

GROWING OUR FUTURE

A TEXAS AGRICULTURAL SCIENCE EDUCATION MAGAZINE

FALL 2026

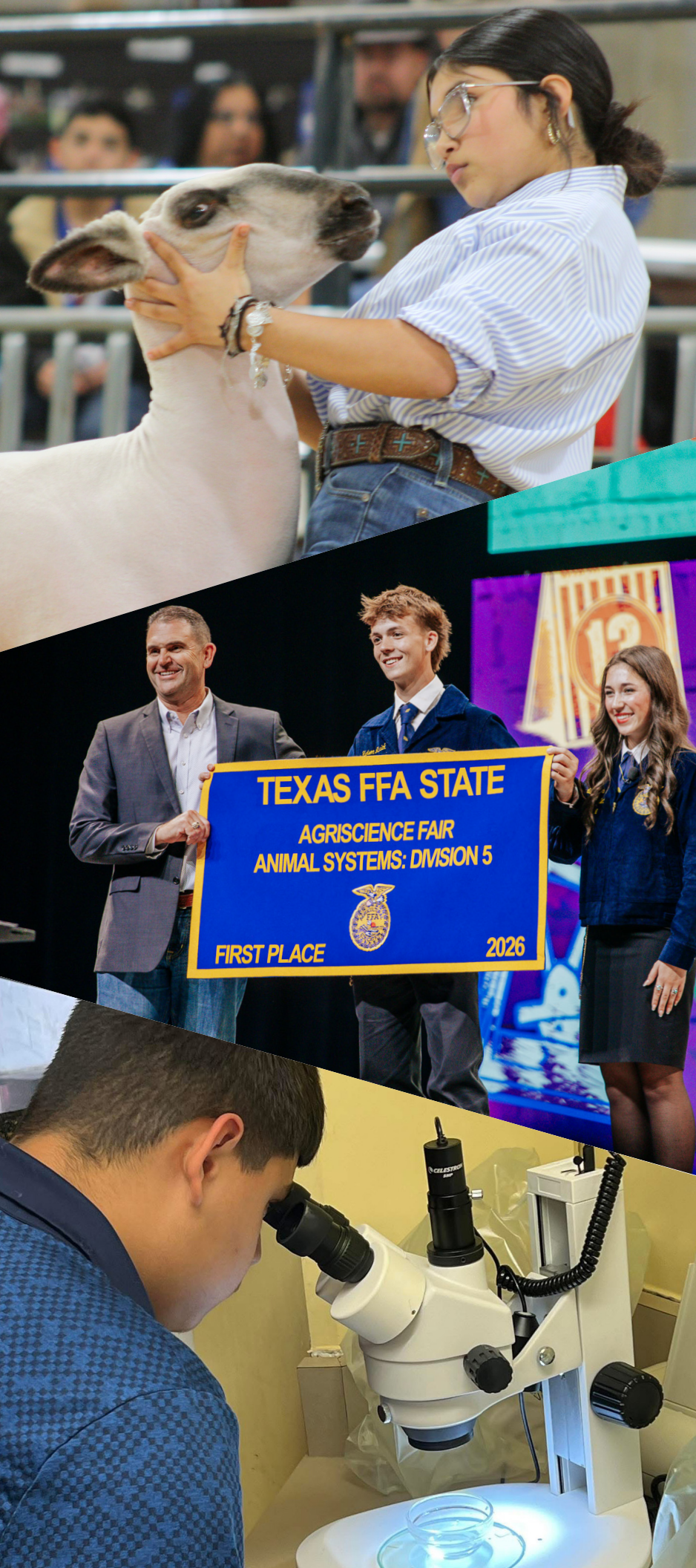


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FROM THE EDITOR



Ashley Dunkerley

One of the greatest strengths of agricultural education is that everything our students learn doesn't just stay inside the classroom. The skills and lessons taught every day connect directly to real work application.

This gives students the opportunity to understand not only what they are learning, but why it matters. Whether they are welding in the shop, caring for an animal, developing a business plan, or working with an industry professional, those experiences build skills they will carry well beyond the classroom.

We hope you enjoy the Fall 2026 issue of Growing Our Future and are inspired to find new ways to connect students with real world opportunities right in their own communities. ■



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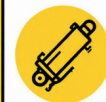
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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE

PROVIDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHERS



Corpus Christi was once again the location for our annual professional development conference at the newly named Hilliard Center. This venue consistently draws strong participation, and this year was no exception, with 2,689 members registered and 2,302 members checking in to take part in the week's events. We knew our check-in numbers would be down slightly due to constraints on teacher travel, including budget and travel restrictions. In addition, 837 guests registered for the conference, with more than 329 attending the Hall of Fame reception.

The continued success of this event was made possible through the efforts of many dedicated individuals and the generous support of our sponsors, especially ICEV, our conference title sponsor.

The conference officially kicked off on Sunday morning



as exhibitors, staff, and audiovisual teams began moving in. The exhibit hall was filled with 125 different exhibitors, filling 60,000 square feet of space. Meanwhile, our Board of Directors convened for their annual meeting to conduct association business, review current initiatives, and plan for both the conference and the future.

Monday was filled with activity from start to finish. The day began with a record-setting Fun Run, where more than 65 participants raised \$1,300 while enjoying a scenic walk or run along the seawall. Later, 73 golfers teed off at North Shore Country Club, raising more than \$1,900 during the annual golf tournament. That day also featured 36 workshops and tours throughout the Corpus Christi area, drawing

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1,205 participants. The sessions offered teachers hands-on learning and practical techniques to bring back to their classrooms. Highlights included tours of the CCA Marine Development Center, the South Texas Botanical Gardens & Nature Center, and the Sea Life Center, along with a Coastal Bend Ag and Port Tour.

Directors and FFA staff. Meanwhile, the Texas FFA Foundation hosted its annual Leading a Legacy Social at the Robstown Fairgrounds, bringing together supporters to celebrate and strengthen the future of agricultural education.

Tuesday began with registration, followed by the

In addition, specialized training workshops prepared teachers for certifications in Floral Design, Texas Parks and Wildlife Outdoor Events, and Pesticide Application. We extend our gratitude to the many presenters from across the state who shared their time and expertise to make these opportunities possible.

On Monday afternoon, registration officially opened, and exhibitors welcomed teachers into the exhibit hall to connect with valuable resources and tools for the classroom. The day concluded with the Floral Cup competition, where 24 teachers showcased their skills and raised \$1,440 for the scholarship fund.

That evening, a special reception was held for approximately 120 new teachers, who were warmly welcomed to the profession by our Board of



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STUDENTS ENROLLED IN
YOUR PROGRAMS."**



Opening General Session. Our 2026 President, Jessica Reeves, presided over the session, which featured remarks from Charles Prause on behalf of ICEV, our title sponsor. NAAE President Cameron Dale of Oklahoma brought greetings from the National Association of Agricultural Educators. The keynote address was delivered by Past NAAE President and retired ag teacher Bill Newsom. He reminded our attendees of why we are ag teachers and encouraged us to put weight on our students' shoulders to keep them grounded.

During the session, we recognized outstanding individuals and their contributions to agricultural education. The ATAT Champion Award was presented to Benny Cherry for his steadfast support of agriculture and agricultural education. We also recognized outstanding administrators for their dedication to agricultural education programs, as well as tenure award recipients marking 40, 35, 30, 25, and 20 years of service. In addition, 27 retirees were honored for their decades of commitment to the profession.

Excellence in teaching was also celebrated, with Riley Sloan named Outstanding Young Teacher, Sean McGuire recognized as Outstanding Mid-Career Teacher, and Brent Wicker awarded Outstanding Experienced Teacher. We are grateful to Superior Awards and Trophies for sponsoring the tenure, retiree, and service awards.

Following the session, each Area held its annual meeting to elect representatives, conduct business, and plan upcoming events for the year ahead.

Throughout the week, Texas FFA staff also convened with their programmatic committees, where teachers provided input on programs and initiatives. In addition, the Major Livestock Show Advisory Committee met to discuss updates and plans for the upcoming stock shows.

Wednesday offered a full slate of professional development, with 78 in-person workshops available for attendees. For those unable to attend on-site, more than 30 hours of on-line sessions were also available, ensuring teachers could continue earning continuing education credits required to maintain their certifications.

Thursday brought another robust day of learning with 52 in-person workshops. The day concluded with our Family Night, sponsored by Ag Workers Mutual Insurance. More than 1,800 attendees enjoyed a fajita dinner, with greetings shared by Dwayne Pavelock on behalf of the company. The evening included fun for all ages, featuring bounce houses and a golf challenge for our guests, along with a cornhole tournament that raised \$320 for the scholarship fund.

During the event, Rusk FFA presented both FFA and ATAT with a scholarship donation from proceeds raised through the Convention FFA T-shirt Contest. We also proudly recognized our outstanding student teachers from nine universities across the state.

During Family Night, outgoing President Jessica Reeves was recognized for her service with gifts from Ag Workers Mutual Insurance and a commemorative belt buckle from Su-

perior Trophies. Officers for the coming year were also introduced: Jay Newton, President; Aaron Bednarz, Vice President; Jeff Klose, Secretary-Treasurer; Jessica Reeves, Past President; and Toby Long, Past Past President and incoming FFA Board Chairman.

We also celebrated the dedication of our staff, Karen Jones, Michelle Vasbinder, Tori Rosser, Carolee Frampton, and Ashley Dunkerley, whose hard work and commitment made this year's conference a success, with audiovisual support provided by Wieghat Graphics. The week concluded with door prizes and a scholarship auction that raised \$5,450 for the scholarship fund.

Our final session focused on livestock shows, with representatives from all major stock shows providing reports and updates on their upcoming events. A reception was held in the Henry Garrett Ballroom Foyer to honor 50 new inductees into the Hall of Fame. The event brought together honorees for fellowship and reflection on their time as agricultural educators. This year's honorees raised more than \$5,600 for the ATAT Scholarship Fund, bringing the five-year total for the event to more than \$320,000. Hall of Fame awards were generously sponsored by Creative Awards and Trophies. Tom Maynard was honored as our Agricultural Education Hero for his years of service to agricultural education.

Our event could not happen without all the

support from our sponsors, which include iCEV, Ag Workers Insurance, Creative Awards, Fresh Country, Seitz Fundraising, Superior Trophies, Texas Farm Bureau, Texas FFA Foundation, LivestockJudging.com, AET, Custom Ag Solutions - Farming is a Risky Business, Pierce, Priefert, Wieghat Graphics, Texas Beef Council, Patterson Foundation, Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, A&G Safety Solutions, State Fair of Texas, Southern Floral, The AED Foundation, Texas Ducks Unlimited, Texas Veterinary Medical Association, Texas Nursery Landscape Association, Lyssy & Eckel, San Antonio Livestock Exposition, Southwestern Livestock Exposition, Alpha Ferns, Ewell Educational Services/Judging Card, Jack & Tammy Winterrowd, Kroger, Resendez Brothers, Rio Equiflor, Smithers Oasis, Herd Login, Inc., Rodeo Austin, and the South Texas Invitational.

