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**The 2001-2002 National Officer Journals****Robin Niehaus****2001-2002 National FFA Secretary**E-mail: rniehaus@ffa.org**February 17, 2002**

"I was nervous about being able to communicate, but when I saw your eyes, I could understand that our hearts are the same." - Tokyo Engei FFA member

We left for Japan from Salt Lake City on Saturday, February 2. Patriotic feelings were flying high in the airport as we were in the middle of Olympic excitement just starting. We arrived in Japan and immediately noticed that we were the tallest people around and the only ones with light hair, but despite our differences, we also felt the first of many similarities we would find throughout our adventure. The Japanese culture combines tradition and modern conveniences in a beautiful way. Kindness, thoughtfulness, and



selflessness are modeled by most of the people, and the warm welcome we felt made our entire tour exciting.

We met our humble and excellent tour guide and interpreter, Hiro. His incredible knowledge and talent helped us overcome the language barrier and taught us valuable insight to Japan's rich history and culture. Our first stop on Monday, February 4, was a melon farm. We learned about the meticulous care of melons grown in greenhouses. The farmer carefully watches the fruit and only allows

one melon to fully mature on a plant so all the nutrients will be concentrated there. Quality results; I tasted the best melon I had ever tasted in my life! Such quality is important to the farmer because his product is totally traceable from the farm to the supermarket. Fruit is much more of a treat in Japan, and customers can expect to pay much more than we do in the states. Attention to detail and traceability was also apparent at our next stop, a hydroponics tomato farm. The tomatoes were much bigger in size and a lighter color as compared to tomatoes in America, and the farmers were proud of their product.

Our next stop was the Narita Seiryō High School. A huge banner welcomed us, and we wore slippers instead of our outside shoes throughout the school. We had a reception with

the whole school, where they also demonstrated traditional martial arts, and Amber, Barrett, Abbie and Elio even tried it out! We dove right in to traditional Japanese food, games and song with the energetic students, and they proceeded to give us a tour of their beautiful school. Japanese gardens require meticulous care, and many surround the school. They sang their school song to us, which is engraved on a large stone, so we sang "America the Beautiful" in return. We also created Japanese crafts with them, and we learned to fold origami cranes!

We left our new friends to visit two more farms, one with flowers, and another with carp and fresh strawberries. Fish of many colors swam in the pools and ponds, and we could even hand-feed the largest one, which was several feet long! Carp are kept by some Japanese in their gardens to represent power. And the strawberries they raised were some of the best I have ever tasted! We quickly learned that Japanese agriculture is efficient, and the products are of the highest quality. Traceability is also very interesting to me because I saw similar techniques during my agriculture study trip to Ireland this past summer.

Excellent Japanese service and technology greeted us at our hotel that night in Tokyo. They took care of every detail, including signs in English, carrying bags to our rooms, starting the hot water for Japanese tea, and an amazing network of radio stations. Our first morning in Tokyo was spent at a Shinto shrine in a beautiful, peaceful park, and then we went to an observatory to view the whole city. Our final sightseeing stop was to a Buddhist temple, and the streets leading to it were lined with shops full of Japanese arts and symbols. That afternoon we saw more of the technology we hear about in Japan at the Toyota Mega-Web, which included a showroom of their newest vehicles and other amusement park-style activities. We learned about their environment-friendly cars and their ideas for the future. We also had fun in virtual reality test drives! But that night, real American food was more than virtual reality as we enjoyed Hard Rock Café. It was a great break to have some American beef!

Fish, fish, and more fish! That's what we saw bright & early the next day at the Tsukiji Fish Market. Aisles were lined with fresh fish of all kinds, octopus, eel, and squid. We watched an auction of frozen tuna, which reminded me of trade at the Chicago Board of Trade! What also surprised me was the size of a tuna fish. What comes to us in a small can starts out as a fish 3-5 feet long! We walked through several of the aisles to get to the fruit & vegetable auction, and on our way, one of the vendors offered us a Japanese delicacy, and our very own Amber Haugland accepted the challenge of eating an eel liver! We were all shocked!

After our exciting morning, we visited Mitsui & Co., Ltd, who has sponsored the national officer trip to Japan for almost 25 years. We learned about their business, which trades commodities such as corn, soybeans, wheat, barley, tea, coffee, and many more. We met many of the younger employees at a reception, where several of us had our first taste of sushi! They even treated us to a night on the town at a karaoke place. Karaoke is much different there than in the states. Our group of twelve had one karaoke room to ourselves for two hours, so we could sing and dance the night away as much as we wanted!

