

Ag Instructors: Not Your Average Fairy Godmother

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Once upon a time, it was the eleventh hour... or rather, fourth block... and freshman Ava sat alone and defeated in the hallway. How would she ever attain that corduroy jacket of national blue and corn gold without an approved supervised agricultural experience? Her friends made it sound so easy with summer plans of mowing, hauling hay, and other jobs on family farms; however, Ava could not drive and she did not live on a traditional farm. Her parents were not going to buy her a cow- and you can forget about a pig! Just as her first teardrop hit the bricks of the North Shelby hallway, someone called out her name. It was not her fairy godmother; it was actually Mrs. Jenny Bradley, the adult agriculture instructor. At that moment, Mrs. Bradley uttered the magic words that would help Ava get her “happily ever after.” No, it was not, “Bippity, boppity boo.” It was, “Flowers... you’re going to raise chrysanthemums!” For the sake of integrity, and for those of you who know the truth, this story is not really about me; although, I have always wanted my own fairytale. It is actually about my brother, Gus. And, although Mrs. Bradley was not really his fairy godmother, I have been privileged to know enough agriculture instructors to recognize they are, indeed, capable of fairy godmother roles, especially when it comes to helping their students succeed in their SAEs.

As I mentioned before, some of the more traditional options for SAEs were not available to my brother, yet he really wanted to be in FFA. You have to imagine that kids all over the nation have felt like this, especially as FFA has become more inclusive of those from different communities and backgrounds. In the past, there were other problems, too. Ag instructors were strapped for time to supervise. Fairy godmothers do not just grow on trees, you know, and neither do ag teachers. Additionally, fewer students were coming from agricultural backgrounds and had limited resources. There also seemed to be a general misunderstanding about program

availability and evidence of student achievement. Based on these concerns, the National Council for Agricultural Education met in 2011 to spearhead big changes for the SAE (SAE, 2019). Ag educators and other stakeholders worked over the course of four years to develop SAE for All, a combination of Foundation and Immersion SAE, that would help secure success for all students in agricultural education (FFA Works Toward SAE for All, 2019).

My big brother did not slip into the idea like a pair of perfect glass slippers; he fought it a bit because he did not want to sell flowers. However, Mrs. Bradley recognized a perfect fit when she saw one, which is just one of the ways ag instructors help support their students. As part of the first components of the classroom SAE, ag instructors help students select a successful SAE by researching career opportunities within the agriculture, food, and natural resources industry (SAE for All Teacher's Guide, 2021). By completing interest inventories and helping students identify career goals, not only are they helping students find their passion, but they are tapping into and developing employable skills for college and career readiness. Gus may have not wanted to sell flowers, but he had a natural ability for sales which resulted in a highly successful SAE and the development of skills that he is now pursuing in college.

While ag instructors will not wave their gavel and make perfect pumpkins appear, they will assist their students in finding resources needed throughout their experiences. Part of the reason my brother could not get excited about his project was because he did not have the first clue about growing mums; I am pretty sure he had to Google what they even looked like. Enter: Fairy Godmother #2, Mr. Harold Eckler (and I bet you have never pictured this one with wings and a wand!). However, he helped by hooking Gus up with local chrysanthemum growers that assisted him with all his questions, from buying pots and plugs to pinching and fertilizing. Ag instructors help their students obtain the training, job shadowing, certifications, and sometimes,

even money that they need (Eckler, 2021). I was thrilled to take over my brother's business, Mums the Word, when he graduated, but I was looking for ways to expand and improve. Mr. Eckler encouraged me to apply for the North Shelby Ag Leaders SAE Grant. I was awarded \$500, which allowed me to purchase a fertilizer infuser, resulting in more consistent and abundant growth with more profit.

Thank goodness my fairy godmother #3 plans her supervised SAE visits ahead of time instead of appearing in mid-air, which would be creepy. However, Mrs. Heather Christine makes sure to visit with and tour all of her students' SAEs to ensure success. During these visits, she makes sure they are on track to meet their goals and stays in close communication with parents and other job supervisors (Christine, 2021). Throughout the years, my advisors have watched our business evolve from hand watering 100 mums on a discarded pool tarp in the yard to a fertilizer-infused, drip irrigation system supporting over 600 plants on a repurposed hog floor. Ag teachers not only watch over the development of their students' SAEs, but they also look out for the students, themselves, by being knowledgeable about and educating about workplace safety. Mrs. Amanda Haeberlin, agriculture teacher at Palmyra High School, starts in the classroom by covering topics like shop safety and proper equipment, chemical, and even animal handling. While on a visit, she is always on the lookout for hazardous practices and makes sure to ask students if safety precautions are being taken to ensure that her students have a successful and safe SAE (Haeberlin, 2021).

Even Fairy Godmother cannot keep up the spell forever, and just like the stroke of midnight, the senior year comes to pass for us all. By providing guidance in selection, acquisition of resources, and supervision and safeguard, agriculture instructors play a quintessential role in the success of students' SAEs, making the path to college and career readiness more achievable

than any fairytale. And it is ag instructors that are setting the stage to make it possible for students to achieve their real-life happily ever after, which is definitely what I am shooting for. So you will most likely find me in the mum lot, keeping up my records in my AET, or growing my business through social media because this Cinderella does not have to sit around and wait for Prince Charming.

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