We sincerely thank all who attended and contributed to this year's conference. We look forward to returning to Corpus Christi next July. We hope our agricultural science teachers are having a successful year and that your participation in the conference supported your professional growth and development. ■



TEXAS FFA RECOGNIZES **HERE BY THE OWL** EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR AWARD



The Here by the Owl Educator of the Year Award recognizes agricultural science educators' tremendous contributions to helping the next generation of agricultural leaders. Students, parents, fellow teachers, and other supporters can nominate their favorite agricultural teacher and summarize what makes him or her the best in the state.

The nomination process opened in late April to see more than 150 unduplicated entities. The committee reviewed all nominations and utilized a rubric to determine the top nominee from each area and the overall winner.

During the final general session of the 98th Annual Texas FFA Convention, the 2026 Here by the Owl Educator of the Year Award was announced to be Lynita Foster, Madisonville FFA.

From the award's conception, the Texas Farm Bureau eagerly supported the effort as the sole sponsor.

"Texas Farm Bureau is deeply committed to advocating for agriculture and education across our great state," said Texas Farm Bureau in a letter addressed to nominees. "Your passion and dedication inspire your students to explore the diverse and dynamic field of agriculture, equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary for a prosperous future. Your influence extends beyond the classroom, fostering a culture of curiosity, innovation, and respect for the agricultural heritage that sustains us all."

Each area nominee that advanced to the final selection received \$300 and an engraved plaque. The winner of Texas FFA's Here by the Owl Educator of the Year award received \$1,400 and the coveted Here by the Owl trophy. ■

2026 INDUCTEES



The Agriculture Teachers Association of Texas Hall of Fame exists to recognize and honor agricultural science teachers whose careers, achievements, and contributions stand exemplary. Inductees are known as well-rounded professionals that have proven their success with FFA activities, in the classroom, as well as community involvement. They have proven their desire to provide students with opportunities for premier leadership, personal growth and career success over a significant period of time.





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for Advisors

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POA PLANNING

TEXAS FFA HAS PROVIDED CHAPTER PLANNING RESOURCES INCLUDING TEMPLATES, ACTIVITY IDEAS, A CHAPTER OFFICER PLANNING GUIDE, TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE POA DEVELOPMENT.



FFA FRIDAYS

FFA FRIDAY ALLOWS TEACHERS TO SATISFY THE SAE/RECORD BOOK REQUIREMENT FOR COURSES WHILE ALSO CREATING LEARNING EXPERIENCES FROM STUDENTS THAT LIE WITHIN THE CORE OF THE 3-COMPONENT MODEL.



CAREER WEEK

QUALITY RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS TO UTILIZE TO PROVIDE A VALUABLE CAREER UNIT EXPERIENCE. TEACHERS ARE PROVIDED A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN THAT CAN BE EASILY IMPLEMENTED INTO THE CLASSROOM.



CHAPTER EVENT PLANNING

RESOURCES FOR FFA CHAPTERS WITH TOOLS, TEMPLATES, AND STRATEGIES TO EFFECTIVELY ORGANIZE GOALS, ACTIVITIES, AND MEMBER ENGAGEMENT FOR A SUCCESSFUL YEAR.



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YOU HAVE BIG SHOES TO FILL, WHO WILL BE THERE WHEN YOU MOVE ON TO THE NEXT CHAPTER?



We would love to connect with students you would like to encourage, or who are already considering becoming Agricultural Science Teachers. Nominate a student by submitting their information using the QR code.

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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

WITH THE LOCAL FARM AND RANCH COMMUNITY

BY: SI COOK
TEXAS FARM BUREAU EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR & CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

Modern agriculture wouldn't be the same without blue jackets around.

Texas farmers and ranchers take pride in FFA, its agricultural science teachers and advisors, and the students who benefit from the leadership and educational opportunities.

I know this pride firsthand as a cattle and hay producer in south central Texas. I've also witnessed it regularly at meetings and events throughout my almost 40-year career with Texas Farm Bureau.

The relationship between FFA and the farm and ranch community is strong, and I encourage FFA chapters to build on it.

There are many practical ways to partner with local farmers and ranchers and bring agriculture to life for

students.

Invite farmers and ranchers to chapter meetings to talk about their farms, technology, marketing, and career paths. Organize farm tours that give members a firsthand look at row crop, livestock, dairy, or specialty crop operations. Chapters can also create a producer advisory group that meets with chapter officers once or twice a year to discuss local agricultural needs and opportunities.

Hands-on experience is especially valuable. Encourage members to complete Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAEs) on local farms or ranches. Partner with producers to offer internships, job-shadowing, or seasonal employment. Students can also explore entrepreneurship projects tied to production agriculture, including raising livestock, growing produce, or

providing custom agricultural services.

The county Farm Bureau is another valuable connection. County Farm Bureau board of directors are interested in connecting with local FFA chapters and members. Encourage students to attend county Farm Bureau meetings and events and volunteer at fairs, livestock shows and judging contests.

Chapters can also bring the agricultural community together by hosting a producer appreciation breakfast or luncheon, organizing an agricultural career fair and sponsoring crop plot demonstrations or livestock educational clinics. Invite community members and leaders to an "Ag Day" that showcases student projects and local agriculture.

There's plenty that can be accomplished in the classroom, too. Modern agriculture provides opportunities to use local production data and case studies, tackle real-world challenges shared by farmers and ranchers and demonstrate precision agriculture technologies such as GPS guidance, drones, yield mapping and soil sampling.

Service projects offer another way for FFA members to connect with agriculture. Fence repair for community projects, farm safety awareness campaigns, conservation and habitat improvement efforts and food drives featuring locally produced agricultural products are just a few possibilities.

The strongest partnerships develop when everyone gains something. Students gain hands-on experience, mentorship and career connections. Producers build relationships with future employees and industry leaders. And the FFA chapter gains support, learning opportunities and community engagement.

By consistently involving local farmers and ranchers in chapter activities—and giving students authentic experiences in production agriculture—an FFA chapter strengthens the relationships that support agriculture today and helps prepare its leaders for tomorrow.

These partnerships also help preserve the future of agriculture. As farms and ranches continue to grow, more advanced technology becomes a larger part of the industry,

and there is a greater need for young people who understand both traditional agricultural values and modern production practices.

One of the best ways to build that understanding is by learning directly from the men and women who work the land and care for our livestock every day. Farmers and ranchers share real-life experience that can't be found in a textbook, while FFA members bring enthusiasm, fresh ideas, and passion for learning and leading.

The future of agriculture depends on strong connections between generations. The knowledge students gain from local producers today will help prepare them to become tomorrow's educators, business owners, farmers, ranchers, and advocates for agriculture.

The blue jacket has always represented leadership, service, and excellence in agriculture. When FFA chapters and local agricultural producers work side by side, they strengthen not only their local communities, but also the future of Texas agriculture.

These partnerships create real opportunities for growth, learning, and success. By working together, Texas farmers, ranchers, FFA advisors, and students can ensure that agriculture continues to thrive for generations to come. ■





TEXAS FFA CELEBRATES NINE YEARS OF QUIZ BOWL

BY: EMMA CRABTREE, DECATUR FFA

The Ninth Annual Texas FFA Senior Quiz Bowl contest took place Tuesday in the OMNI hotel to continue the action at the 98th annual Texas FFA Convention.

"I think quiz bowl is a very interesting contest," said Ira FFA member Keegan Bufkin. "It implements the knowledge of quiz, but also gives the activities and the fun that comes with games, such as Jeopardy, which is kind of what it feels like. There's a lot of fun [in it]."

The Quiz Bowl contest was introduced at the 2017 Texas FFA Convention after Ray Pie-niazek, a Texas FFA Board of Directors member, proposed the contest.

"A big portion of getting leadership positions and officer positions is taking tests, and so doing quiz bowl, you can have a more interactive and fun way to learn that knowledge and implement it," said Bufkin. "I think it's a great way to either be a gateway into [office positions] or to



really spark your love for that knowledge."

FFA members competing in the contest develop skills such as reasoning and critical-thinking abilities, personality, observation, expression, self-discipline and self-confidence, as well as project skills.

"Quiz bowl is a really good way to gain a lot more knowledge about agriculture, because I feel like everyone has a basic understanding of agriculture, but really studying it allows you to get a more in-depth understanding of what you're actually doing," said La Vernia FFA member Masyn Morrow.

The contest is expected to only continue to grow.

"My favorite part about Quiz Bowl is probably the super intense moments where the contest is like super tight or super close and you have a lightning round left to make up the points, or it's just like a really competitive round," said Morrow. "It just makes it super high spirits, and I like it."

At the 9th Annual Quiz Bowl, Madisonville FFA won the Senior Ag Quiz Bowl and Pearland FFA won the Junior AFNR Quiz Bowl. ■

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
2026
CONFERENCE

AGRICULTURE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS

CONFERENCE AWARDS



AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION
HERO AWARD
TOM MAYNARD



ATAT
CHAMPION AWARD
BENNY CHERRY



YOUNG
OUTSTANDING TEACHER
RILEY SLOAN



MID-CAREER
OUTSTANDING TEACHER
SEAN MCGUIRE



EXPERIENCED
OUTSTANDING TEACHER
BRENT WICKER



A LIFE OF SERVICE

THE LEGACY OF RAY PIENIAZEK

BY: MICHELLE VASBINDER
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COORDINATOR
AGRICULTURE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS

Some careers are measured in years, titles, or accomplishments. Others are measured by the people they influence, the students they inspire, and the profession they leave stronger than they found it. Ray Pieniazek's career is best measured that way.

For more than three decades, Ray has devoted his life to agricultural education. From the classroom to FFA contests, from the meats cooler to the Capitol, and from teacher to his role as Executive Director of the Agriculture Teachers Association of Texas, Ray has remained steadfast in his belief that agricultural education matters and that the students and teachers who make it possible are worth fighting for.

Steve Forsythe perhaps captured Ray best when he described him as "a tireless advocate for Ag Ed and what's right." That combination of conviction, loyalty, generosity, and genuine care for others has defined Ray's career.

The Teacher

Ray began his teaching career in Poth, later spending time at Clear Lake High School before finding his longtime professional home at East Central High School, where he ultimately retired in 2018.

Long before Ray became an association leader and advocate for teachers across Texas, he was "Mr. P" to the students sitting in his classroom.

For former Clear Lake student Jenny Steckler-Lott, those four years from 1993 to 1997 left an impression that has lasted a lifetime. She remembers Ray as an agriculture teacher who taught her far more than the content of an agriculture course. Through FFA, she learned parliamentary procedure, livestock and meats judging, leadership, responsibility, and skills she still uses as an adult.

"Mr. P always pushed those he knew could deliver," she recalled.

That phrase may be one of the best descriptions of Ray as a teacher. He pushed students because he believed in them. He expected them to work because he knew what they could accomplish. He challenged them because he understood the lessons learned through agriculture and FFA were about much more than winning a contest or earning a degree.

