



# The Mid-Atlantic Beef & Dairy Farmer

A Supplement to the Delmarva Farmer

## ‘No two days are ever the same’



Virginia vet chronicles career on farms in debut pair of books

By **JONATHAN CRIBBS**  
Associate Editor

**LOUISA, Va.** — Don't make the mistake of presuming the title of Melinda McCall's debut collection of true stories is bawdy or tongue-in-cheek. The truth is anything but.

It refers to the time she drove home in nothing but a pair of rubber boots after peeling off clothes completely saturated with a cow's blood. She had been tasked with restoring the animal's prolapsed uterus.

It's one of many stories McCall, an overworked large-animal veterinarian in central Virginia, included in her debut book, "Driving Home Naked: And Other Misadventures of a Country Veterinarian". The book, released last month, chronicles McCall's two-decade career in veterinary medicine.

"No two days are ever the same," she said. "I think that's why I could write a book."

It's also not the only title she's releasing. "The Million Dollar Goat", an illustrated children's book about a goat owned by a former 7-year-old client of McCall's, was also released last month — a not-small accomplishment for one of the few large-animal vets working in her 20-county region in a job where the travel can be long and the hours grueling. Until she was able to recently hire help, McCall, 44, said she spent two years working 12-hour days, seven days a week. She would listen to classes on writing while driving to prepare for the book.

"It takes a toll on your physical and mental health," she said. "Even when you get a little time to rest you can barely turn your mind and body off."

Known as a natural storyteller among friends and colleagues, McCall began writing the book after a client — and former editor — suggested she write those stories down. Taken together, she said they show a career that's helped move large animal care forward in her region while focusing on issues such as animal welfare, disease identification and treatment, and beef quality assurance. It's the sort of thing that only happens following a long career that's gained the trust of farmers who have taken her counsel to heart

Virginia veterinarian Melinda McCall poses atop a tractor with her debut memoir, "Driving Home Naked: And Other Misadventures of a Country Veterinarian", released last month.

Photo courtesy Melinda McCall

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Melinda McCall, right, poses with her mentee, Adrianna Peevy, a Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine food animal student.

Photo courtesy Melinda McCall

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## Books ...

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and improved their practices whether it's redesigning gate systems, reducing cattle stress or other ways to improve the quality of beef.

McCall's efforts to write the book coincided with back troubles that made it easier for the outgoing doctor to focus on the page. She also hired a writing coach.

"I needed to sit more instead of go, go, go," she said. "You think you know about your life... but if you ever really try to sit down and chronically put those on a piece of paper, you'd struggle a little bit."

The book, which carries the endorsement of famed animal behaviorist Temple Grandin on the cover — "A worthwhile read." — begins with a story about McCall learning the industry as a young woman. In the 1990s, there weren't many of them, but her father worked in livestock.

She recalls begging a local vet to tag along on the job.

"I reckon you can if your parents say it's OK," he said. "But I'm telling you, I rarely get home before dark, and there's a good chance of a tiny thing like you getting hurt."

"You're a smart gal. There are easier ways to make a living."

The rest of the book proceeds with chapter titles such as "What Would John Wayne Do?", "Snip, Snip", "Tampax for the Win", and "Virginia Chain Saw Massacre".

Writing the book "made me proud

of what I was doing," McCall said. "I chased a dream so hard, and I was actually making a difference in some people's lives, even in ways that I didn't expect to."

Her children's book focuses specifically on a young girl, years ago, who was raising a goat. In an effort to educate their child about the business of agriculture, the girl's parents required her to pay for the goat's treatments — McCall gave her a deal — from money she made selling other goats. She would pay McCall in \$1 bills.

"God love them, they were trying to teach her how to run a business," McCall said. "But this poor goat was cursed."

The goat was beset by health problems, and the child ended up spending far more than she anticipated. To pay it back, McCall promised the girl — now a nursing student — that some of the proceeds from the book, illustrated by Laraib I. Sukhera, can go toward her educational expenses.

McCall was raised on a dairy farm in Washington County, Va. After she received her bachelor's in biology from Queen's University in Charlotte, N.C., she attended veterinary school at Virginia Tech. The college recognized her as an outstanding recent alumna in 2014.

But in addition to her experiences as a vet, McCall said she wants to honor the farmers she serves — how few they are in number and what they're tasked with doing.

"I'm trying to raise awareness for the hard work that they do, and that their numbers are dwindling too, and we have just as many people to feed," she said.