THREE WEEKS before calving season at Keewaydin Ranch, two ranch hands yell and sweat at the cows—“Hey! C’mon. Git. Git in there!”—ushering them out of a corral and into a squeeze shoot. The metal compartment holds the 1,200-pound creatures still enough for Alex Blake ’96 and his father, Francis Blake ’61, to inject a vaccination and mineral supplement.

“They just don’t naturally like going into confined spaces, even though they’ve all been through here before,” says Alex, as one red Angus mother-to-be moos and grunts and kicks the bars, making a clanging racket.

“But,” adds Francis, refilling the syringes, “it’s never very pleasant.”

Alex pats the cow’s auburn coat and pulls the lever to set her free. She trots past the wooden fence toward the pasture on the far side of the barn, where lush grass grows.

The work is slow. Already, the men have been out for hours under darkening clouds moving east from the snow-capped Crazy Mountains, and have injected only about half the 110 cows. “Rain’s coming in,” Francis says. “Hope it doesn’t come while we’re trying to get this done.”

The livestock’s health, and the weather, are constant worries at the 5,000-acre ranch, where Francis has been handling cows since he and his wife, Sandi, moved out from Boston in 1973. Alex was a month old and his brother Peter ’93 a toddler when the family settled on a dilapidated ranching homestead, seeking what Francis calls a life “connected to the land.”

The winters are brutal. Snow and ice coat the landscape; temperatures easily dip to 20 below. The winds can whip up to 50 miles per hour across the prairie, and typically hold steady at 35 mph through January. Not a place “for the feeble of mind or body,” she continues—and you’d better find something you love to do inside. Here, it’s really about being self-sufficient and happy within your own being. People who don’t have those inner resources will probably spend a lot of
offered “cultural diversity, broader global perspectives, and a better appreciation for farming and ranching production practices. Sustainability Exchange, a nonprofit conservation organization focused on improving the fact we’re helping the well-being of the environment, including the land. The businesses are profitable enough for the family to live comfortably, but far from lavishly. “You want to survive, but the business is far from only about making money,” Francis says, speaking for everyone. “Today it seems so important to people to make a large amount of money, yet, how much satisfaction do you really get out of that? I think we all get satisfaction out of working with living things, animals and trees, and how you can see wonderful results through your own physical, hard work.”

At 78, Francis doesn’t sit still for long. He’s racked up more than 13,000 miles on indoor rowing machines, like the one in his study (where his Harvard diploma and an etching of rowers on the Charles River hang; he rowed varsity lightweight), he also founded the Harvard Club of Montana and in 2005 received the College admissions office’s Hiram Hunn Award for his decades of schools and scholar- ships committee work across the state. A seasoned runner, he’s registered, with Amory, for the Devil’s Backbone, a 50-mile relay race in the Gallatin Mountain Range in July.

Over tea, talk turns to the agricultural industry’s chronic lack of reliable laborers. The Blakes feel lucky to employ a Mexican and two Peruvians—one, now an Ameri-
can citizen, has worked at Keewaydin for 16 years—and five Montanans for the nursery season. Alex cites a local irrigation company that offers high pay, yet can’t lure applicants, even though there are able-bodied people around in need of jobs. “But they don’t want to work—or they don’t want to do that kind of work,” he says. They apparently prefer service-industry jobs, or sitting at a computer screen eight hours a day. “I know,” Francis pipes in, fresh from a gym workout. “My God, I couldn’t stand that for long.”

Growing up in the then semi-rural Boston suburbs of Weston and Dover in a family whose Harvard roots date to the 1700s, Francis always liked working outdoors and on his grandparents’ dairy farms. His multi-talented great-grandfather, also named Francis Blake, was a scientist, inventor, and pioneering photographer. In the late 1800s he invented a carbon microphone, the Blake Transmitter, which made the telephone a viable instrument and became standard equipment for Bell Telephone. He also created the Keewaydin Estate in Weston, a Victorian home and gardens. “I had many good times there,” Francis adds. But after much of the land was taken for part of the Mass Pike and the Weston tolls interchange, his father and his siblings sold the place, and it was torn down.

Francis bucked his family’s traditional naval service to join the marines after Harvard, then worked briefly in finance in New York City, where he and Sandi, a reporter for Life magazine, married. He, more than she, craved rural life, and they moved to the English Cotswolds: he earned a certificate from Royal Agricultural College, and worked on a diversified farm, while she honed gardening skills, and bore Peter. Returning to the United States, they touched down for Alex to be born in Boston, then headed to Big Timber, where they could afford to buy land and a small herd. They fixed up the house enough to live in, carted away the junked vehicles, and Francis fenced off the creek, funneling the cows to water gaps instead, to help restore riparian growth. They also began naturally enriching the topsoil there and in abutting pastures (they avoid synthetic fertilizers and use only minimal herbicides), and have, over the decades, planted at least a hundred trees and shrubs, along with countless other native plants and grasses. The creek banks are now a verdant habitat for herons and migrating pelicans, beavers, and sometimes otters.

The Blakes have always sought to employ simple, sustainable practices, including low-mechanized operations and solar power. One key move, made soon after Alex returned, was to calve not, per tradition, in February and March, but in May and June, when pregnant cows can feed on spring grass instead of expensive winterfeed that adds to their carbon footprint. The off-cycle practice also generates more profit: the calves typically go on sale in January, when fewer animals are available to meet the demands of the winter or early spring commodities market.