The American flag welcomed us to the United States Embassy the next morning, where we met with agriculture correspondent Suzanne Hale and many other experts to learn about the valuable relationship between United States and Japanese agriculture. Japan is the #1 importer of U.S. agriculture products, and our #1 customer in corn, beef, and pork. Wheat and soybeans are also important products there, and Japan comes in as the second largest importer of U.S. products. Japan's main agriculture products are rice, livestock, and vegetables, and like the United States, non-farm income supplements farm income. In fact, non-farm income brings in \$7 for every \$1 the farm brings in. Japan consumers are sensitive to GMO's, especially after the StarLink scare. The embassy now calls these commodities "products of biotechnology." The scare of BSE, commonly called mad cow disease, has resulted in a higher demand for traceability in agricultural products. We were grateful for the understanding for the agriculture and economy of Japan when we left that visit.

Our afternoon was spent at the Tokyo Engei High School, where we met FFJ members from many area schools and the National FFJ President. As we approached the school, we noticed their considerate effort of flying the American flag next to the Japanese flag on top of their school. They had compiled a booklet to help us understand the demographics and psychographics of their members, and we had a great time hanging out with them! FFJ has 120,000 members in 400 chapters nationwide, and the organization was founded in 1950. We made homemade soap and strawberry shortcake rolls, and then we helped with Japanese traditions such as rice pounding. The school is famous for their rose gardens, bonsai trees, and Japanese gardens, and we were excited to see all of them!

Even though we experienced a language barrier, our new friends said it best when they expressed the similar cares and desires shown through our actions and hearts. It really was hard to say goodbye to such excited students. Each one was open to new experiences, and their positive attitudes were refreshing.

We left on Friday for Chita Futo, a company belonging to Mitsui that processes grains from all over the world. They even import corn, soybeans, wheat and barley from the United States! They were also kind enough to take us out to dinner to experience many delicious Japanese dishes, including yakisoba, tempura, sushi, and fruit. We made our way to the Anjo Norin Agricultural High School. We toured the school, which raises cattle, horses, tomatoes, and many other products for personal projects. A dinner reception welcomed us and allowed us to see traditional Japanese dancing and meet our host families, with whom we would spend the weekend.

My host family was amazing! My parents, Akio and Myoto Maki, have two daughters, 16-year-old Masayo and 13-year-old Siho. The Maki family welcomed me into their home, which was just constructed one year ago. They provided fluffy slippers and led me to "Robin's Room," a traditional tatami room with a comfy futon in the corner. The Japanese do not heat their homes, with the exception of maybe one room at a time, so my bedroom was very cold, but the many blankets on my futon kept me quite warm and cozy. I joined the family in the heated kitchen for green tea and conversation. The parents had "studied English to accommodate me," and Japanese students start studying English when they are 12 years old, so even though their English was quite broken, we were able to talk without considerable effort. Another kind gesture was the refrigerator, full of Japanese phrases that had been translated into English. The phrases included, "Help yourself to a drink," "You may go to bed anytime," and "Do you need to do any laundry?" Their thoughtfulness remained true throughout the rest of the weekend.

I awoke in the morning to a huge breakfast, and then we drove to the garden center. Akio and Myoto (my host parents) work as landscape gardeners, so it was exciting to see examples of their work and the stones and plants they use to make it. I saw some of the most vibrant colors, and my favorite was a blue and white saenidia. After we left, we went shopping at the grocery store. Like most Japanese households, my family shops daily for food. In fact, they go shopping before every meal to make sure all of their food is fresh. I enjoyed being a part of the daily event. Three of Masayo and Siho's friends joined us for lunch and an afternoon of games. We played Uno, Othello, and other card games. It was exciting to get through some of the language barriers with smiles and laughter, and I even learned to say the colors in Japanese!

We left quickly for an evening at the theatre to see a performance of taiko, traditional Japanese drums. I was in awe from the first second they started playing. The night was full of synchronized percussion, precise and challenging. They were all dressed in traditional Japanese clothing, and they even performed a traditional Lion Dance. I also had the opportunity to be a part of the performance. When they asked for volunteers to go on stage, I was chosen! It was exciting to be a part of the culture along with many energetic Japanese children!

We left quite early the next morning for our big day with the whole group. We visited the Nagoya Castle with our entire team and their host families. My host family always made sure I saw the neatest parts of the castle and shared "myths" they had heard as children. We were also able to fill in conversation holes we had with the help of the English teacher. I said some sad goodbyes to my host family, who were all very kind, selfless, hard working, and generous.

