The extraordinary life of Dr. Thomas Sutherland, a prominent professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University, shows that with an open mind, unflappable positivity, and a big heart, you can overcome any trial in service to society.

Born and raised in Scotland, Sutherland grew up playing soccer and reading at the local library. He was so good at soccer that he was chosen to play in a national game where he scored a goal, a fact so important to his family that his mother related it to his grandmother, who was on her deathbed. He studied agriculture at the University of Glasgow and spent a post-graduate year at the University of Reading, where he studied a textbook about animal breeding plans, written by Jay Lush, “the most renowned animal breeding scientist in the whole world.” He decided he would continue to study agriculture, but he wanted to go to Iowa State and study under Lush.

In 1954, Sutherland got his wish and came to the U.S. His fellowship was only for one year, but, as it happens, he fell in love with a woman from his church. Three weeks after he met Jean, he was asking her to marry him. She deferred for a few months before accepting. After earning his PhD from Iowa State in 1958, he was attended a meeting of the American Society of Animal Science when a friend of his and fellow animal science expert, Howard Stonaker, told him about a position opening up in Fort Collins, at Colorado State University. Sutherland brought it up to Jean and she promptly replied, “Ahh! I’d love to go to Colorado!” So the decision to apply was made on the promise of pristine mountains and persistent sunshine.

Stonaker intended for Sutherland to contribute heavily to research, but his real call was teaching. “I ended up teaching an awful lot of classes,” he laughs about the 50+ different courses he taught. “And I have to say that that was one of the most enjoyable aspects of my whole career here at CSU.” He taught everything from the introductory class in animal science to a course for the Department of Statistics about agricultural research. About his methods for teaching, he says, “I didn’t read my lectures ... I mean, you had to make a class interesting!” And beyond the factual knowledge of his courses, he hoped students learned “that life was a good challenge, and that you needed to try your best to do something worthwhile in life.” Whenever he speaks at conferences, former students still come up and say, “man, you’re that crazy guy that used to come to class in a kilt!”

When Sutherland wasn’t teaching, he was serving on committees. “Why, I ended up on almost every committee that was ever invented,” he laughs. These most notably included the Task Committee on Undergraduate Education, the report was referred to as the “Sutherland Report,” which pushed the necessity of good teaching, and a planning and zoning committee for the City of Fort Collins. His research included a grant from the National Science Foundation to study body composition of animals which changed the unhealthy but common perception that a steak needs “maybe an inch of fat on the outside” in order to be tasty.

Sutherland’s international experience includes stints in Ethiopia, Lebanon, and France. When he was serving as the Dean of Agriculture at the American University of Beirut, he was kidnapped in what he calls “an extended paid vacation as a guest of the Islamic Jihad.” Despite the trauma of that experience, he stresses the importance of “being involved internationally to the max. As much as we possibly can ... because those who ignore history are destined to repeat it, as they say.”

For Sutherland, the mission of the land-grant institution is “to be a service to the state, and even to the nation. And to convey research results out, practical results, as far as possible
to the agricultural community.” Through his work on the body composition of cattle and international outreach, he was helped CSU live up to that mission. About his career he says simply, “I tried my best to be worthwhile to society,” which, at the end of the day, is what any of us can hope for.