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2026 ACN STORY OF THE YEAR

“Small Groups, Big Outcomes” Lisa Foust Prater Successful Farming

Small Groups, Big Outcomes

The smell of fresh coffee wafts through a friendly meeting room overlooking a busy street in Rocky Ford, Colorado. A plate of glazed doughnuts sits on the table. The welcoming space features a large, rectangular table, comfortable chairs, plants, notice boards, and dozens of wooden plaques emblazoned with the brands of several local ranchers.

Some of the men and women behind those brands make the drive to town on a Monday morning. They grab a mug of coffee and a doughnut, greet each other warmly, laugh, and talk about the things ranchers talk about: the weather, cattle prices, and what’s going on in town.

As the conversation drifts into more serious topics, such as loan payments, succession planning, and the stress caused by forces they can’t control, the ranchers open up, listen, and lean on each other. They talk openly about depression. They share their feelings. They ask how they can help.

This isn’t just an ordinary coffee shop. It’s The Coffee Break Project.

Response to a Tragic Situation

In the High Plains around Rocky Ford, cattle outnumber people 7-to-1. Ranchers often live miles from their nearest neighbors. That isolation contributes to a suicide rate among American farmers and ranchers that is 3.5 times higher than the general population, according to the nonprofit National Rural Health Association.

In 2018, four men with ties to Kiowa County, just northeast of Rocky Ford, died by suicide. Three of the deaths occurred within two weeks. A local journalist asked J.C. Carrica what he planned to do about it. Carrica is vice president of Valley-Wide Health Systems, a nonprofit providing physical and behavioral health care services to rural communities across southeastern Colorado.

Carrica developed an ag advisory committee to address rural stress in the area. Jennifer Pollmiller, director of public affairs and community outreach for Valley-Wide, is a member. She said the committee acknowledged the stigma surrounding mental health. “We knew we probably weren’t going to get farmers and ranchers to walk through the doors of the mental health center,” she said.

The committee decided to implement the Changing Our Mental and Emotional Trajectory (COMET) method, developed by the High Plains Research Network, a project of the University of Colorado School of Medicine. It teaches people how to reach out to someone having a difficult time and help them shift toward wellness and away from a mental health crisis. COMET was created with rural communities in mind.

In a two-hour session, COMET trainees learn how to observe others and notice early when something isn’t right. It demonstrates how to start a conversation in a supportive way, with a seven-question guide, and offers resources to share if someone needs additional help.

Promoting Firearm Safety

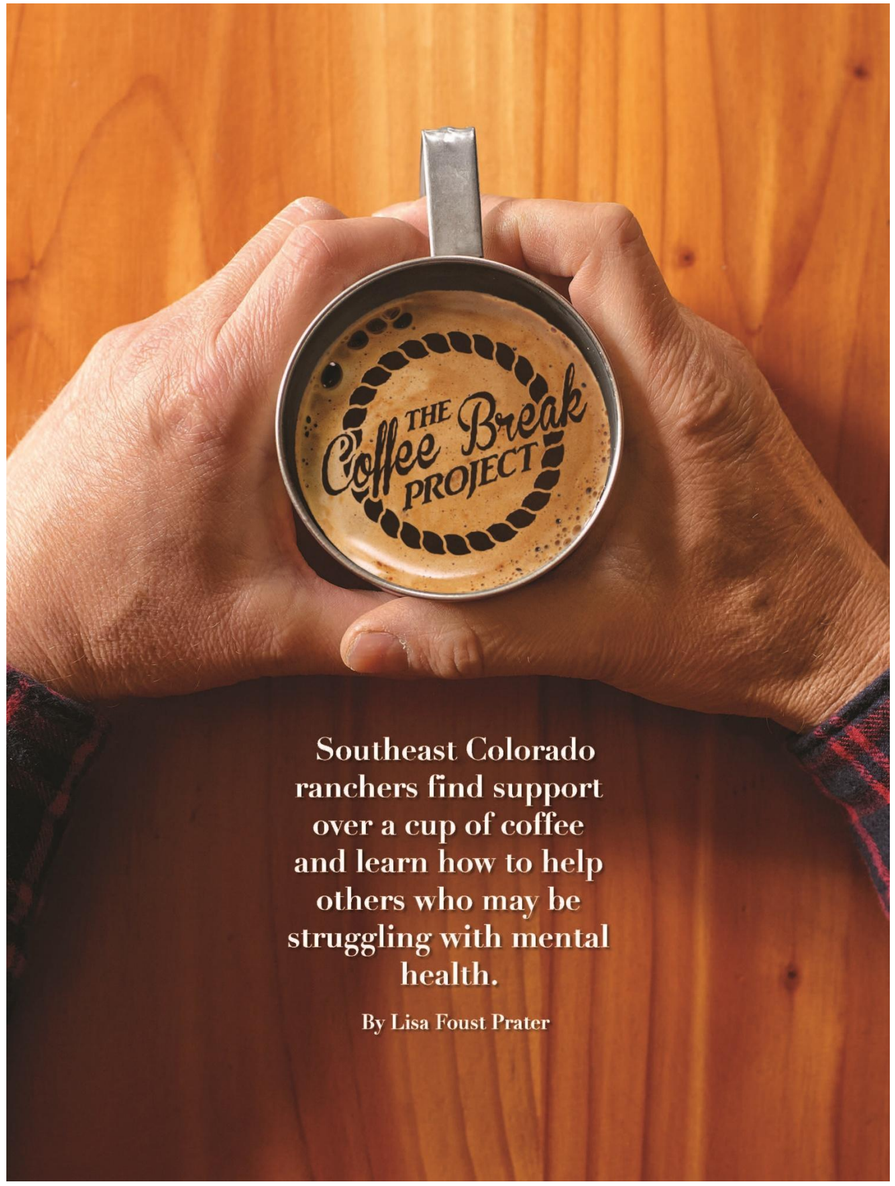
Partnering with the Colorado Gun Shop Project from the state’s department of public health gave the committee another way to help farmers and ranchers.

