

Ag Educators: Making a Positive Difference

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I vividly remember the day my mom told me I was going to be in FFA and didn't have any other choice. I looked at her like she was crazy. Why was my mom telling me that I needed to be in an organization for farmers? Although she grew up in a very rural town of Martinsburg, the closest thing to agriculture she ever experienced as a child was occasionally watering my grandma's flowers and feeding her dog, Buttons. My dad on the other hand, grew up on a row crop and cattle farm, always doing daily chores and was in a truck or tractor whenever he had the chance.

Shortly after I had this conversation with my mom, I was spending Mother's Day with my family at my Grandma's house. We spent the rainy afternoon watching the Cardinals beat the Cubs and putting together a 1000 piece St. Louis Cardinals puzzle we got for my Grandma. As we were all sitting around the table working on the puzzle, my cousin Taren, who was active in FFA and a sophomore at the time, was telling me that I was going to be on the Nursery/Landscape CDE team with her the following spring. I remember thinking to myself again, "What's the big deal with FFA?" Throughout that night, she continued to tell me about all the experiences she has had and how much fun it was. Little did I know, this was the first piece of my puzzle that I would be putting together within the agriculture.

The agriculture industry is a very diverse, complex, and sometimes difficult industry - just like a puzzle. There are many occupations and roles, or pieces, that are played everyday to keep the industry headed in a positive direction. One of the most important pieces to our diverse puzzle is an agricultural education teacher. Our ag teachers are the base and beginning foundation to some of our agriculture knowledge. For myself, this was the case.

Today, I live right down the street from where my mom grew up, so I guess I really shouldn't be judging her. As a kid, I would occasionally ride in the combine with my dad and visit my grandparents on the farm, but I had about the same experiences within the industry as she did. That was until my freshman year, when I decided FFA wasn't just about farming. With the help of my agriculture teacher, and much trial and error, I was able to find an element within the industry that fit me, along with leadership and life skills that I will use for the rest of my life. I know it is the same for the rest of the students enrolled in agricultural education courses around the country.

Today in the United States as well as three U.S. Territories, there are over 800,000 students enrolled in an agriculture education class that ranging anywhere from ag mechanics to horticulture (What is Agricultural Education?, 2019). For those 800,000 students, there is just over 11,000 agriculture educators (National Teach Ag, 2019). In Missouri there are 27,395 students and 489 agriculture teachers (Ag Ed in Missouri, 2017).

For the 2019-2020 school year, one new program was started and ten additional teacher positions were added while one program was closed and three positions were lost. Additionally, 38 teachers retired or left the profession. In total there were 54 changes in agricultural education in Missouri (Davis, 2019). From the six universities in Missouri training agricultural educators, there were 42 student teachers, with not 100% of those entering the ag ed profession (Missouri Teach Ag). As you can tell by some simple math, there simply are not enough people entering the profession to make up for those retiring or leaving. According to Marie Davis, the Northeast District Supervisor, there are "potentially 6 non-agricultural education certified teachers" in the state this year (2019). A shortage of ag teachers will leave students without general knowledge

about the industry and can lead to many misconceptions. This shortage is the hole in our puzzle that we are struggling to find the piece to everyday.

Many agriculture teachers have cited their high school ag teacher as one of the main reasons they pursued a career in education. While the FFA experiences were important, more teachers reflected on the classroom teaching and relationships built as a main criteria leading them to their teaching positions. Mr. Burgin from the Marshall FFA Chapter said that his ag teacher hooked him in the classroom, having an activity in every class. “You are only as good as your classroom, because that is where it all starts,” (Burgin, 2019).

I know with my ag teacher, there are lots of life talks. Not just about what’s happening here and now, but also about my future, along with the many mental breakdowns in between. Whether it’s to or from a contest, a day after school, or the late nights after FFA meetings, my ag teachers are always there with an open ear, ready to solve a problem. I can’t help but think about all the professionals in the industry who have had these same experiences with their ag teachers and how they influenced them into their careers.

My agricultural education classes have helped me prepare for the future. With the help of my ag teacher, I know how to correctly shake someone's hand, fill out a job application and resume, as well as the simple things like picking someone up after a bad day, or volunteering on my own time. However, there are times when my ag teachers make me get out of my comfort zone.

I remember the day freshman year when we had to stand up in front of our entire class and present the beginning of our SAE. Might I remind you that my class only consisted of about 10 people, but I was terrified. I knew my SAE was not going to be like everyone else's. I don't

have a job and I definitely don't own any livestock living in town. People were going to make fun of me when I told them my SAE was going to be Agricultural Education. Long story short, no one really made fun of me, but it opened a new door. Many of the great opportunities I've been able to experience within FFA have been brought to my attention by my ag teacher.

Through these opportunities, I have made friends and met that I can relate to and help me pursue a career in the future. For example, I had the opportunity to attend Missouri Agribusiness Academy this summer. I had no intention of filling out this application, but once again, my ag teacher pushed me out of my comfort zone and did not let me have the option to not complete it. Because I filled it out and was selected to attend, I got to see all sides of the industry from ag mechanics to food science. This experience is a piece of my puzzle in agricultural education, and will help me pursue a future in our industry.

In our very complex and diverse puzzle of agriculture, ag teachers play a vital role in our future. They work countless hours every year, impact hundreds of students throughout their career, and are making a positive difference in the lives of their students. Without the puzzle piece of agricultural educators, we would never be able to finish the puzzle of agriculture. Something I hear a lot but would never like to admit, is "Listen to your mom! She will always be right!", but I also hear "Listen to Mrs. French! She's always right!" So I guess in this case, yes, Mom and yes, Mrs. French you were right. Thank you for pushing me that extra step and making me feel uncomfortable at times. Because my ag teachers have taken that extra step and made a positive difference in my life, I hope I can leave the same impact on students in the future.

References

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I certify this is the original work of Emily Hoyt. She has completed all research and preparation of this speech. All facts and figures are referenced in the final works cited page. I certify Emily Hoyt conducted personal interviews via email with the following individuals in Agricultural Education:

Tyler Burgin, Agriculture Teacher, Marshall Public Schools/Saline County Career Center

Marie Davis, Former Agriculture Teacher & Current DESE Ag Ed State Supervisor

Katie Robnett, Agriculture Teacher, North Callaway High School

Dr. John Tummons, Director of Undergraduate Studies & Assistant Teaching Professor
in Agricultural Education & Leadership, University of Missouri

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