s hunting trip.

Fourteen days later, Amber flew home with her recovering child. Folks from the community sent notes of support and offered to help in any way they could. One family even sent

money in the mail. “I couldn’t believe that,” Amber says, her eyes softening as she smiles. “It was everything.” ■

*Jessianne Castle is a freelance writer and editor based in Livingston, Mont. Born and raised in Big Sky Country, she has a particular interest in both the people and animals that call the West home. A similar story appeared in Mountain Outlaw Magazine, Summer 2018.*