For Jenny, those lessons have stayed with her for decades. She still remembers the opportunities, trips, state conventions, competitions, and skills she gained during her years.



"What he did for ag and for his students can't really be put into words," she said. "He was just awesome at it."

Her final assessment of Ray as a teacher perhaps says everything: "Every student should take an ag class, and every one should get a Mr. P at least once in their educational career."

The Influence of a Great Teacher

Ray's students learned quickly that he expected a lot from them. They also learned his expectations came from a place of belief. He saw potential, sometimes long before they saw it in themselves.

When Kayla Guelker was assigned Ag 101 at 14 years old, agriculture was the last place she wanted to be.

"I was determined not to like it. I did not like animals, I hated going to the barn, and I did not want anything to do with agriculture."

Little did she know that Mr. P saw potential and opportunities that she could not yet see herself.

Through Ray's guidance, Kayla gained skills, experiences, and opportunities to last a lifetime. "My parents built a foundation of life-long skills, but Mr. P refined them." Even the market turkeys, mostly against Kayla's will, became part of a journey that would eventually lead back to agricultural education.

After high school, Kayla attended Texas A&M and initially pursued business and marke-

ting before realizing an office career was not the right fit. A career in education followed, first as a social studies teacher and then a transition to a full-time agriculture teacher, a plan her 14-year-old self never saw coming.

The connection to Mr. P had never really disappeared. Fourteen years after graduating, she picked up the phone to ask Ray for help with her new job as an ag teacher, not even knowing he was now Executive Director of ATAT.

"He had been cheering me on and encouraging me before, but I could tell he was very excited for my new era as an ag teacher."

Looking back, the impact became clear. Ray





had provided the experiences, skills, and persistent encouragement that helped shape not only a student, but a future teacher. Today, Kayla teaches agricultural science with the same understanding of the impact an agriculture teacher can have on a young person's life.

Kayla stated, "I often have parents thank me for my sacrifice and work for their kids, and my response is that I am just giving back because someone did it for me."

When the lessons do not end when a student graduates, but continue into the next generation of agricultural education through their own classrooms, it may be one of the greatest accomplishments an agriculture teacher can achieve.

The Teacher Who Never Really Retired

Ray officially retired from the classroom in 2018. But did he really retire? For those who know Ray, the answer is an emphatic no.

As Executive Director of the Agriculture Teachers Association of Texas, Ray took the same passion he had brought to his own students and expanded it to teachers and agricultural education programs across Texas. The teacher who once spent his days coaching students and developing an FFA program now spent his days advocating for an entire profession.

And he never stopped teaching.

Beth Zuilhof experienced that firsthand when Ray made the drive from Austin to Mi-

dway to help scan a small CDE contest. She was grateful he was willing to make the trip, but what stayed with her was what happened while he was there.

Ray spent time talking with her teaching partners, sharing resources, discussing teams, and offering strategies. He did not have to do it. He simply chose to.

Beth said this experience made her appreciate Ray not only as the director of the association, but as a fellow former agriculture teacher.

"It really hit me hard that he was still sharing and discussing teams and strategies with teachers today."

This moment captures something fundamental about Ray. Becoming Executive Director did not mean leaving his identity as a teacher behind. The classroom simply became bigger.

Instead of teaching one group of students, he was now serving teachers throughout Texas. Instead of coaching one judging team, he was helping programs across the state become stronger. Instead of advocating for his own students, he was advocating for agricultural education students everywhere.



A Champion for Agricultural Education

Throughout Ray's career, there has never been much question about where he stands. He believes in agricultural education. And when something threatens the opportunities available to agriculture students or the teachers who serve them, Ray is willing to stand up and fight.

Whether at a contest, in an agriculture classroom, or at the Capitol, he has consistently been an advocate for agricultural education.

His advocacy has not simply been about protecting a program or defending a profession. It is about protecting opportunities for young people. This commitment is reflected in the words of those who have worked alongside him.

Advocacy requires more than knowledge. It requires persistence. It requires showing up when the conversation is difficult. It requires being willing to say what needs to be said. And it requires caring enough to keep fighting even when the work is thankless.

Ray has done all of those things.

For decades, he has used his voice to advocate for agriculture teachers and students, and his leadership with the association has allowed his advocacy to reach far beyond the communities where he once taught.

A Legacy Still Being Written

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Ray Pieniazek's career is that his greatest legacy cannot be found on a résumé. It is found in people.

It is in the many former students like Jenny, who still carry the lessons of their agriculture classroom into adult life.

It is in students like Kayla, who took the lessons Ray taught her and carried them into an unexpected career as an agriculture teacher.

It is in the countless students who learned that hard work, accountability, and perseverance matter.

It is in the teachers who have called Ray for advice and received not only an answer, but



a willingness to share everything he knows and support them.

It is in the programs all across Texas that have benefited from his advocacy.

And it is in the profession of agricultural education itself, which is stronger because Ray Pieniazek has spent his career fighting for it.

His story is not simply one of a man who taught agriculture for 30 years and then became an association executive. It is the story of a teacher who never stopped teaching. An advisor who never stopped believing. An advocate who never stopped fighting. A friend and mentor who never stopped showing up.

His career has been about much more than contests won, programs built, or positions held. It has been about service. Service to students. Service to teachers. Service to agriculture. Service to an organization. And service to a profession he has spent his life making better.

Ray Pieniazek may have retired from the classroom, but he never retired from agricultural education. Because for Ray, agricultural education was never simply a job. It has been an act of service.

Ray's legacy will continue long after the classroom doors have closed, the judging clipboards have been packed away, and the next generation of agriculture teachers has taken their place. As he retires to spend time with the family who made his achievements possible, his impact will continue to reach new teachers, new students, and the future of agricultural education. ■



TEXAS FFA GIVES BACK TO CITY OF FORT WORTH THROUGH DAYS OF SERVICE

ARIANNA SANDLEY, MERIDIAN FFA

This year at the 98th Texas FFA Convention, members had a wide range of opportunities to get involved and give back through the Days of Service projects. This year's projects included Build-A-Bear, Tarrant Area Food Bank, Fort Worth Herd, Mission Arlington and Keep Fort Worth Beautiful.

These service opportunities gave members the chance to make a positive impact on the Fort Worth community while putting the FFA motto, "Living to Serve," into action.

Returning for its second consecutive year, the Build-A-Bear project invited members to assemble stuffed bears that will be donated to charitable organizations. The project gave members a hands-on way to brighten a child's day while creating lasting memories for everyone who participated.

Members volunteering with the Tarrant Area Food Bank helped sort, inspect and prepare food for distribution to families facing food insecurity. Through their efforts, members supported one of the region's largest hunger relief organizations while learning more about the importance of



fighting hunger in their communities.

At the Fort Worth Herd, volunteers assisted with projects that help preserve the history and daily operations of one of Fort Worth's most notable traditions. Members had the opportunity to learn about the city's rich western heritage while helping maintain an important piece of Texas history.

Those serving with Mission Arlington organized donations and prepared supplies that will be distributed to individuals and families throughout the Arlington area. The nonprofit provides assistance through food, clothing, household items, medical care and educational programs, making it a vital resource for thousands of Texans each year.

Members who volunteered with Keep Fort Worth Beautiful worked to improve local parks and public spaces through cleanup efforts. Their service helped create a cleaner environment while encouraging stewardship of Texas communities.

Whether they spent their time building bears, sorting food, preserving history, organizing donations or cleaning parks, members left this year's convention knowing they had made a meaningful difference. The Days of Service projects continue to remind Texas FFA members that leadership extends beyond the classroom and that serving others remains at the heart of the organization. ■

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A MESSAGE FROM

YOUR NEW AGRICULTURE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

BY: MELVIN POUNCY
AGRICULTURE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

I am very excited and honored to be serving as your new Executive Director of Agriculture Teachers Association of Texas. I feel it is a blessing to be serving more than 2,600 teachers across the state in this capacity. I have always said there is no more important career in the world than being an educator, because we cultivate the new generation. As an ag educator you have an even greater responsibility, but you are cultivating the hearts and minds of those that will feed, clothe and house the population for a century to come. I always looked at what we do not as a job but a lifestyle, as teaching agriculture is just that, it is a life commitment.

My teaching career encompassed 30 years in the classroom and one year in extension. I have a very diverse background in education. I taught a single teacher, two teachers and a larger teacher program. My experiences at schools that were rural such as Troy High School and Wellington, CO to large urban programs like James Madison and ASTA have shaped my view of ag education. It has allowed me to understand the challenges and advantages of just about any type of program in the state.

Tracy and I have been married 33 years now and have three sons; Colton is starting his 8th year as an ag teacher, Dylan is in his 4th year of being a Natural Gas Trader in Houston, and

Mason is just starting his career as a Financial Planner in Houston. Tracy has an MSN in Nursing and has been a Trauma Program Director for over 25 years.

Many have asked what things my vision for the future of our organization is. That is challenging as I have never concerned myself with what someone might remember me by, because on the path that we walk in life we are influenced by so many things and leave a very small footprint.

However, collectively if we work together with others a much larger footprint can be left behind. One vision I have is proactively solving our retention of teachers and growing our own more robustly. Our mentor program is tremendous and serves an essential role for the 40 or so teachers we can serve annually. However, there are many that we just can serve due to limitations. That's where collectively we can work together and all leave behind a legacy. I would like to challenge all the mid and late career teachers to identify an early career teacher and introduce yourself to them and actively check in with them throughout the year.

Remember, our job as advisor does not just apply to students in our classroom. We have a responsibility to be a steward to those who are just beginning their careers. ■

2026

AGRICULTURE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS

SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

KYNLIE BAIRD
DALLYNN BISHOP
EASTON BRANAM
MADISON BURRIS
BRYCE BYRD
KENDALL COMPTON
ZOEY EASON
TRISTIN EDDINS
CAYDEE ESPITIA
MILEY EVANS
ANDRIA GARDNER
DEZIRAE GARZA
KAYDEN GILLIT
BRYSON GOODMAN
ANNABELLE GRIFFIN
LESLIE HALL
KORI HAMMOND
KORD HENRY
MADELYNN HOPKINS
KAYLEE JACKSON
SAWYER KERSTEN
AVA KING
MORGAN KRASUCKY
SAVANNAH LAMPMAN
RICARDO LEAL IV
LOGAN LIERE
PRESLEY LONG
WESLEY MARTIN
EMMA MARTINEZ
KYNDAL MCRAE

HAYDEN MOWREY
DYLAN MUEHLSTEIN
WESLEY MUEHLSTEIN
JUAN SAMUEL MUNOZ
ASHLYN PETERS
BLAKE PHILLIPS
RUGER REEVES
JAKE RESSLER
MACKENNON SAMMON
MASON SAUNDERS
STARLYN SCHNITKER
MEGAN SHAW
AVERY SISAK
BRAYDEN SMITH
GRACE SMITH
HOLDEN SMITH
KINDER STANLEY
RAELEIGH TAYLOR
LAYNE THOMAS
LANE TINDEL
RHETT TURNER
DAVA CLAIRE VELA
KYLIE VOGLER
SOPHIE WADE
PAISLEY WATKINS
CAIDEN WATSON
TATUM WESTBROOK
ADDISON WILEY
CAIN WILLIAMS



BOERNE CHAMPION FFA MEMBERS MAKE NATIONAL IMPACT THROUGH AGRICULTURAL MECHANICS

Most high school students never imagine that a project built in an agricultural mechanics shop could one day help protect the nation's livestock industry. Fewer expect to see something they designed and fabricated recognized by government officials and used in efforts to strengthen American agriculture.