Versed in data and debate over the environmental effects of cattle ranching and beef production, Alex recognizes that it’s difficult for many ranch operations to make overnight management changes that might mitigate those impacts. “How we adjust to climate change—potentially wetter, and almost certainly warmer in our region—has become an issue of huge interest for many farmers and ranchers,” he explains. “For us, this means reevaluating the utilization of our grass and water resources and ultimately how we design our seasonal grazing model.” They have transitioned from an early focus on cattle genetics to managing their forage base, and now seek to manage more of what happens below the soil surface, including microbial activity, water filtration and retention capacity, nutrient availability, and erosion resistance. But Alex is clear that they “disagree with the idea that all beef production is detrimental to the environment. There is plenty of solid evidence that, under good management, livestock can actually be a really great tool for restoring and improving rangelands. In so doing, ranchers can build soil carbon through sequestration and potentially be a significant contribu-
tor in slowing or reversing the impacts of human-caused climate change."

The Blakes have also instituted shorter-duration, higher-intensity grazing, letting the cows’ hooves and manure do much of the work of tilling and fertilizing the earth. They’ve reduced their use of fossil fuels by eliminating hay production; are developing a new, more effective digital mapping range-monitoring system; and are participating in a pilot carbon-sequestration project. Alex adds that among ranchers he knows and has met through Western Sustainability Exchange, “Members of our generation are getting excited about new practices, attending trainings and workshops, asking neighbors about what they are trying, and seeing things done differently.” He himself is part of a start-up that raises and sells all-grass-fed beef, and would like to see more of Keewaydin’s own grass-fed and grass-finished beef (cattle raised on a forage diet exclusively) sold directly to customers, so the ranch could get paid a premium for its more sustainable practices and humane treatment of the animals. “We’re not necessarily proponents of the feedlot model,” he says, “but recognize its vital importance in the current system.”

Raising high volumes of grass-finished cattle is not easy in North America because it requires large tracts of land and a longer growing season than exists in most regions. Active debate continues about whether grass-finished cattle can meet current global beef demand, he adds, but plenty of people see the urgent need for finding a better model and are “trying to figure this out.”

Meanwhile, this spring the Blakes were easily working 11-hour days, immersed in caring for the cows, fixing a break in the corral’s main water line, and figuring out, again,
how best to curb industrious beavers. “They burrow under the fences and do a lot of damage to the trees,” Amory says. “But in some ways we love having them around, ‘cause their dams slow the water down.”

Spring floods along Otter Creek, which cuts a mile and a half through their acreage, threatened more than usual, given the winter’s snow pack. But flooding is a perennial part of living on the land. In June 1997, “barns were washed away,” Sandi says. “We had just forests of huge old cottonwoods crashing down the creek. That was scary.”

But on a sunny day, the sky blue for as far as anyone could see, as Alex rode by on his horse, herding the cows out of a pasture by the nursery, over the creek bridge that was once held up by a pile of cars, and off on a two-mile trek to fresh grazing grounds, it was hard to imagine the Blakes’ homestead as anything but blissful. 

New Harvard Overseers and HAA Elected Directors

The names of the new members of the Board of Overseers and elected directors of the Harvard Alumni Association (HAA) were announced during the HAA’s annual meeting on the afternoon of Commencement Day. Five of the new Overseers were elected for six-year terms. The sixth-place finisher, Diego A. Rodriguez, will serve the final two years of the unexpired term of Jane Lubchenco, who stepped down in light of other professional obligations. The new Overseers were elected from a slate of eight candidates, and the HAA directors from a slate of nine candidates, who were nominated by an HAA committee, as prescribed by the election rules.

Harvard degree-holders cast 26,765 ballots in the Overseers election, and 27,537 ballots in the election for HAA directors. For Overseer:

Geraldine Acuna-Sunshine ’92, M.P.P. ’96, Manila, Republic of the Philippines, and Boston. President, Sunshine Care Foundation for Neurological Care and Research.

Philip Hart Cullom, M.B.A. ’88, Gaithersburg, Maryland. Vice Admiral (retired), U.S. Navy.

Meredith L. “Max” Hodges ’03, M.B.A. ’10, Boston. Executive director, Boston Ballet.

Marilyn Holifield, J.D. ’72, Miami. Partner, Holland & Knight LLP.

For elected director (three-year term):

Collette Creppell ’82, M.Arch. ’90, Providence and New Orleans. University architect, Brown University.

Sid Espinosa, M.P.P. ’00, Palo Alto. Director of philanthropy and civic engagement, Microsoft.

Natosha Reid Rice ’93, J.D. ’97, Atlanta. Associate general counsel, real estate and finance, Habitat for Humanity International; associate pastor, historic Ebenezer Baptist Church.

Krishnan Namboodiri Subrahmanian ’03, Minneapolis. Attending pediatrician, Hennepin County Medical Center and the University of Minnesota; maternal child health specialist, Partners In Health (COPE Program).

Bella T. Wong ’82, Ed.M. ’91, Weston, Massachusetts. Superintendent/Principal, Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School.


Diego A. Rodriguez, M.B.A. ’01, Palo Alto. Executive vice president, chief product and design officer, Intuit Inc.


Cambridge Scholars

Four seniors have won Harvard Cambridge Scholarships to study at Cambridge University during the 2018-2019 academic year. Farris Peale, of Washington and Quincy House, a social studies concentrator, will be the Lionel De Jersey Harvard Scholar at Emmanuel College; Christian Schatz, of California and Adams House, an environmental science and public policy concentrator, will be the William Shirley Scholar at Pembroke College; Theresa “Tez” Clark, of Tokyo and Adams House, a philosophy concentrator, will be the Charles Henry Fiske III Scholar at Trinity College; and Ellie Lasater-Guttmann, of Virginia and Eliot House, a philosophy and mathematics concentrator, will be the John Eliot Scholar at Jesus College.