

Ag Educators: Growing Leaders

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Imagine this: driving herds consisting of hundreds of thousands of cattle across open pastures, thundering across the prairie on horseback with your best friends chasing outlaws, or tracking down stolen horses in the dead of night. In the old days, children grew up watching westerns on TV, playing cowboys and Indians, and learning basic mannerisms that would mold them into fine young people. Now, very few could tell you Tommy Lee Jones' famous final words to Robert Duvall in the film *Lonesome Dove*. They get in trouble for playing cowboys and Indians at school, and they are lacking admirable traits and principles to live their lives by that can be easily learned from cowboys. Fortunately, young men and women like me were not robbed entirely of this western lifestyle. While we may not run wild outside playing cowboys and Indians anymore, we are lucky enough to have a few exceptional people, agriculture teachers, encouraging us and shaping us into the best people we can possibly be. I've come to this conclusion: ag teachers are cowboys.

Cowboys "live every day with courage" ("Cowboy Ethics"). There is nothing more terrifying than your very first day with overdramatic, hypersensitive high school students; it's a scary thought, that's for sure, and I'm positive that it never gets easier. Being a teacher today requires courage. Courage to stand up for what you think is right. Courage to stand your ground. Ag teachers are cowboys because they possess that courage: the courage to take on the challenge of preparing and inspiring their students to become innovators in agriculture who will produce enough food for "9.7 billion people by 2050" ("World Population Projected to Reach 9.7 Billion by 2050").

Cowboys "take pride in their work" ("Cowboy Ethics"). Ag teachers are passionate about their role of educating not only their students but uninformed consumers, politicians, and people throughout their communities. Ag teachers are advocates. These men and women are some of the

most educated on a wide variety of interests in the industry; I know this for a fact. In order to teach a lesson you have to know the information inside out, forward and backward. Ag teachers aren't afraid to share that information with others. I have watched my ag teachers advocate for agriculture throughout the course of my high school career. They've taught me to become a responsible, educated advocate that stands up for my industry. Ag teachers are cowboys because they're passionate about their work and excited to share it with others.

Cowboys "do what has to be done" ("Cowboy Ethics"). Ag teachers definitely aren't in education for the money. How do I know that? Because they are not paid nearly enough for the ridiculous amount of overtime and energy they put into making each activity, class period, and year the best for each and every student. Terry Jenkins, a man whom I admire and an ag teacher in Malta Bend, Missouri, says, "Our paychecks aren't worth near enough, but that's alright because we don't have any time to spend them." Even though Terry is not my FFA advisor, he is always willing to help me with my record book, proficiency application, or even my Teach Ag fall speech. Ag teachers are cowboys because they have exemplary work ethics and "do what has to be done," ("Cowboy Ethics").

Cowboys are "tough, but fair" ("Cowboy Ethics"). Ag teachers believe in hands on experience, instead of just telling you how to do it. They have taught me some of the toughest lessons and have made me a better person because of it. They've taught me the meaning of respect through hard work. Honestly, I couldn't count on all of my fingers and toes the number of times I've had to sweep the shop or file papers because I wouldn't stop talking in class, or when they trusted me enough to organize, set up, and proctor a contest at our annual judging day all by myself. Ag teachers are cowboys because they show students the value of hard work and tough love, all while carefully guiding them toward their futures.

Cowboys “ride for the brand” (“Cowboy Ethics”). Even in the most compromising times, cowboys were quick to show compassion, loyalty and cowboy camaraderie. Ag teachers are your best friends. From September through the beginning of December and February through May, I see my ag teachers more than I see my parents. They know everything about me, down to how long it takes me to get ready in the morning and my favorite flavor of toothpaste. They see me at my worst and still think I’m the best. When I’m sitting in the back of the suburban in tears because a contest or application didn’t turn out the way I had hoped, my teachers are there to show compassion and sometimes tough love. Ag teachers are cowboys because they most definitely “ride for the brand” (“Cowboy Ethics”), and when it comes to their students, they’re the first to stand up.

The cowboy is an American icon. He represents the best of America -- the courage, optimism, and plain hard work that transformed our nation in the late 1800s. Cowboys are heroic because they stood for something remarkable, those simple, basic values that shine through in everything they do. Even though their lifestyles have changed dramatically over the past 150 years, cowboys still live with these guidelines in their hearts. Over the course of my four years in an agricultural education program, I’ve learned that the term “ag teacher” and “cowboy” are almost interchangeable. My ag teachers and the cowboys in my life have taught me invaluable lessons that I am beyond grateful to possess.

When I began this conversation with you today and said the word “cowboy,” I’m sure that many of you thought of John Wayne, a man almost everyone can picture in a cowboy hat. As I think of the Duke, I remember one of my favorite John Wayne scenes from the movie *Hondo*, where he chucks a young boy into the pond to teach him how to swim. Iconic moment, right? Well, too often students leaving high school feel just that way, thrown to sink or swim. I

am blessed to have had many agriculture teachers in my life, from my father to my actual FFA advisors. Even though they have made me feel overwhelmed at times, I've never felt like I'd been thrown to learn to swim on my own. My ag teachers have taught me that we're all in this together, and I have insight into many careers that will guide me through my time after high school. Like John Wayne, agricultural education is iconic and is admirable. And like he once said, "tomorrow hopes we have learned something from today." I have learned something remarkable and I've grown into an advocate, educator, and strong leader thanks to my experience in the Marshall FFA Chapter and the extraordinary cowboys I get to call my Ag teachers.

## Bibliography

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Sydnee Mason interviewed Terry Jenkins on October 24, 2016 for her Teach Ag Fall Speech.

Terry Jenkins  
Terry Jenkins

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# Marshall Fall Speaking Consent of Information Presented

The work presented in manuscript and speech is authentic work completed by the speaker with the use of information provided on the works cited page.

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Teacher Signature: *[Signature]*

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