We spent Monday in Hiroshima, first at Miyajima, which is a floating Shinto shrine. We saw part of a ceremony there and enjoyed the beautiful scenery and Japanese crafts. In the afternoon, we visited the peace park at Hiroshima to commemorate the atomic bomb that devastated the city at the end of World War II. One building partly left in tact remains close to the museum, and the museum brought the war to life. It helped me understand the background and effects of the bomb. I left speechless as I tried to imagine the pain that many people are still going through. I feel so blessed to live in a time when the Cold War is over and until recently, our fear of war is minimal. I also felt grateful that two countries who hated and feared each other 50 years ago can now greet each other on friendly terms and that our citizens are welcomed into both countries.

We spent Tuesday at two different Yanmar Plants, which sit on Lake Biwa, the largest lake in Japan. We enjoyed a beautiful view during lunch, and we learned about incredible technology to create Yanmar diesel engines in the morning and afternoon. Factory tours showed the newest technologies to put everything together with precision and efficiency, and we were impressed by robots that transport materials around the plant that are led

by lasers. It was also encouraging to hear them discuss efforts to become more environmentally friendly, and we saw equipment they use to harvest rice and farm on steep mountains. 60% of their engines are for export, and 35% of their production is automated. Our visit to the tractor manufacturers filled the afternoon with great information as we saw an assembly line that produced many different models at once! In addition to Yanmar tractors, the factory also produces 25-35 horsepower John Deere tractors for export.

Our final day in Kyoto was spent sightseeing and shopping. We visited the Nijo Castle, which was built 400 years ago. It served as a temporary home for emperors, and the neatest part for us was the floors. They squeaked mysteriously, and they were built that way to warn residents when someone was sneaking in for a possible assassination. After we left the beautiful palace grounds, we stopped by a kimono show, where young Japanese women modeled beautiful traditional kimonos. It was a great preview to our stop at the Handicraft center, where we bought traditional Japanese items to take home for friends and ourselves! We also



visited the Golden Pavilion, a beautiful Buddhist temple. It was coated in gold, and its majesty reflected upon the small pond in front of it. Our final stop of the day was the Kiyonizu Temple, another Buddhist temple with many symbols. One is a spring of water that is split into three, and each one grants either health, wealth, or love. We chose which was most appealing and drank of it. If you ever go, be sure to avoid trying all three, because then you will get none! We spent our last evening in Japan with a nice dinner and another team karaoke trip!



We left the next morning for some last-minute stops before we flew home. Our first was to Osaka, where our wonderful interpreter Hiro grew up. We visited his mom and sister-in-law in their home, and we watched in amazement as Hiro drew beautiful Chinese calligraphy. Our next destination was the Panasonic center, where we saw new technologies for the future! Cell phones with video capabilities, microwaves with electronic recipes on an LCD screen, and a washer and dryer in one amazed us all!

It was "Siyonara, Japan" and "Aloha, Hawaii" as we stepped off the plane to enjoy our second Valentine's Day (thanks to the international dateline) in Honolulu. We kicked off our shoes and spent the day at Waikiki beach. Of course, we had to buy sunglasses, Hawaiian shirts, and sunscreen before we left, but it was wonderful! The sunset takes on a brand new beauty over the Pacific Ocean and palm trees.

The next day we visited Pearl Harbor and the USS Arizona Memorial. After seeing Hiroshima, it was amazing to see what caused our country to enter the war. I am humbled as I think about the many men and women who have and continue to give their lives and fight for our freedom. December 7, 1941, was the first attack on American soil, and the sadness and suffering felt has been left unmatched until the unfortunate events of September 11. The Arizona memorial itself is slightly bow-shaped with the lowest point over the center of the sunken ship. The architect did this to represent that day of suffering, but more importantly, the rising ends represent the victories of America and the bright and prosperous future we have. We stood above a sunken ship that became a grave for many innocent men, yet an American flag flies in victory above it. I am proud to be an American, and I am thankful to stand on American soil every day.

Our afternoon was spent on the north shore, where the beaches have bigger waves and fewer tourists. We had a great time as a team jumping the waves and creating a sand castle and kingdom! Before we left beautiful Hawaii, we met many Hawaii FFA members for a reception. It was great to meet members from Mililani, Leihehua, and Kailua. Thanks to James for teaching me some "step" moves and Heather for teaching Amber, Abbie, and

me how to hula! Everyone was kind and so much fun! We even got some delicious Hawaiian pineapple to take home with us!