For members of Samuel V. Champion FFA's agricultural mechanics program in Boerne, Texas, that became reality.

Over the last year, chapter members, under the direction of advisor Dorman Vick, designed and built the T-REX, or Tick Removal Eradication X-perts, a massive mobile dipping vat created to support efforts to protect the U.S. cattle industry from livestock pests and disease threats.



.....
"MOST HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS NEVER IMAGINE THAT A PROJECT BUILT IN AN AGRICULTURAL MECHANICS SHOP COULD ONE DAY HELP PROTECT THE NATION'S LIVESTOCK INDUSTRY."



The project directly supports agricultural biosecurity efforts and represents months of engineering, planning, fabrication and teamwork. For the students involved, it was far more than a welding project.

"The most challenging aspect was designing and building a system that was both mobile and durable enough for agricultural use while still meeting the requirements set before us by the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC)," student Cade Vick said. "So being able to overcome those immense hurdles through communication, working as a team, brainstorming, and designing through Google SketchUp, helped all of us to grow stronger as a team and got us across the finish line with a project that will hold up for generations to come."

The technical skills students developed were significant, but many say the relationships

built throughout the process were equally impactful.

"I think what's made me the most proud throughout the ups and downs of this project was growing the relationships with my five other friends along with Mr. Vick," Roman Beetz said. "Additionally, using that growth through eight months of hard work to bond over the smallest things. Those small things made each day more worth it, and those moments directly correlated to increased teamwork that led to produce something so special and meaningful to all of us, which is something that over the course of my life I'll never be any less proud of."

The project attracted attention from agricultural leaders across the country.

"The Southwest Cattle Raisers Association found out about the build and invited us to





the Cattle Convention and Expo in Fort Worth," Vick said. "It was another historic thing that had never happened before. That's where things really, really got awesome."

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins was in attendance at the convention and greeted the students with open arms.

"Secretary Brooke Rollins spent a ton of time with us, and even got on [the T-REX] with high heels on," Vick said. "She said that she was taking us to Washington, D.C., for the world to see these kids' incredible project."

The project went national much quicker than anyone planned.

Shortly after the convention, Vick received a phone call from Washington, D.C., informing him that he and his students along with the T-REX had been invited to attend the groundbreaking ceremony for the New World screwworm facility at Moore Air Force Base in South Texas .

At the ceremony, Secretary Rollins asked the students and Vick to stand and be recognized for their work and the role the T-REX will play in protecting American agriculture.

"It's going to save America, because left unchecked, the screwworm will be devastating to the cattle industry," Vick said. "Our cattle numbers are already lower than they've been

since the 1950s. It was a very powerful moment to be there. I'm excited that she recognizes and sees the value in what these kids have done."

The recognition continued this summer when Rollins hosts the students and Vick in Washington, D.C., as part of the Great American State Fair. While the T-REX itself remained in Texas, the students who designed and built the project were recognized on a national stage.

For Vick, the invitation represents something much bigger than a single project.

"To have these students recognized at the national level for work they completed in an agricultural mechanics shop is incredible," Vick said. "They're getting to see that what they do can have an impact far beyond our community."

For the students, the opportunity to represent Texas agricultural education in the nation's capital serves as another reminder that the skills they developed through the project can create meaningful change across the country.

While the T-REX brought national attention to the program, the story actually began nearly two decades ago with a connection that would change the course of Champion FFA's agricultural mechanics program.

Through the planning of an agriculture mechanics project in 2007, Vick was connected to Dr. Matt Pound with the USDA through multiple mutual friends. Dr. Pound was a leader in fever tick research at the USDA ARS Knippling-Bushland US Livestock Insects Research Laboratory in Kerrville, Texas.

Dr. Pound had already started building capture setups in the Kerr Wildlife Management Area in Kerrville, Texas. Vick and his students began working with the doctor to create ways to capture deer more efficiently.

"To my knowledge, we developed the first ever swing-away gooseneck nose on a trailer that you pull a pin and the whole nose swings out of the way for a 40-foot rotunda to be set up," Vick said. "It has a series of boxes on the trailer leading up to a lift chute to be able to lift the deer up. Then four people can work on that deer, check it for fever ticks, ear tag it, cut the horns off, and then the lift safely lowers them back down."

The Mobile Deer Capture Trailer marked the beginning of a partnership that would eventually place students at the center of projects with national significance.

After the success of the Mobile Deer Capture Trailer, Dr. Pound connected Vick with another USDA official, Ed Bowers. Vick and five of his students traveled to Laredo to learn about their next mission — building a mobile dipping vat for cattle, later called the Big Dipper.

"We came back in 2009 and 2010 and built the first mobile dipping vat," Vick said. "We literally lived at the shop to be able to get that done, because it weighs nearly 25,000 pounds empty. It's massive to say the least. The sheer amount of welding on it is mind-boggling."

Vick said that both the Mobile Deer Capture Trailer and the Big Dipper were built on handshake agreements with the federal government. Upon the third project in 2010-2011, a Mobile Scratch and Spray Unit, an official contract was implemented.

Years later, the impact of those projects was still being felt.

In early 2025, the state of Texas reached out to Vick to see if his students would build another mobile dipping vat like the Big Dipper. Vick initially thought the call was a hoax.

"They left a message that the Big Dipper was still going, and that it had outlived industry built ones," Vick said. "It was holding the Northern Line for the fever tick, and the state of Texas wanted us to build another

one. I'm thinking, 'somebody is messing with me.'"

Vick instructed the callers to provide a detailed proposal outlining what they were looking for. When a multiple-page document, complete with photos and specifications, landed in his inbox, he realized his students were about to embark on another historic project.

That project became the T-REX.

For Vick, the national recognition and government partnerships are impressive, but the true impact can be measured in the students who have passed through the program.

"Morgan Burkett was a 2017 graduate and was in the top five in her class," Vick said. "[She] actually signed up for the course by accident. She went on to Purdue University, and she's working for Polaris as a development engineer. Mia Carolla is a 2015 graduate and is now a research engineer for the U.S. Air Force. She went on to Texas A&M University and is working on her doctorate while she's working for the Air Force."

Those stories, Vick said, are proof that the lessons learned in an agricultural mechanics shop can extend far beyond welding and fabrication.

"It's seeing lives get changed, seeing kids have a why, a purpose, because we're built pretty simply," Vick said. "We want discipline, we want love, and we want direction, and when we give people that, it's just incredible to watch the mountains they can climb." ■





MENTORING OUR OWN

A GUIDE FOR THE TEACHING PARTNER TO AN EARLY CAREER TEACHER

SET THE PARTNERSHIP UP FOR SUCCESS

- Define “who owns what” in writing. Split responsibilities by strengths, not just fairness (e.g., livestock species SAE checks, school travel paperwork, FFA duties, etc).
- Weekly 15-minute check-in Same day, same time. Agenda: How are things in classroom, what’s coming up, deadlines, allotted time for questions. No venting spiral–problem solve.
- Shared digital hub One Google Drive/OneNote with lesson plans and resources, program documents, FFA calendars, budgets, and contacts. No “where is that file?” drama.

MODEL NOT MICROMANAGE

- Share the “why,” not just the “what” Explain why you manage something your way- instead of “this is the way we do it”. Be open to discussion-it accelerates growth fast.

FFA & SAE MENTORING

- Discuss strength and weaknesses prior to assigning duties. It is not always reasonable to assign all duties that a new teacher is inexperienced with.
- Split FFA advising roles clearly, a one advisor per team, officer group duty, SAE, etc. whenever possible. Students and parents need clarity on who to come to, and new teacher needs leadership role in the program.
- Do a few SAE visits jointly early on to model questioning, record review, and feedback style.

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH & LONGEVITY ENCOURAGE

- Introduce them to your network including; administration, ag boosters, local producers, vets, extension agents, ect.–relationships matter. Isolation only eliminates collaboration which impedes growth.
- Boundary setting early, model works life balance, saying yes to “everything,” and protecting personal time. This may actually HELP your balance!
- Present a united front to students, parents, and administration. Address disagreements privately.
- Celebrate small wins with them, even when feels ridiculous. First smooth lesson, first contest traveled to, first successful season–acknowledge it, it matters to them.

QUICK MENTOR MINDSET SHIFTS

Don’t rescue–coach

Don’t assume–ask

Stay aligned publicly–resolve differences privately

Don’t gatekeep–share & communicate

VIEW, PRINT, AND REFERENCE
FULL GUIDE HERE:





**AGRICULTURE
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POSTER PD

CONNECTING WITH THE INDUSTRY

CONNECTING YOUR PROGRAM TO LOCAL INDUSTRY PARTNERS IS ESSENTIAL TO BUILDING THE BRIDGE FROM EDUCATION TO COMMUNITY. SUCCESSFUL INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS ARE BUILT ON RELATIONSHIP. THESE RELATIONSHIPS LEAD TO HAVING VALUABLE INDUSTRY EXPERTS GUIDING YOU AND YOUR STUDENTS TO DEVELOP THE SKILLS AND NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES THAT WILL SET THE FOUNDATION FOR THEIR FUTURE CAREERS.



WAYS TO CONNECT:

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU CREATE A TRUE PARTNERSHIP. FOR SEVERAL PROGRAMS, LOCAL AGRIBUSINESS ARE KEY FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTORS, BUT THEY HAVE SO MUCH MORE TO OFFER. TAKE THE TIME TO GET TO KNOW YOUR PARTNERS AND HAVE THEM INTERACT WITH STUDENTS.

- JUDGES TO EVENTS
- BANQUET ATTENDANCE
- AUCTION BUYER TRAVEL ASSISTANCE
- FUNDRAISING PURCHASES
- INTERNSHIP/PRACTICUM PLACEMENTS
- JOB PLACEMENTS
- GUEST SPEAKERS

WHERE TO FIND:

WHEN SEEKING OUT INDUSTRY PARTNERS, BE SPECIFIC ON HOW THEY CAN MEET YOUR NEEDS. EX: WHEN YOU'RE ASKING FOR THEM TO COME SPEAK TO YOUR CLASS, BE SPECIFIC ON WHAT TOPIC YOU WANT THEM TO ADDRESS. BE SURE TO THANK THEM IN THE WAY THEY PREFER.

