



.....STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSES MOUTH

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I will have to admit as I sit down to write this column that I am having trouble keeping my eyes open. I guess that is typical for one of my age and especially considering that it is a weekend. However, I actually have a pretty good excuse this time. Most everyone that knows me is familiar with the fact that I taught agricultural education for many years before becoming an extension educator. That first career choice also meant that I was the FFA advisor. Now that seems to be a rather weird segue into this week's topic – and the reason I am so tired. But it is primarily the reason for my current physical state. I attended the 87th Nebraska State FFA Convention these past few days as a convention assistant.

While that is not all that remarkable, in that many people volunteer their time and efforts in helping to run the convention and the accompanying agricultural education contests (CDE), it was especially poignant for me to be on the other end of the convention. I was working behind the scenes, instead of coaching, monitoring and hauling kids to where they needed to be. I had the opportunity to work with the “cream of the crop” helping with the Legislative breakfast, the State Proficiency finalist interviews and the Star State Degree finalist competition. While being a long couple of days with a lot of pressure, all I can say is WOW! I come away every year so highly impressed with the young men and women across our state whom I get to know a little better through these processes. I knew the caliber of these young people as a teacher, since I had some of the best in the land in my classes, but this always comes back to remind me and to reaffirm my faith in the future with the talents and skills exhibited by these outstanding young men and women.

Most people remember the early years when FFA stood for “Future Farmers of America”. It was that familiar moniker when I was a young member in the organization in the 60's and it was that when my father was in FFA during the 30's. Some parents would say in those days that it actually stood for “Father Farms Alone.” It was always in good humor though because most every parent that said that, also said they would have it no other way - because of the value that their child received as a member of this organization. Of course the official name has since changed because of the influx of non-farm students into the ag ed programs across the nation to just be “FFA”. Not only has the name changed, so has the program and the demographics. There were no girls as members when I was in. That certainly has changed. You could see that walking through the halls during the FFA State Convention and it would not surprise me if they now outnumber boys. Many will say that we used to be pretty heavy in “Plows and Cows”. That too has changed with the influx of other sciences, horticulture and agribusiness. But the FFA Mission still stays the same – “FFA makes a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education.”

This year there were big changes with the Convention moving its headquarters to the new Pinnacle Bank Arena located at the Hay Market area. Wow what a nice venue that is! I walked around a bit like that wide-eyed freshman Wilcox FFA member attending his first convention at the East Campus Union auditorium in April of 1964. Oh what changes I have seen over the years! One thing that hasn't changed is the emphasis on leadership and leadership development. I think most people know that FFA excels in this venture. What many people don't know is not an extra-curricular organization!

The U.S. Congress passed Public Law 81-740 during the year after I was born – yes that long ago. This Congressional Act gave the FFA a Federal Charter and stipulated that it be recognized by Congress as an intra-curricular part of the agricultural educational program. Did you notice that? Intra-curricular, that means it is not extra-curricular as some seem to think it is. That is important to note and a big reason why I think that agriculture education/FFA should be in every school in this state. I don't think there is another program that gives you so much “bang for the buck!” We must remember that agriculture is the engine that runs this state. UNL research has determined that one out of three jobs in this state is directly involved in agriculture; and we must not forget that over 300 ag-related career choices are available in this state.

This year, 157 Nebraska schools offered agriculture programs and FFA programs with more than 7,100 members - state wide. I made special note that 8 new FFA Chapters were chartered this year and recognized at the convention, including two new chapters in our area – Silver Lake and Adams Central - and I was pumped to see them at this year's Convention! While the organization is much larger than when I was teaching, it could be getting even bigger. It amazes me that another 15 other schools are looking at the same possibility for the 2015-16 school year; including Kearney and Lincoln. That satisfies and impresses me that our constituents across this state see the value of agriculture and the accompanying “intra-curricular” organization called FFA. I just hope we can find enough teachers to fill that need.

This year's State FFA Convention theme was “Live A Legacy” and after witnessing a new record of more than 4500 young men and women all dressed in the Blue & Gold at Convention, with the enthusiasm, spirit and unbridled anticipation for their future that they bring, you cannot help but feel really good about our future. If all of my fellow taxpayers were to take in the State FFA Convention, or at the very least attend one of the sessions at the Pinnacle Bank Arena; witness their skills and talents, and see the enthusiasm that permeates the halls and meeting rooms, they would see what I see - and would make sure we keep these programs alive and available to our young people who strive for a viable agriculture and leadership oriented background. These young people are our “Legacy” and I believe they have a leg up on living it Now!

The preceding information comes from the research and personal observations of the writer which may or may not reflect the views of UNL or UNL Extension. For more further information on these or other topics contact D. A. Lienemann, UNL Extension Educator for Webster County in Red Cloud, (402) 746-3417 or email to: dlienemann2@unl.edu or go to the website at: <http://www.webster.unl.edu/home>