We finally reached home sweet home after a long flight home and a layover in Salt Lake City. Barrett, Elio, and I tried to see some of the Olympic Village, but we were there before it opened! But we can still say we were there, and we even got to see the beautiful Mormon Temple before we got home. The last two weeks truly opened my eyes to the importance of global agriculture and the value of learning from others.

Happy National FFA Week, everyone! We have many reasons to celebrate, so have fun!

February 3, 2002

"Attitudes are contagious. Is yours worth catching?"

Wow! Elio and I expected a cold week in Wisconsin, but we were so shocked when we walked off the plane to find a 50 degree difference from our previous stay in Washington, D.C.! The weather was the only cold part of our trip to Wisconsin, though, for we met kind, hospitable, and motivated people as we traveled through our Experience State.

After some weather delays, we finally made our way to central Wisconsin on Monday night, when we met the Executive Director, Mrs. Cheryl Zimmerman, and her family for dinner. It was also exciting to meet three of their state officers with whom we would spend the following day. We started bright & early Tuesday morning at Granton High School, and we were immediately welcomed with smiles and enthusiasm. Most of their chapter showed their pride with bright red Granton FFA Chapter t-shirts, and we were honored to receive one of our own! As we discovered opportunities in the FFA together, many leaders came out of the group. Sam, a sophomore, took the lead in her group, and the dedicated chapter officers were an example of dedication. Thank you, Granton FFA, and I hope you had a great time at your chapter lock-in this weekend!

We stopped briefly at the National Farm Medicine Center in Marshfield, and we learned about their efforts to assist farmers in their medical needs and promote farm safety with children. They do extensive research to help the agricultural community, and we appreciate their partnership with the FFA Partners for a Safer Community program.

Our next stop was Stratford High School, where Elio and I met the Leadership Class, a group of 30 amazing juniors and seniors. We learned that leadership is influence, and the class showed us how a positive attitude can make us all more effective leaders. We spent the rest of the afternoon with the chapter officers and the talented junior high class.



Tuesday was topped off with the Section 7 Leadership Workshop. We had a potluck dinner with the chapter officers at Spencer High School, and they were so awesome! I will never forget my wonderful escort Ben W., Kyle's dedication to the PALS program, or Amanda's strength in her convictions. The potluck dinner brought back some old memories as I created new ones, and all the home-cooked food was great,

especially the "scotcharoos" Ben B.

brought! Elio and I opened the event with "amoeba tag," and we then split into two workshops. We had a blast "Finding the Land of Oz" and working to become effective teams! Section 7 FFA is fortunate to have chapter officer teams taking the challenge to truly make a difference!

We woke up bright and early on Wednesday for a 5:00 AM live radio interview with Bob Meyer, a former Wisconsin State FFA Officer who is now a radio broadcaster. Our day continued at Tri-County Schools in Plainfield, Wisconsin. Elio kicked off the morning with a motivational speech, and then we got to know the junior high FFA members through our workshops. I was so impressed by the enthusiasm of many, especially AJ, Teegan, and Mike. We met with the school's administration, and we couldn't leave without posing for "milk mustache" pictures to help the FFA chapter with their milk campaign!

Our day continued in Madison for Ag Day at the Capitol. Wisconsin Farm Bureau leaders, commodity group leaders, and state senators and representatives discussed legislative issues on the floor that are pertinent to agriculture. It seems that nearly every state is dealing with budget cuts, and it was reassuring to hear overwhelming support for education. Agricultural education is the foundation of our organization, and it must continue to grow! After we learned about some of the issues, we walked over to the Capitol Building to meet with some state legislators and promote the FFA. Our night was concluded at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, where we attended the Collegiate FFA meeting. It was exciting to see some old friends and make new ones. Collegiate FFA is one area that is certainly growing, and those Badgers are stepping up to the challenge!

We made our way to the northern part of the state, where we had a full day in Menomonie and Barren. The folks in Menomonie were absolutely incredible. We walked into their high school to find a welcome sign, and we knew we were set up for success when the gym was already bustling with energy as the pep band played. Elio and I kicked off an all-school assembly with over 1,100 students! It was so fun to be a part of their celebration, and we enjoyed watching their talents, too. The FFA chapter did a great job with one of their relays. Kayla and her officer team led a pedal tractor and pig race, where 4 people raced through a course of cones on pedal tractors. But this had a twist because each racer also held a young pig in one arm! It was very creative, to say the least! After the assembly, we got to meet the FFA members in two workshops, and then we went to lunch at Pizza Hut. It was fun to get to know Onnalee, Jamie, Kevin, Chris, and the rest of the high school officers while we also met the junior high officers. I had the honor of sitting with Tim, Matt, and Paige, and their enthusiasm for the FFA (and life in general) amazed me!