- YOUR PERSONAL NETWORK. EXAMPLES: FRIENDS, FAMILY MEMBERS, PREVIOUS JOBS/CAREERS, MENTORS, ETC.
- YOUR CTE ADVISORY COUNCIL
- ADMINISTRATION AND SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS
- COLD CALLING EXPERTS IN THE FIELD THAT YOU LOCATE THROUGH SEARCH ENGINES. (I HAVE READ ARTICLES AND MADE MY STUDENTS CALL THEM FOR AG ISSUES AND SCIENCE FAIR)
- PARENTS/BOOSTER CLUB
- ALUMNI ORGANIZATIONS/YOUNG FARMERS
- PRACTICUMS/WORK PROGRAM TRAINING SITES
- COMMUNITY COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY BUSINESS YOU AND YOUR STUDENTS' USE

CONTACT

KAYLA GUELKER
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FOR MORE FROM
THIS WORKSHOP





TEXAS FFA STEPS UP FOR COWTOWN C.A.L.F

BY: HAYDEN LUFT, IRA FFA

Every year at the Texas FFA Convention, members come together to support a service project that gives back to the local community. This year's project, "Helping Every Single Step Feel Like Home," partnered with the Cowtown Marathon and its C.A.L.F. Program.

Created in 2009 as part of the Cowtown Marathon's mission, C.A.L.F. promotes a lifelong love of fitness by helping tens of thousands of children from area school districts and community centers lace up and start crossing finish lines.

"The FFA groups are amazing," said Seth Fossett Cowtown C.A.L.F. Warehouse Manager. "I used to be an FFA kid myself 10 years ago, so whenever this opportunity came up, I was jumping at the bit."

Throughout the week of convention, chapters were encouraged to bring new running shoes and socks to help support children in the Fort Worth area.

"Because of their efforts,



we received an amazing donation of 200 pairs of running shoes and 2,850 pairs of socks," said Heidi Swartz Cowtown C.A.L.F. Executive Director. "This contribution will make a tremendous difference for the children we serve throughout North Texas."

Service projects like this one truly capture what the FFA motto, "Living to Serve," is all about.

"FFA kids are great, and everyone contributing to our cause and helping out is just phenomenal," said Fossett. "We get to go out there, light up kids faces, and give them something they really appreciate and can use." ■



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Owen Hoge and Anna Miller

Texas A&M University
Elizabeth Moore and Kalyn Patranella

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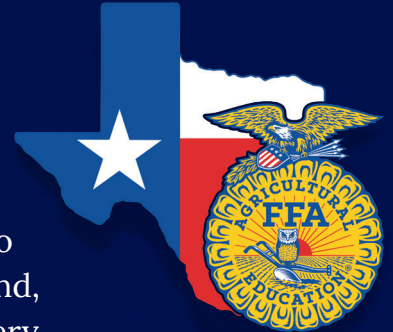
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FROM OPPORTUNITY TO EXCELLENCE

HOW EXCELLENCE CONFERENCES ARE DEVELOPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

BY: LAYTON ERVIN



Whether it's winning at a competition or being elected to an officer position, FFA members are constantly striving for excellence. However, it can be hard for students to find their footing when there is just so much out there. Such was the case for the Texas FFA Association. Texas FFA has long had a high membership, making it hard to ensure that every member got the most out of their time in the blue jacket.

Austin Large, while serving as the Texas FFA Leadership Development Coordinator, recognized that the Texas FFA association wasn't doing a great job of serving the incredible number of FFA members in the state. Mr. Large moved to Texas from California, where he was an FFA member and an ag teacher. In California, there were Integrated Leadership Development Programs, or ILDPs. These programs set out to provide timely and relevant leadership and personal development training to young people. That was something Texas FFA was lacking at the time. Area and district associations held greenhand camps; however, those were only for first-year members. Then the only other opportunity for real development was to be elected to district or area office.

The idea that came was to provide the area associations with resources for a Greenhand Leadership Conference. Then the state association would host sophomore/junior and senior leadership experiences.

Thus, the Texas FFA Excellence Conferences were born. Initially supported through an annual gift to the Foundation from a past State FFA Officer, the content was also honed in through a partnership with the Ziglar Foundation. Today, there are three different excellence conferences for sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Made For Excellence, Building Excellence, and Executing with Excellence. All conferences are hosted together at six universities across Texas. This ensures that Texas FFA members from the panhandle to the Gulf Coast all have access to these opportunities for growth.

Today, the Texas FFA Excellence Conferences are doing more than filling a gap; they are shaping the future of our organization. Students who walk into these conferences unsure of their place leave with a sense of purpose, stronger confidence, and the skills needed to lead in their chapters, schools, and communities.

By intentionally investing in members, Texas FFA is ensuring that every student, no matter where they come from, has the opportunity to grow. Through these experiences, members aren't just striving for excellence; they are learning how to live it. Carrying the values of premier leadership, personal growth, and career success far beyond the blue jacket. ■

WHERE THE CLASSROOM MEETS THE COMMUNITY

BY: MICHELLE VASBINDER
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COORDINATOR
AGRICULTURE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS

One of the greatest advantages of agricultural education is that what we teach does not exist only within the walls of a classroom. Agriculture is happening every day in the communities surrounding our schools. The science, skills, decisions, and challenges found in our curriculum are also found in local businesses, farms and ranches, school facilities, community organizations, and the careers of the people our students interact with every day.

Yet, even in a subject as naturally hands-on as agricultural education, students may not always recognize that connection.

Creating meaningful real-world applications does not require turning every lesson into a field trip or developing an entirely new curriculum. Often, the most effective approach is much simpler: intentionally connecting existing instruction to the people, problems, decisions, and resources already present within the local community.

Localize the Content You Already Teach

Real-world application becomes most effective when it is not treated as a special activity but as a regular way of approaching instruction. One of the simplest

techniques for creating real-world relevance is to localize existing instruction rather than creating something entirely new. The standards, objectives, and concepts remain the same, but the context surrounding them changes.

As teachers prepare a unit, it can be helpful to consider where that particular concept exists within the local community. Nearly every agricultural topic has a local connection. Identifying that connection allows teachers to frame instruction around something students recognize rather than something that feels distant or hypothetical.

This localization can happen through the language used during instruction, the situations presented in assignments, the data students analyze, or the questions teachers ask during discussion. A familiar context immediately gives students a reference point. Suddenly, the lesson is not simply something they need to know for a test; it is something being used by people and businesses within their own community. Over time, this creates something unique: a curriculum that reflects the community in which students actually live.

Intentionally localizing instruction also helps students develop a broader understanding of agriculture itself. They begin to recognize agricultural careers, businesses, and systems that may have always existed around them but that they had never previously viewed through an agricultural lens. They start recognizing the science behind a production decision, the business principles behind an agricultural operation, the technical skills behind a piece of infrastructure, and the career opportunities behind businesses they may have passed hundreds of times.

Lead With the Problem, Not Always the Answer

Traditional classroom instruction often follows a predictable sequence: teach the concept, practice the skill, and then apply it. Real-world problems rarely ar-

rive in such an organized manner. Instead, professionals are presented with a situation and must determine what information they need, which knowledge applies, and how to move toward a solution.

Agricultural education provides an ideal environment for occasionally reversing the traditional instructional sequence.

Beginning a lesson or unit with a problem creates a reason for students to learn the content that follows. Rather than immediately providing the information students will need, teachers can allow students to first examine the situation, identify what they know, determine what they do not know, and consider what information would be necessary to make a decision.

The teacher then becomes the facilitator who provides the knowledge and skills students need to move closer to a solution.

This technique shifts students from simply receiving information to actively looking for it. As new concepts are introduced, students can immediately connect them to the original problem. The question changes from "Why do we need to know this?" to "Can we use this to solve the problem?"

Bring Industry Thinking Into the Classroom

Real-world application is strongest when students are required to do more than arrive at a correct answer. In agriculture, there is often more than one possible solution to a problem. Professionals must consider cost, efficiency, safety, available resources, environmental conditions, long-term consequences, and the needs of the people involved before determining the best course of action. Classroom instruction can mirror this process.

Assignments that require students to analyze information, make a recommendation, and defend their reasoning en-

courage a different level of thinking than assignments focused solely on recall. Students learn that knowing information is only the first step. They must also determine how and when to use it.

Teachers can strengthen this process by resisting the urge to immediately tell students whether a decision is right or wrong. Asking students why they made a particular choice, what information influenced their decision, or what might cause them to change their recommendation encourages students to examine their own reasoning.

This is one of the most transferable skills agricultural education can develop. Regardless of whether students ultimately pursue a career directly connected to agriculture, they will need to evaluate information, make decisions, communicate those decisions, and adapt when circumstances change.

Use the Community as a Source of Expertise

Agriculture teachers do not have to be the only experts students encounter.

Every community contains individuals with knowledge and experience that can strengthen classroom instruction. The challenge is often finding ways to access that expertise without creating additional logistical burdens for teachers or community members.

Instead of viewing community involvement only through traditional guest speakers or field trips, teachers can think in smaller, more flexible ways. A professional may contribute a question for students to solve, provide feedback on a project, share an industry perspective, supply a resource used in their work, or briefly explain how a classroom concept influences decisions in their career. These smaller interactions can be especially powerful because they can occur throughout instruction rather than being limited to an occasional special event.

They also reinforce an important messa-

ge for students: the skills being taught in the classroom have value beyond earning a grade. Someone within their own community relies on that knowledge to do their job successfully.

From Classroom Knowledge to Community Capability

Ultimately, real-world application is not about adding more to an already full agriculture teacher's workload. It is about changing the lens through which existing instruction is delivered.

A lesson becomes more meaningful when students understand where the knowledge lives beyond the classroom. A skill becomes more valuable when students understand who uses it. A problem becomes more engaging when students recognize that someone in their own community is working to solve a version of it.

Agricultural education has always been uniquely positioned to make those connections.

Our classrooms sit at the intersection of education, industry, community, and workforce development. When teachers intentionally bring those worlds closer together, students gain more than content knowledge. They begin learning how to observe their communities, recognize problems, seek expertise, evaluate information, make decisions, and contribute solutions.

That is where real-world application becomes more than an instructional strategy. It becomes preparation for students to become capable participants in the agricultural communities already surrounding them.■



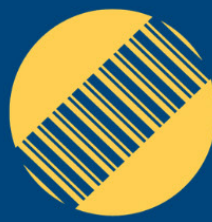
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PARTING THOUGHTS

BY: RAY PIENIAZEK
RETIRING AGRICULTURE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As I think about writing my last article for the Growing Our Future Magazine, I think about how far we have come in making a periodical our association can be proud of and share across the state. The idea that Ashley Dunkerley had to transition from a monthly newsletter to a quarterly magazine with articles to share with our members and supporters was a giant step forward. It has been such a valuable part of the improvements made by Team AgEd to showcase what agricultural education and FFA are doing in Texas.

