

“Ag Educators: Building A Better Tomorrow”

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Going into my senior year of high school, I had the daunting task of cleaning my room. At first, I thought it would be easy, but looking around I saw the immense amount of Legos I had collected over the years, everything from pirates to ninjas, farm animals to royalty. As I sorted each set, a flood of memories came rushing back, the countless hours that I spent with my sisters building and creating the futures of the characters. Each character had their own story to tell, and none of them were alike, just like in the real world.

The first Lego set was a farmer on a little blue tractor. My farming set reminded me of a local first-generation farmer and advocate, Gavin Spoor. Gavin has always had a passion for agriculture, begging his neighbors to let him tag along during planting and harvest. As he got involved in his ag class and FFA, his passion continued to grow. While talking to Gavin, he kept mentioning how his agricultural instructor, Stacy French, helped keep his passion for agriculture alive. “My ag educator pushed me to work harder during contest season and go the extra mile.” This lesson of “working harder” stuck with him as he followed his passion for farming. Gavin Spoor is now the owner and operator of Spoor Farm’s Popcorn. Starting with only 6 acres in 2017, Gavin has grown his farm to 2,200 acres of popcorn, soybeans, wheat, and yellow corn. His motto of “dreams only work if you do,” is still impacting him as he continues to build his company reaching all 50 states (G. Spoor, Personal Communication, October 19, 2023).

The next Lego set I came across was a castle. This enormous gray building was the setting of many epic battles, resulting in losing the king. While I was cleaning, I finally found it. This king is a symbol of leadership and courage. Nicki Poindexter, a 2002-2003 Area IV Officer from my chapter, displayed both. Nicki was unsure about

joining FFA, but as time went on, she developed a passion for leadership. With courage, she ran for area office unsure of the outcome. One of her favorite memories with her teacher, Mr. Don Hanson, was waiting for the results to be announced at Centralia High School. The time and work dedicated to preparations paid off when her name was read as an Area Officer. Her time with Mr. Hanson showed her how impactful educators are to their students. Nicki now teaches middle school science at a small rural private school. It may not be an ag teacher, but she continues to ignite passion in students, by using hands-on activities for biology labs that she used to do in ag classes. Just as Mr. Hanson supported her during her career in FFA, Nicki continues to build the future through her own classroom (N. Poindexter, Personal Communication, October 22, 2023).

With each Lego set comes some animals, and in my room I only had horses. These plastic figures were always running around in pastures, pulling carts, or carrying a rider. These horses led me to reflect on a family that not only raised horses but built their farm into something completely new. Mike Duenke is a third-generation farmer who works to create a brighter future in agriculture for future generations. During an interview, Mr. Duenke continually mentioned his father, Harold Duenke, the first “ag teacher” for Mike. As they worked together, Mike knew that his dream was to take over the family farm. When he entered high school, there was no question that he would be involved in an ag class and FFA. Vee Voris was Mike’s high school ag teacher. Mr. Voris used hands-on activities that taught Mike various skills ranging from taking soil samples to welding fences. Now, Mike and his son Travis farm over 1800 acres of field crops, own 700 head of Red Angus cattle, and raise 40 Halflinger horses. Harold and Mr. Voris had such an impact on Mike, that he grew his family farm from corn and soybeans to one

of the largest cattle producers in Audrain County (M. Duenke, Personal Communication, October 31, 2023).

Finally, one of my favorite sets that I refuse to get rid of, are my Harry Potter figures. Hedwig, the snow owl and messenger was taken off of the shelf, but before I put her away I realized what she represented. “The owl is a time-honored emblem of knowledge and wisdom,” (Official FFA Manual). This is spoken by many ag teachers around Missouri. Duane Melton, an ag teacher from Republic, Missouri has always tried to build a better tomorrow. Relying on the three-circle model, Mr. Melton balances his curriculum to give his students every chance to find their own passions. He is given the opportunity to travel and gain more information to bring back to his classroom in every possible scenario. “Not all ag careers require the same amount of attention and skill.” Mr. Melton expresses how being an ag teacher can be difficult at times. Job shadowing at different schools and seeing what the community expects is the best way to create a program that thrives. Each corner of our state requires a different set of skills. Following the three-circle model and creating a diverse curriculum can prepare students for life after high school (D. Melton, Personal Communication, October 16, 2023).

Agricultural educators are the foundation of agricultural education programs across the state. According to the Five Year Strategic Plan for Missouri Agricultural Education, there are four key priorities: Comprehensive Reach of Ag Ed Programs, Quality Curriculum and Resources, AFNR Literacy, and Quality Instructors and Instruction (Strategic Plan). Wise owls such as Mr. Melton, Mrs. French, Mr. Hanson, Mr. Voris, and more have worked throughout their careers to build quality programs and

individuals. As we move forward, the 556 agricultural educators will work to build a better tomorrow for the 29,367 students enrolled in ag ed programs (FFA Fact Sheet).

As I finished boxing all my Lego sets, I came across the last pieces, the blank platforms. Just as I created the characters' futures from nothing, agriculture teachers create our futures from facts and personal experiences. Whether you're a farmer, a king, or a horse, the owl is always there to guide you. The owl symbolizes not only Mr. Melton, but ag teachers and advisors from the past, present, and future. Ag teachers everywhere are using the basic aspects of agriculture to shape their student's minds and experiences, creating their futures. Ag teachers are given the building blocks of agriculture. They strive daily to build a better tomorrow for their students who are the leaders of the next generation.

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Personal interviews were conducted via email and are parenthetical references within the body of the speech, not listed on the Work Cited Page, per APA 7.

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