We spent the afternoon at Menomonie Junior High. As we walked in, the walls were lined with agri-science projects the students had researched, posters about the emblem, and art drawings about agriculture. Their talent didn't stop there; Elio and I learned a lot from Sam, Toni, Cassie, Chelsea, Mark, Danny, Bailey, Katie, Jon, and so many others at that school. The future of our organization is bright, and that chapter proves it in their pride, but also in their hard work – whether it is in their beautiful scrapbook, hydroponics system, or small animal projects. Menomonie is blessed with two phenomenal agriculture teachers and tons of talented FFA members!

Our final stop for our Experience State was at Barren High School for the Section 1 Leadership Night. Elio kicked off the event with a keynote, and then we split into two different workshops. I learned that Jenny is a great artist, Nick's enthusiasm is for the FFA and for band, and Nikki has a heart ready to serve others. Every member there taught me something about leadership and our involvement in the FFA. After enjoying pizza for dinner, we had another workshop, and I closed the event with a motivational speech. Just as everyone started to leave, State President Courtney Peissig surprised us with our very own authentic foam cheeseheads! Even though I do live in Rams land, I was honored to be a part of the Packers frenzy! And to top off the night, we finally saw snow – a welcomed sight for me and for my new Wisconsin friends who love to snowmobile.

Throughout the entire week, we had the honor of working with eleven talented individuals, the Wisconsin FFA State Officer Team. Courtney, Erik, Melissa, Crystal, Kory, Shane, Jason, Becky, Troy, Matt, and Leslie: you are encouraging individual FFA members on their 'Destination: Excellence' every day, and your influence reaches farther than you can imagine. Thank you for sharing part of your year of service with us!

We spent Friday packing our bags and making final preparations for our trip to Japan. I look forward to hearing about Amber & Dane's experiences in Pennsylvania and Barrett & Abbie's travels in South Carolina. Japan, here we come!

What does your attitude say about you? I met many people in Wisconsin this week whose attitude gave me confidence in the future of agriculture. You have an incredible power to influence others with your attitude, so make it positive!

January 27, 2002

"Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice." – Proverbs 13:10

After a great weekend at home, I joined the rest of the team in our nation's capital. What a beautiful sight to see the Washington Monument and other symbols of our freedom as we arrived in D.C.! We spent a day working on our speeches and workshops for Experience State. That night we had a special dinner at Mt. Vernon, the former residence of our first president, George Washington. We ate dinner with our National FFA Advisor, Dr. Larry Case and his wife, and Executive Secretary C. Coleman Harris and his wife. We had a great time getting to know them better and discussing national convention, the future of our organization, and other issues.

On Thursday, we met Mrs. Tracy Mahoney, who is an expert on Japan. She helped us prepare for the people, culture, language, and food we will soon experience! And when we return, don't be surprised if you find us saying "Ohayoo gozimasu" instead of "good morning!" We spent most of the day at the Children's Museum in D.C., where they have a Japanese home, city street, and classroom set up. It was helpful to walk through a model of what we will live in Japan. We also sampled a variety of Japanese food, and we realized that each of us will find something we enjoy!

We spent the weekend in our first National FFA Board of Directors meeting. The dedication and commitment of the adult board members is second to none, and they do it because they believe in the future of agriculture and the FFA. Their selfless service is a model any of us can follow. It also reminded me that we truly are a student-led organization, and how important adult guidance can be. After thorough discussion, our national officer team votes on each motion, and then the adult board can choose to sustain our decision. It is a process that has worked to ensure a bright future for FFA and agricultural education for years! We also had a lot of fun with the board this weekend, especially as we traveled around Washington, D.C. to go out to dinner. Many of the board members have traveled with the national officers on previous Japan trips, so it was fun to hear their stories!

I am excited to spend this week in Wisconsin with Elio, where we will present speeches and workshops across the state, all while doing one of my favorite things – meeting FFA members!

Don't let your pride get in the way of a tremendous resource: the advice of supporters and people around you. You don't have to look far to find someone who can help you make positive decisions for your future.

January 20, 2002

"The beauty of friendship is that it cannot be made, described, or measured, for it is a precious gift of the heart."