I have had the opportunity to work with a great staff. Karen Jones continues to ensure members are taken care of with their membership needs. Tori Rosser continues to grow in finding new ways to promote our organization through social media and managing exhibits. Another change I am particularly proud of during my time was getting approval to hire a professional development coordinator, and having it be one of my former students. Michelle Vasbinder takes pride in finding opportunities for curriculum development, specifically getting groups together to crea-

te curriculum for Principles of AFNR and Small Animal Care, and organizing Advanced Floral Design. She strives to make the mentor program successful, and we have been grateful for support from Herman and Bobbie Wilson and the Texas FFA Foundation.

It has been a pleasure working with all the Team AgEd staff. Please support all of them, as they are doing a great job serving the needs of agricultural education. I also want to give a shout-out to my favorite Texas FFA Executive Director, Jennifer Jackson. She and her staff are doing an outstanding job, and I will miss getting to work with all of them. I wish Melvin the best of luck as he takes over this position. He has a good vision for the association and will strive to keep making us great.

If anyone ever asked me what the best part of this job was, it was an easy answer: answering a phone call to help a member figure out a problem they were having. Sometimes, the problems were easy to solve by looking at the school district policy, and sometimes it was a challenge with some other issue the teacher was having. Many

times, teachers only wanted someone to listen to them and acknowledge that they were important and what they were doing mattered. Never doubt that as a teacher, your worth to your students is beyond measurable. Our association is here because of our members and should always be there for our members.

One of the biggest challenges I faced was what to do about the conference when COVID-19 took over. It was my first conference on my own. With the help of the staff, Abby Mund, Stacey Jones, and Tyler and Laurie Wieghat, we were able to get an online conference planned. We pulled it off and even had Aaron Watson give us a private concert. Out of this came the online workshops we still offer today. We adapted, and those adaptations made our membership offerings even better by giving us the ability to provide teachers with professional development opportunities without having to come to an event.

One item our association created during my tenure was the Hall of Fame. This was actually the brainchild of Jim Harris during our December 2020 COVID-style meeting in Waco. There is no doubt this recognition piece of our association has been a pride and joy of mine and should be for the whole association. Recognizing the influence agricultural science teachers have on our local communities is so important. I have gotten to read so many stories about how ag teachers helped people in life and supported them. We have honored 289 retired teachers and raised over \$320,000 for our scholarship fund, which supports our members' children in their education. There is not a doubt in my mind that families are very proud of their honorees.

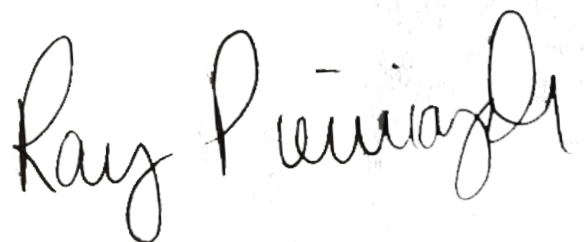
We are, by almost 1,000 members or so, the largest CTE organization in the state of Texas. I have had the pleasure of working with some of the other executive directors from other CTE organiza-

tions to help promote and grow CTE. I promise you, we have always let other states know we are larger than they are when we attend NAAE events. In fact, NAAE had 1,200 at their national conference, and we for sure let them know we have over 2,300 attending ours. We should be proud of this organization and how we connect agricultural education teachers across the state.

A group of retired ag teachers meets every August in New Braunfels, and they love to tell stories about teaching and about times with the other people in the room. Several other areas of Texas have these gatherings, like in Areas 6 and 8. I have found they truly know and continue to feel the impact they had on students. Many in attendance have not been in the classroom for years but are still aware of their impact. Our impact on students runs deep, and we may never know how much we do to support these students. Ernie Eckert had a former student tell him he was the only one in the school who cared about him. Always show students you care. They will never forget it.

As I close, I also need to thank my family for letting me stay in this job and give back to an association that has meant so much to me. Gail Pieniazek has been a hero to me for holding things together during the week. It will be nice to be back home and be with her during the week and not just on weekends.

I can truly say I was blessed to have had the opportunity to serve this organization and get to work with agricultural education on all levels. Never forget the value of your membership and that our staff is here to serve you. ■

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kay Pieniazek". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Kay" is written in a larger, more prominent script, followed by the last name "Pieniazek" in a similar but slightly smaller script. The signature is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page.



THE THINGS WE CAN'T AFFORD TO LOSE

BY: JENNIFER JACKSON
TEXAS FFA ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Walk into almost any ag classroom in Texas and you'll see things our predecessors could have only imagined.

Students design projects using CAD. They use automated systems to water plants in the greenhouse. They earn IBCs before graduation. They compete at a level that continues to raise the standards and increase rigor year after year. Our programs have become more innovative, advanced, and more connected to the industry than ever before.

Ag education has never been more innovative.

.....
"AG EDUCATION HAS NEVER BEEN MORE INNOVATIVE."

Let's be clear; there is tremendous value in competition. Buckles, banners, and championships inspire a lot of greatness. They teach goal setting, perseverance, teamwork, sportsmanship, and pride. They provide students with opportunities they may never have imagined and create memories that last a lifetime. We should celebrate these accomplishments and continue striving for excellence. But if we aren't careful, the pursuit of the award can begin to oversha-

dow the purpose of the experiences.

So why do so many industry leaders, retired ag science teachers, and recent graduates continue to say the same thing "its not like it used to be."

I don't think anyone wants to go backwards, but I think we have to appreciate our roots that made our organization what it is today.

.....
"I THINK WE HAVE TO APPRECIATE OUR ROOTS THAT MADE OUR ORGANIZATION WHAT IT IS TODAY."

Agricultural education has always been different. While many classrooms teach students about something, our students actually do it. Build it, repair it, grow it, raise it, troubleshoot it, figure it out.

Since the passage of the Smith-Hughes act in 1917, agricultural education has been built around one simple basic idea: students learn best when classroom instruction is paired with real world experience. More than 100 years later, that philosophy still sets us apart.

As our programs have grown and evolved from the days of Ag 1, 2, 3 and 4...so have opportunities. Leadership conferences, CDE and LDEs, more livestock shows, more scholarships, IBCs, Service opportunities, travel, etc. Those opportunities have changed lives, and should continue to be part of what we do. But they have also made our calendars fuller than ever.

Sometimes, it feels like we're so busy preparing for the next contest or the next trip, or the next local event that we have fewer opportunities to slow down and teach the things the students will actually use for the rest of their lives. So busy that it's easier for us to take on the planning and the leading than giving our students the opportunity to experience these unique leadership opportunities we use to give them.

As any veteran teacher, they'll probably smile and tell you a story....about the student who finally learned to strike an arc after burning through half a box of rods. The freshman who spent an afternoon organizing bolts, washers, and drill bits before ever touching a welder. The chapter that replaced the floor in an elderly neighbor's barn or repaired fence that they didn't have the ability to any more. The student who learned how to back a trailer after twenty failed attempts, and now one who backs one every day for work. Those may not have been glamorous projects, nobody won a buckle because of them, there wasn't a banner hanging in the ag shop afterward. But those students walked away with skills that were way more valuable and lasted a lifetime.

Ask a livestock producer what they want young people to know and many won't start by talking about showmanship. They'll talk about husbandry. Can students recognize the early signs of illness and make necessary changes to course correct? Can they properly identify the right treatment and administer the medication? Can they evaluate body condition? Can they select the right breeding stock? Can they make management decisions or do they need to be told exactly what to do each day? Showing livestock is an educational experience, but understanding why we make management decisions is what prepares students for careers

in agriculture and gives them the confidence to appropriately manage students and their projects when they become FFA advisors themselves.

Twenty years from now, very few former members will remember the score they received in a contest. Many won't remember how many banners their chapter won, some won't even remember what placed they finished but they will remember the first project they built, the teacher who taught them how to use the equipment, the animal they helped save, the gate they repaired, the trailer tire they changed on the side of the road, and the confidence they gained through these and similar experience. That's the real reward of agricultural education.

As you begin this school year, ask yourself one simple question. What practical skills can every student leave my classroom with this year? Maybe it's changing a tire, wiring a switch, identifying sick livestock or plants, using a torch safely, whatever it is, making sure everything students leave knowing how to do something they couldn't do before. Because that's what makes agricultural education different.

.....

"AS YOU BEGIN THIS SCHOOL YEAR, ASK YOURSELF ONE SIMPLE QUESTION. WHAT PRACTICAL SKILLS CAN EVERY STUDENT LEAVE MY CLASSROOM WITH THIS YEAR?"

Banners will continue to hang in our shops. Buckles will continue to be proudly worn by our members and championships will always be celebrated. But the greatest measure of our success will always be the young people who leave our programs more capable, more confident, and better prepared for life than when they walked through the door. If we can continue pursuing excellence while never losing sight of our purpose, the future of agricultural education has never been brighter! ■



LOOK BEYOND THE LABELS

BY: JESSICA REEVES
AGRICULTURE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS
PAST PRESIDENT

The night before school starts, our minds race with excitement and anticipation for a brand-new year. The first day symbolizes a fresh start full of endless opportunities. Then you look at your roster and spot that name.

Suddenly, the excitement dwindles. The hope for a smooth, promising year begins to fade as you feel the familiar dread of the student who could derail your entire class, your week, or even your whole year.

Maybe "Little Johnny" was in your class last year, creating a chaotic environment that left you praying all summer he wouldn't return or would choose a different pathway. Or maybe you've never taught him before, but you heard the talk in the teacher's lounge or in the halls.

Or you know that, as a last resort, the counselor decided the ag program was the "one place" he might actually succeed. When you pull up his file, you see a wall of labels accumulated over the years: IEP, BIP, ELL, At-Risk, Dyslexia, and abbreviations you've never even heard of before.

Over my 25 years in Agricultural Education, I have been in

your shoes more times than I care to admit. Looking back, I realize how often I was wrong and how wrong I was to let teacher-lounge chatter dictate my attitude toward a child.

Did Little Johnny test my patience to no end? Absolutely. Were there days he disrupted the entire lesson or showed complete disrespect? Yes. Were there days that I wanted to just give up and even thought about a career move because of that ONE, or maybe even a handful of kids? 100%.

But when we take the time to look past the disruptive behavior and our own emotions that have gotten the best of us, we almost always find a soul worth fighting for.

Students don't act out in a vacuum. When you peel back the layers, you start to see why they show up the way they do:

They come guarded. Some kids live in toxic home environments where their earliest memories of adults involve shouting, neglect, or abuse. They don't trust adults, so they put up armor before you even get a chance to say hello.

They hide their insecurities. Many students have struggled academically their entire lives. Feeling "dumb" is painful, so acting out becomes a defense mechanism. Being labeled the "troublemaker" feels safer to them than being exposed for struggling academically.

They crave connection. Negative attention is still attention. For kids who go completely unnoticed at home, acting out in class is often the only way they know how to feel seen.

Their minds run like racehorses on a trail ride. Neurodivergent students, like those with ADHD, aren't trying to disrupt your flow intentionally. Their brains simply process the world at lightning speed, often blurting out thoughts before they can process the consequences. As a parent who raised children with ADHD, I can tell you my understanding of this changed drastically once I lived it at home.