In 2021, 56.7% of male and 30.7% of female suicide deaths in Colorado occurred by discharge of a firearm, according to the state health department. Still, many gun owners are hesitant to call the authorities if they’re suicidal because of laws that allow the court to remove firearms from those considered a danger to themselves or others.

The Gun Shop Project puts time and distance between a suicidal person and their firearms →

Photography: Pablo Jo’s Hurlamps Fotobraking, Getty Images

2026 ACN WRITER OF THE YEAR



2026 ACN WRITER OF THE YEAR



By **Lisa Foust Prater**
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Ross Chastain drives the No. 1 Busch Light Chevrolet in the NASCAR Cup Series.

Watermelons in the Winner's Circle

NASCAR driver Ross Chastain's eighth-generation farm roots have shaped his racing career. Now, he's using his platform to spotlight farmers.

On May 25, NASCAR driver Ross Chastain started the 2025 Coca-Cola 600 in last place. But when the checkered flag waved 400 laps later at the Charlotte Motor Speedway, he was the first to cross the finish line. After taking a victory lap, Chastain climbed on top of the No. 1 Chevrolet, and, as fireworks erupted behind him and the crowd roared — he held a watermelon over his head and smashed it onto the track.

The watermelon featured in his signature celebration was grown on Chastain's family's farm in southern Florida, representing generations of hard work and perseverance.

Long Legacy

Chastain said his family has been farming in the Southeast since Pierre Chastain landed in what is now Richmond, Virginia, in 1700. Pierre, who was trained as a doctor in France, also took up farming after the move. The family continued the farming tradition, with branches moving to South Carolina and Georgia over the generations. Their specialty was watermelons.

In the 1950s, Chastain's great-grandfather moved from Georgia to southern Florida. "You can grow and harvest watermelons earlier there, and he had heard about the prices they were getting, so he went," the NASCAR driver said.

The family still grows early-season watermelons, which they harvest in spring and early summer. "Most of the family still lives there, within 15 miles of each other, and a lot of them work in the family business," he said.

Farm to Track

Chastain grew up working on the farm alongside his father, Ralph; grandfather, Dick; and brother, Chad. He also spent a lot of time at a nearby racetrack, watching his dad drive and eventually getting behind the wheel. He won his first local race as a young teenager.

Despite plans to go to college and return to the farm, the call of the track led the 18-year-old to the NASCAR Truck Series in 2011. A year later, he moved to North Carolina to pursue ➔

Photography: Courtesy of Ross Chastain

2026 ACN WRITER OF THE YEAR



Bugs on the Ranch

Working with a National Geographic photographer opened Jaclyn Wilson's eyes to the vast diversity of insects that call her Nebraska Sandhills ranch home.

By Lisa Foust Prater
Photography by Joel Sartore

Congratulations!

Lisa Foust Prater
Successful Farming