I am truly blessed to have amazing friends, whether through the FFA, my home in Hillsboro, Illinois, or Iowa State University. I was reminded of this all week, hanging out with my team and making late calls to home and other friends just to catch up. I came home this weekend to find two of my best friends from college waiting with my parents at the airport to pick me up. I had a great time showing them around St. Louis, and then we hung out and played in the snow back at my house. We created a great mix of water skiing and sledding with our Kubota tractor and saucer sleds!

My fun weekend followed a phenomenal week of growth, learning, and great memories. We worked with our dedicated training team to take our presentation skills a couple of notches up. We shared our experiences in Missouri and talked about how we can make our workshops even more effective, and we worked specifically to give clear directions, ask deepening processing questions, and create new activities, openers, and closers.

Like always, our team had a lot of fun during the week! We spent an evening with Jason Givan, who works at the FFA Center, and his wife Amy. We had so much fun sharing college stories, FFA experiences, and laughing together. Jason and Amy are also great musicians, and we had fun singing around the piano together and listening as they shared with us.

On one of our free nights, we rented "Meet the Parents" and watched it on a big screen together in the National FFA Center. We just brought the movie theatre to us! As we

wrapped up the week, we celebrated at a Japanese steakhouse with our training team. Our chef cooked everything in front of us, and we were amazed when he made a volcano out of an onion and sent vegetables flying from the stove into our mouths. Then, we went to Marble Slab Creamery to enjoy one of my favorite foods – ice cream! We reflected on our week and more importantly, on the future. We have learned a lot, and we're now facing the time to truly apply everything in the months to come, whether it's at state conventions, experience state, board meetings, or business and industry visits.

Friendship is a gift of the heart, and we are all fortunate to have people who care about us. Don't focus on having the best friends, but being the best friend you can be, and you will be amazed by the blessings around you. We are excited to get to know you and develop many friendships across the country!

January 13, 2002

"As we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same."
- Nelson Mandela

We saw over 3,600 talented Missouri FFA members let their lights shine last week. Dane, Amber, Elio, Barrett, Abbie, and I conducted eight motivational conferences for first-year FFA members across the state. At each stop, we presented a skit to introduce ourselves and the FFA, taught six different workshops, and wrapped up the event with a motivational speech. We were thrilled to be back with members! The state staff treated us with amazing hospitality as they patiently made our connections across the state, and we left with many new friendships!

My workshop was entitled "Destination: Success," and many members took several steps with me as we checked our backs, found the gate, and took our seats on the journey. Members like Kasi and Trudi taught me the importance of being willing to learn. Jacob, Nick, Penny, Melanie, and other members from the Eldon FFA Chapter made me feel right at home because my chapter had visited them during a trip through Missouri two years ago.



Our skit, the "Gabbin' with Gail" show, made a successful mark, especially at Paris High School. The FFA really turned Bust-a-move Barrett, Scared Scout Robin, Catman Dane, Amber Auctionsen, Aurelio Chickarelli, and Gail (out characters) into the national officers you see today!

One of our conferences was in Rolla, which was very special for me because my sister, Karla, is a graduate student there. I was thrilled to share part of my year with her and show her exactly what we do when we're on the road. We also met tons of amazing members there! The St. Clair officers, Robby, Chris, and David, were tons of help in my workshop, too!

We had the privilege of flying throughout the state of Missouri in one of the state planes! If you ever get the chance to fly in a small plane, get ready for an amazing view! The plane flies at a low enough altitude that you can see the landscape through most of the trip, and the view of the landing strip is beautiful.

In Cape Girardeau, we were greeted with beautiful facilities at SEMO, and members from the Jackson FFA Chapter were excited to help us out. And in Springfield, we were greeted by several members from the Southwest district. We had a great time hanging out during the short trip from the airport to a great Chinese restaurant. We then faced our busiest day with three conferences in one day! But members in the Southwest District kept our energy levels high! Rusty and Lyndsey from the Diamond FFA Chapter showed their leadership skills with their chapter members, and members from Ava, Rachel and Tyler, impressed me with their desire to reach success. I made many friendships there that I hope will last a long time!

An extraordinary part of our time in Springfield was hanging out with the Marionville FFA Chapter all day. They helped us load our luggage and workshop supplies in and out of the van, and they even guided us around Bass Pro Shops, which is like heaven for any hunter

or fisher! Special thanks to Greg, Kody, Andi, Sam, Chris, and Gary! While we were at Bass Pro Shops, we attended a luncheon with the Springfield Agriculture Committee. We met many FFA supporters, and I was also excited to meet an Iowa State University alum!