They carry invisible trauma. Every student processes trauma differently, and all too often, our shop floors and classrooms become the place where that pain boils over.

What I Wish I Knew Sooner

Did I handle these situations perfectly early in my career? Not at all. As a young teacher, I got frustrated. I got angry. I begged counselors for schedule changes and threw up my hands in defeat before I ever truly got to know the student behind the paper trail.

I am sharing this because I wish I had responded with more grace back then. I am deeply grateful for the veteran mentors who led by example, demonstrating how to show love to the students who make it hardest, build daily connections, and never give up on a kid.

A simple reminder for your desk: Keep a QTIP (Quit Taking It Personally) on your desk.

Our students walk through our doors carrying heavy baggage. Not every outburst, roll of the eyes, or argumentative comment is directed at you. Our job is to remain the calm, safe harbor where they can unload that weight and still know they belong.

Remember Why You Started

None of us became Agricultural Science Teachers by chance. For most of us, FFA and Ag class were the exact places where we first found true belonging, acceptance, and success. It did not matter what challenges we faced with our own behavior or academics. We found an Ag teacher who took the time to look beyond our rough exterior and bad attitude, choosing to invest in us and love us anyway.

Our classrooms and shops provide opportunities that no traditional academic setting can replicate. Here, students can express themselves, move around, learn outside the box, and build confidence through hands-on work. For many of our kids, your shop floor or greenhouse is the one place where they can finally catch their breath, realize their worth, and find real hope for their future.

A New Year, A Fresh Purpose

As you set up your classroom, organize your shop, and prepare your lesson plans for this coming year, hold tightly to that purpose. You are not just teaching curriculum, coaching contest teams, or supervising livestock projects. You are offering safe harbors and second chances. You are stepping into the very same life-changing role that an Ag teacher once played for you.

When Little Johnny walks through your door, take a deep breath. Look past the labels, leave the rumors in the hallway, and choose to see the potential waiting underneath. You hold the key to rewriting a student's story this year. Go make a difference, and have an incredible school year. ■



PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF MENTORING AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

BY: MELVIN POUNCY
AGRICULTURE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

STOP! Take a minute to think about where you are in your professional journey.... How did you get here? Who are the two to three key influencers beyond your family that helped you get to whatever point you are in your professional journey?

.....
"AS A MENTOR TEACHER YOU CAN BE THE ONE TO ASSIST AN EARLY CAREER TEACHER IN SPRING BACK UP TO BE STRONG."

As for myself, I can easily name eight to ten, but to be true to the question, it would be Dwight Callis, Ben Alley and Dennis Ellebracht. John C. Maxwell has said, "One of the greatest values of mentors is the ability to see ahead what others cannot see and to help them navigate a course to their destination."

Mr. Callis was my extension agent growing up as a kid and he saw something in me that I never imagined, a college education and a professional career in teaching other students about Agriculture. He was a valued resource and a role model in how to develop parent relationships that led to increasing involvement.

He was also instrumental in my

first three or so years teaching in mentoring and guiding me with show projects. I was Ben's teaching partner for two years during my formative years. It was in those years that I learned how important it was to pull that quiet overlooked student into the program and see them grow and achieve their potential and not just focus on the highflyers.

He also taught me how to do as much as you can to involve as many students as possible in FFA activities. Mr. Ellebracht was a colleague during my growth years. He saw potential in my leadership abilities and encouraged me to run for a teacher officer position on the district level. His support and confidence provided a path to serve on State Committees and eventually serve as Area President.

Each of these men saw something I could not and navigated the course ahead as a lifelong mentor.

What is Your Footprint in the Grass of Ag Teaching

If one views the profession as a field or lawn of grass, there are so many varieties each with their own unique purpose and weakness. People are resilient just like grass, it can be pressed down when walked or driven on, but it bounces right back up. As a mentor teacher you can be the one to assist an early career teacher in spring to be strong. We easily recognize the ability of our students, "see what they can't."

But, what about our fellow colleagues, especially those early in their career. If one was very critical of the profession, they would ask themselves, does the profession properly mentor new teachers? How can each of us leave that gentle impression?

How can we better nurture the growth of the profession? Who have I mentored within the profession? In the moments of stress, mentors can provide a time of inspiration and a period of growth.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice captured an important element of mentoring when she said, "If you want to mentor somebody, you have to care."

The Trail of Knowledge and Wisdom

Our part in the FFA Opening Ceremonies states, "being older than the rest of you, I'm asked to advise you from time to time as the need arises." These words were meant for our students but additionally they are applicable to our role as a veteran teacher. It is our responsibility to provide guidance to others as we have already walked the trail younger teachers are just barely down. We must recognize that it is hard to ask or that many early career teachers don't want to ask for help. Conversely early career teachers should allow themselves some grace and ask for advice or help. E.M. Tiffany writes in the last paragraph "so that I can exert an influence in my home and community," mentors are that "influence," the profession is the "home" and early career teachers are the "community" that we serve.

How to Carry Out the Mission

Our part in the FFA Opening Ceremonies states, "being older than the rest of you, I'm asked to advise you from time to time as the need arises." These words were meant for our students but additionally they are applicable to our role as a veteran teacher. It is our responsibility to provide guidance to others as we have already walked the trail younger teachers are just barely down. We

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How to Carry Out the Mission

This year there are over 230 first year ag teachers across Texas, and half of them are alternatively certified. The Agriculture Teachers Association of Texas Mentor Program can only mentor about 50 of those first-year teachers. Thus, there is a massive gap in service that needs to be filled by current in the classroom ag teachers. To solve this problem, it will require experienced teachers to identify an early career teacher in their FFA District or Area and become their mentor.

This can be a simple task of just a regular phone call on your drive to or from work to have a conversation to build a trusted bond. Many times, mentees just need someone to vent with or to talk through a situation to validate their thoughts. To strengthen the mentor/mentee partnership, mentors can invite the mentee to watch team practice, make SAE visits, or even invite them to travel alongside to a contest or stock show.

These easy engagements can provide the strategic guidance needed to promote the viability of the profession. It is sometimes easy to forget that each of us was once in their shoes. The role of an ag teacher has greatly changed over the last 20 years. If one is very honest, it is more difficult to get started today than it was 20 years ago. The sustainability of the high quality standards expected of the ag teaching profession requires the active engagement of seasoned veterans to ensure every new teacher each year has someone watching over the team to ensure their success.■



BUILT FOR THE REAL WORLD

BY: JAY NEWTON
AGRICULTURE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS
PRESIDENT

As we have finished a great summer conference in Corpus Christi and returned home to begin school, I hope you feel refreshed and ready to start. No matter if you are a beginning teacher or a seasoned veteran, starting school seems to ignite a desire to inspire the next generation.

As a young teacher, I remember spending my summers preparing for the next year. I attended camps, workshops, and conventions, soaking in all I could to help make me a "great Ag Teacher." When I was not at one of those, I was at the shop working on something to prepare for the next year. Whether it was fixing equipment or designing a project for the coming year, that is where I could be found.

As I start year 36 of my career, my summers seem to be different. Yes, I still attend all the previously mentioned events, and I still find time to prepare for the year as much as possible. However, it is different. Why? Maybe it is because our cognitive functions have changed and we require more rest and recovery. Or could it be our sponge is full and needs to be squeezed to share our knowledge? It could be as Ingrid Bergman said, "Getting old is like climbing a mountain. You get a little out of breath, but the view is much better!"

To be honest, I am not sure. However, starting this year as the President of the ATAT, I do know I am so thankful God allowed me to become an Ag Teacher and to represent the 2,600 Ag Teachers who feel the same way.

As I write this article, "Real World Application at the Local Level: Where Are They Now?", I think of how the Vega FFA Chapter is a great example of this question.

In the Vega FFA Chapter, we have chosen a different route than most traditional Ag Programs. We are all Ag Mechanics. Students can still choose to have animal projects, however, our focus for the last 25 years has been Ag Mechanics.

Growing up, my family fabricated a lot of items. I began welding around the age of 10. As a member of the Vega FFA in high school, Ag Mechanics was not popular. Yes, we worked in the shop cutting and welding and building some small wood projects, however, the main push was animal projects.

In college, I was challenged to develop a philosophy of teaching ag. I believe my role is to enable students to learn a trade that, if needed one day, they would be able to use to feed their family.

Well, not all of your students are

going to be fabricators!

I have students who are doctors, lawyers, teachers, pharmacists, counselors, musicians, salesmen, moms, and dads. However, if they happen to lose their job, I have taught them a skill they can fall back on in order to put food on the table.

Today, every student who graduates from Vega High School and has come through the Vega Ag Program has earned an Industry Based Certificate in Welding, giving each of them the ability to go out and test for a welding job. Moreover, our chapter has become very involved in Ag Mechanics Project Shows, furthering the need for "Real World Applications."

I would like to tell you about my first Ag Mechanics Project Team. I had a group that decided to build an 18-foot trailer, a small hog trailer, a log splitter, and a bumper to attend the 2nd Annual San Antonio Ag Mechanics Show. The group of eight young men, who had never been to a project show, worked long hours fabricating their projects.

At the show, I gave them instructions to stand all day, shake every person's hand, and show their project like they were a used car salesman. I had been to the show the year before and watched the way some schools exhibited their projects. I determined right then that we had to be different.

At the beginning of the day, they were slow to start, but by noon I had a hard time getting them to stop to eat lunch. At the end of the show, we had won a very difficult trailer class. On the way home, they talked the whole nine hours about how much fun they had, what they were going to build next, and what they should do differently.

How could I have ever known the simple "Real World Application" would have become so evident?

Those young men were the start of something bigger than themselves, and they never realized how it would play an outcome in their lives. Today, most of those young men still live in the Vega community. They are all very successful in their

careers.

Tyler Leavitt, Campus Pastor at Trinity Fellowship Willow Creek, said, "Time management, communication skills in conversation and public speaking, and project management skills are something he attributes to his time in Ag Mechanics."

"Success isn't built overnight. It's built through lessons, mentors, and opportunities that shape us. For me, the Vega FFA Ag Mechanics program laid the foundation. I will always be proud to say that's where my journey began," said Landon Friemel.

Scott Brorman, farmer and school board president, said, "I learned it was very important to think outside the box. We are all learning, and sometimes the teachers are not there. In my farming operation I have to make decisions, and mentors or my dad are not always around, but the decision I make, I have to live with and accept what the real world throws at me. Another thing I learned, and have experienced watching my own children go through this program, is we have to learn how to communicate with complete strangers. Sometimes they don't agree, understand, or are not familiar with whatever it is, but you must have the ability to sell yourself, defend your position, and hold true to what we know. That is a valuable outcome in this world."

Today, real world applications happen daily in Vega. People call the Ag Shop all the time looking for a student to go to work for them. Many times, someone brings by a part to be repaired. They even stop by the shop to see projects the students are working on.

Because they know real world applications and skills are being taught here. The entire community of Vega is different. A vision was born that no one could have imagined would affect the local community as much as it did.