Our final presentation was in St. Joseph. It was an amazing feeling to take everything we learned from our experiences that week into one of our best workshops at the end. And the members were awesome – all 658 were in official dress, but their sparkle reached much deeper than their outside appearance. Tim, Jason, and Suzanne from Chillicothe made my day with their enthusiasm, and I had a great time talking with Logan from Trenton about sports as our group walked over to the breakout room. Every member there was excited to share and learn, and I learned just as much from each amazing individual. Thank you, Missouri, for a great opportunity to learn from you! It is impossible to name every member who touched my life last week, but I was truly blessed by every member I met and friendship I started there.

Our time before and after Missouri was also wonderful! We spent the few days between Christmas break and Missouri preparing for the week, and we also visited several national FFA staff in their homes. It is always a pleasure to learn more about the selfless people who work for the FFA! We also talked a lot about the 75th National FFA Convention, which we will experience this fall! FFA members, I assure you that this convention will be one you will never forget. It is the official kick-off to the 75th birthday of the organization we love so much. Isn't that exciting? If you have anything you would like to see at this convention, be sure to let us know. We would love to get your input!

We kicked off our Missouri trip in Kansas City, where we enjoyed breakfast with a long-time FFA supporter, Farmland Cooperative. We saw many of the principles about cooperatives that we learn in agriculture classes actually happening in the real world. It was exciting to see a career path in the agriculture industry, and like many companies, Farmland is excited to see the many leaders that come from the FFA.



We came home absolutely exhausted from Missouri, but also fulfilled. After catching up on sleep, Dane, Barrett, and I drove to Chicago. We enjoyed Chicago-style pizza and walked around the city Saturday night, and on Sunday, we saw more of the city before we headed to WGN Radio studios, which is located in the first floor of the Tribune Building on Michigan Avenue. Max Armstrong interviewed us for the radio and television stations there. He and his partner, Orion Samuelson, are amazing supporters of the FFA and

talented communicators for the agriculture industry. It was a special treat for me because I spent my summer as the WGN Farm Department intern! I saw many old friends, and it was exciting to show Dane and Barrett around the beautiful city!

The last two weeks have been filled with new friends, beautiful scenery, laughter, constant improvement, impassioned hearts, and exciting experiences. FFA members, let your light shine. You never know where your enthusiasm will spread. You may just give someone else the spark they need to let their light shine!

January 6, 2002

"Courage is not the absence of fear, but the knowledge that something is better."

There's no place like home. I felt like Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz as I walked into my house in Hillsboro, Illinois, to find the Christmas decorations that hang every year. I cherished every second I had at home with my family and many dear friends celebrating the holiday. I visited with former teammates and friends from high school, and I even celebrated the new year with some of my closest friends in Iowa! Connecting with my roots and the people who provide love and encouragement every step of the way was the boost I needed. Even though I didn't have a white Christmas with snow, it was pure with joy.

While I was home, I was surprised with an "unveiling" ceremony. My FFA chapter worked with Senator DeMuzio and Representative Hannig, who represent my district in Illinois, to get a road sign at the entrance of Hillsboro to commemorate my office. Many community and school leaders came to show their support. The recognition is secondary to the opportunity to help people and serve others this year, but it is wonderful to realize that I have a great support group when I go home.

It was exciting to share with my friends about the wonderful people I get to work with this year and what we have learned! I watched "Princess Diaries" with my family, and that great quote about courage really stuck out to me as a reflection of our last week in Indy. I remembered how much courage our team had to try new methods in preparing our workshops. We trusted our great training team, and we quickly learned that we grow the most when we are truly challenged.

After a wonderful week at home, I am recharged and ready to hit the road again! I am blessed to have loving family and friends, and I am excited to see my teammates again!

December 23, 2001

We spent our last week in Indy with a phenomenal training team that helped us become better workshop presenters. We worked through the Magic Formula to plan workshops for the Missouri Greenhand Conferences in January. We had individual coaching sessions to make our workshops the best they could be, and then we had the opportunity to present to FFA chapters in the area. Dane and I went to Hamilton Heights High School, and the members there were great! The school is only eight years old, and the students take great pride in their work in the shop and the rest of the chapter. The Huskies won the state soils competition and will be competing at the national level in Oklahoma!