So, I encourage you to be visible at community events. Have your chapter reporter do monthly articles for the local newspaper to report on the current events in your chapter, and invite your community to see the real world application that your chapter is doing. ■



SERVING AND LEARNING... MAKE IT A HABIT

BY: AARON ALEJANDRO
TEXAS FFA FOUNDATION EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

"You can have everything in life you want, if you will just help enough other people get what they want." - Zig Ziglar

How do we do life? How do we do life so we are happy? How do we do leadership so we are fulfilled?

Serving others with genuine authenticity is a recipe for success and purpose. Serving others builds strong communities, fuels our own fulfillment, and shifts our attention away from selfishness and toward something bigger than ourselves.

Is there a challenge in your community that you could help solve? Is there a need in your local school district you could help meet?

As our friend Roger Rickard says, "Giving back becomes the greatest classroom."

How do you learn a new skill? More importantly, how do you develop that skill until it becomes a building block for your next opportunity or success?

Here's a tip for personal and professional development. It is called R2A2, a personal development and success formula

developed by Napoleon Hill and W. Clement Stone to help turn knowledge into action:

Recognize

Servant leaders are always on the lookout for a good idea, life skill, strategy, or concept that can provide a competitive edge. Listening with both our ears and our eyes gives us the awareness to recognize effective tools we can use.

Relate

Once leaders recognize an effective strategy, they have to relate to it—or identify with it. How does it fit their leadership style, their FFA chapter, or their community? While a concept may have been developed for a larger school or community, it can often be adapted and scaled to fit a smaller audience.

Assimilate

Once servant leaders have recognized a concept and related it to their own situation, the next step is to assimilate it—to take it in and make it part of themselves. The idea moves from something they simply know to something they understand and begin to own.

Apply

The final step is to apply what has been recognized, related, and assimilated. Application gives leaders the opportunity to test the concept in the real world with fellow FFA members, students, teachers, families, and community members.

R2A2 also works in life.

Personal and professional development can be enhanced by always being on the lookout for an R2A2 opportunity to grow, especially when looking for opportunities to become a more effective servant leader. It is an application not just for leadership in our local communities, but for life.

Being intentional about building life skills takes effort and repetition before those skills become daily tools and eventually habits.

Building New Life Skills

Creating a life application or skill involves a structured process of identifying a need, practicing intentionally, and consistently reflecting until knowledge becomes habit.

Effective servant leaders are lifelong learners. They are always looking for ways to improve themselves while encouraging, equipping, and empowering those around them.

Here are a few steps for building new life skills:

Identify and Select the Skill: Choose one specific skill that will improve your daily life, such as time management, communication, organization, or stress management.

Make It Applicable: Break the skill into its simplest components. Focus on the 20% of effort that can produce 80% of the results.

Set SMART Goals: Define what success looks like by setting goals that are spe-

cific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.

Make It Real: Practice the skill in the same way you will use it in real life. Repetition builds confidence and competence.

Assess and Ask for Feedback: Seek honest, constructive feedback from family, friends, mentors, teachers, or colleagues. Use their perspective to identify opportunities for improvement. Celebrate and Adjust: Pay attention to your progress. Adjust when necessary, and celebrate the wins, large or small.

Servant leaders are always on the lookout for a need or an opportunity to serve. They equip themselves with the skills necessary to serve others better. As they get enough “reps” identifying needs, developing skills, and serving others, something powerful happens:

They create a habit of service.

How important could that habit become to a career, a goal, a community, or even our happiness?

You may know me. I’m your constant companion. I’m your greatest helper. I’m your heaviest burden.

I’ll push you onward or drag you down to failure. I’m at your command. Half the tasks you do might as well be turned over to me because I’m able to do them quickly and do them the same way every time.

I’m easily managed. All you have to do is be firm with me, show me exactly how you want it done, and after a few lessons, I’ll do it automatically.

I’m the servant of all great people. Of course, I’m also the servant of those who have failed. I’ve helped make great individuals, and I too have made failures.

I work with the precision of a marvelous computer and with the intelligence of a

human being. You may run me for profit or run me for ruin. It makes no difference to me.

Be easy with me, and I will destroy you. Be firm with me, and I will put the world at your feet.

Who am I?

I'm a Habit!

Humans are creatures of habit. In fact, it has been said that we are among the most easily programmed creatures of all. Much of our day is administered out of habit. Our days become routine.

The question is: What kind of habits are we building?

Do we have positive habits or negative habits? Habits that embrace the status quo, or habits that develop a growth mindset? Do we have habits and traits we would be proud to pass on to our children

and families, bring into our workplaces, and demonstrate in our communities?

Texas agricultural science education and our FFA program are loaded with servant leaders. Students, teachers, sponsors, and stakeholders have made serving others a habit and, in doing so, have made service part of their leadership legacy.

That is the opportunity in front of each of us.

Recognize. Relate. Assimilate. Apply.

Learn the skill. Practice the skill. Build the habit. Then use that habit to serve someone else.

Because when serving others becomes a habit, leadership becomes more than something we do.

It becomes part of who we are. ■

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT 2026 CONFERENCE

AGRICULTURE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION OF TEXAS

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DEVELOPING FUTURE ALUMNI MEMBERS FROM THE CLASSROOM INTO THE COMMUNITY

BY: JAY TREES
TEXAS FFA ALUMNI ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT

When starting the school year, agriculture teachers across the state begin the introduction to their FFA unit in Principles of Agriculture by introducing the FFA Creed by E.M. Tiffany. This has always been one of my favorite traditions of the FFA through the character development that comes from overcoming the fear of public speaking and working toward the personal achievement of doing something difficult and different. Jim Harris, past Tilden FFA advisor, could probably still recite all five paragraphs from memory, as he did every year for his Principles classes.

"I believe in the future of agriculture" is the opening statement in the FFA Creed and the most remembered line when you talk to alumni members who had the opportunity to say this iconic piece of literature. What first-year members may not realize is that they are the future of agriculture, and the skills and opportunities that come from their time in agriculture classes have the potential to set them up for their future.

I hope to encourage both teachers and students to look at scholarship criteria to ensure they are directing and diving into their program with full transparency. As advisors, this allows us to work toward developing the future of agriculture with clear expectations and goals. As alumni and supporters, it can provide a clear picture of how we

can provide opportunities to FFA chapters and their members.

In a typical high school classroom, learning often relies on textbooks, lectures, and exams. However, like many other programs across the state, the Agricultural Mechanics program here at Judson High School in Converse, Texas, takes it one step further. Our program focuses on transforming the typical classroom setting into real-world applications that prepare our students for future success in life and their careers.

There are multiple avenues Judson ATMS takes to ensure students receive real-world experiences. This includes students working in a school-based laboratory, participating in industry tours, completing internships, earning Industry-Based Certifications, and building and presenting projects.

One specific example I would like to touch on is our relationship with Holt Caterpillar and Rick Elmore and the impact it has had on our students. By partnering with regional industry leaders such as Holt Cat, Judson High School bridges the gap between secondary education and technical careers. Program alumni frequently transition directly from the Judson shop floor into high-paying technician and fabrication roles across Bexar County. Instead of taking on massive student debt, graduates can

enter the workforce equipped with industry-recognized credentials, college credits, and hands-on experience that local employers need.

Beyond technical instruction, Judson FFA Ag Mechanics serves as an opportunity for personal growth and inclusivity. The skilled trades have historically lacked gender diversity, but Judson High School is helping rewrite that narrative. Female students increasingly take on leadership roles within the shop, building trailers, diagnosing diesel engines, and competing alongside their peers.

For many students, the program provides a sense of ownership. Designing a piece of equipment from scratch, troubleshooting a stubborn engine fault, or earning a high score in a state competitive event builds self-reliance and resilience. These transferable skills, including problem-solving, teamwork, and accountability, prepare Judson students for success regardless of whether they enter the workforce immediately or pursue university degrees in agricultural engineering.

Additionally, there are many opportunities within the local community, whether it be at a local floral shop or a larger company such as HEB. Some internships may be more competitive, but they are worth pursuing for students who truly want a career within the

industry after high school.

In the San Antonio area, local chapters have the opportunity to have students interview with companies such as Holt Cat for internships that have the possibility of turning into a career. Practicing interview skills and developing a resume helps build a portfolio for members going into the workforce as well as post-secondary education. The ability to incorporate what a practicum in agriculture can offer students in their fourth year is hard to match when it comes to real-world, hands-on experiences.

Connecting with FFA alumni in your local area can truly create internship opportunities or build relationships that could even lead to careers.

This is the foundation that the Texas FFA Alumni and Supporters is built on, giving members the chance to better themselves and the future of agriculture. I want to encourage you to reach out to your local businesses, whether large or small, and see if they would be interested in partnering with you on possible internships for your students and members. This can foster relationships that will continue to grow into the future.

After all, we are "The Future of Agriculture" for many years to come. ■



SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

PROVIDES:

- ✓ \$20,000 per year for undergraduates in their junior and senior years in college (\$40,000 total)
- ✓ Access to special events and educational programs regarding civic education and engagement

REQUIREMENTS:

- ✓ College or University student in Texas or Oklahoma
- ✓ US Citizens who are permanent residents of TX, OK, LA, MO, NE, NM, AR, CO, or KS
- ✓ Plans to engage in the democratic process as vocation or avocation
- ✓ Financial need is not a factor



YOUNG FARMERS OF TEXAS UPDATES



It's Been a Fast Summer!

The school year is getting going again. I see organizations like ours having their first meetings of the year. They are making plans for activities that will benefit students and rounding up volunteers to help with all of it. It will be a challenge until the end of the school year.

One of our highlights was attending the FFA Convention in Fort Worth this summer. The students had such a busy schedule at the convention and during their off hours, but they were all having fun and learning at the same time. It amazes me how these students carry themselves. The leadership, politeness, manners, and care that they exhibit is sublime. All parents and teachers of these students should be proud of their FFA child or students.

During the convention, we were proud to present our scholarships to Blake Daniels from Teague, Cole Mims from Fairfield, and Haylee Jones from Grapeland. Congratulations to all!

Our next adventure was attending the ATAT Conference in Corpus Christi. I didn't realize I knew so many people. I got to see old friends, visit with new friends, and talk to vendors a lot! We had a lot of genuine interest in the Young Farmer program. I hope a lot of those interested make contact with us and let us help or-

ganize your student parent base.

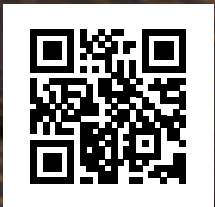
We want to invite all our existing and new members to our convention in January, located in Victoria, TX. Keep an eye on the website and Facebook page as updates are getting more frequent.

One last thing, congratulations to our newest chapter, Lee County Young Farmers! This county organization has Giddings, Dime Box, and Lexington FFA groups on board. They worked hard all summer to get this going and had their first meeting Tuesday, August 4, 2026.

YOUNG FARMERS OF TEXAS

Executive Secretary

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