We had fun during our training, but also after hours! We had Christmas with the Small family on Tuesday night. Mr. Tony Small works in the FFA center, and both of his daughters have been very successful in the FFA. The Smalls had called our families and asked them to send something that would represent our Christmas traditions at home. So after dinner we opened stockings to find traditions from all of our families. It was amazing to share pieces of home as a team, and we were also honored that the Small family opened up some of their traditions to us.

Another highlight of the week was my first NBA game with the Indiana Pacers! Wow! We had forgotten how wonderful it was to hear shoes squeak on a basketball court and feel the energy of the entire crowd. The game was extra special for me, because Pacers starting guard #11 is Jamaal Tinsley, who just graduated from the one and only Iowa State University! Tinsley was even honored as their rookie of the year, and I was excited to cheer for the former Cyclone!

Our last few nights together were very special as we celebrated success together and with our training teams. We made Christmas ornaments together, enjoyed amazing dinners, exchanged gifts, and even sang Christmas carols! Friday night was Dane's "night of passion." We watched "The Majestic," a great movie that just happened to be filmed in and around his hometown of Eureka, California. The setting of the movie is absolutely beautiful, and it was neat to share something with Dane that means so much to him! We then had our own slumber party! Abbie and Dane cooked spaghetti for us, and we relaxed as we watched movies and talked – just like we would with our friends back home!

December 16, 2001

We dedicate our year of service to instilling a passion for excellence in all people by sharing our hearts and leading by example as a role model, advocate* and friend.

*Advocate for Agriculture, a term coined by the 2001-2002 national officer team.

We had another phenomenal week, but the highlight was developing our team mission statement (above) and vision. It was an amazing growth process as we combined our ideas and thoroughly discussed our goals for the year. Our vision is the Flame of Excellence, which shows the passions in our hearts and the potential we see in all people. Excellence means striving for your personal best. Not necessarily being the best, but always putting forth your best effort. Our flame is fueled by four foundational elements – faith, friends, family, and agriculture. If any one is missing, our flame cannot burn as brightly. A heart is at the center of our flame, representing the care and love that goes into all of our actions to produce Service, Integrity, Leadership, Growth, and Unity in our

flames.

On Monday and Tuesday we worked with an actress from the Derby Dinner Playhouse in Louisville, Kentucky. She came to town to help us become better speakers and make the content of our speeches more dynamic. We are all getting ready for Missouri Greenhand Conferences in January, and it was good for all of us to learn to critique ourselves. On Tuesday night, we went to downtown Indianapolis with Tammy Meyer, who works with the FFA Foundation. She took us to a great Italian restaurant, and then we admired the Christmas lights downtown and in another beautiful part of the city.

Tuesday night was Amber's "night of passion." She took us to an auction in town because she and her family are auctioneers. It was neat to share in her excitement and to see the antique furniture that was being sold. We also ate great steak and settled in for a competitive game of Uno[®] before heading our separate ways.

On Wednesday we started a series on teambuilding. After a morning spent talking about our own strengths, weaknesses and hopes for the team, we developed our team vision, the Flame of Excellence. That night we had dinner with Mr. Stagg and his family. Mr. Stagg is the team-leader for the Marketing and Communication Services team in the national FFA center. It was great to have another home-cooked dinner, and we had fun sharing stories and music together. If you ever need a mind-puzzler to pass the time, just ask one of us about the Albatross!

On Thursday, we reviewed our vision and started developing our mission statement, how we are going to make our vision a reality! Most of the day was spent in a volunteer project at the Gleaners Food Bank in Indianapolis. Gleaners is a non-profit, volunteer organization that supplies food and other products to several charity distributors in Indianapolis. The six of us were packing miscellaneous paper products, and Dane and I even got to shrink-wrap a crate full of the boxes we had packed. It was a different sort of volunteer work than I had ever done before. In most cases, we get to see the people we are directly helping. The smile on their faces is a greater reward than we could ever expect. But the products we were packing at Gleaners would pass through at least one other set of hands before entering the home of a family in need. It helped us act with the future in mind and truly pay it forward. The afternoon made us realize how blessed we truly are, and it was also a lesson in selfless service. The best reward in helping others is not receiving recognition for it, but in seeing others succeed.

That night we had dinner with Mr. Bernie Staller, the Chief Operating Officer, his wife, and two of the division directors in the center. We shared a lot of good food and laughter, and we sang Christmas carols as we left!

We worked through more team-building activities on Friday and solidified our mission statement before we prepared for a night celebrating my favorite holiday – Christmas! We dressed up in suits and party hats for the national FFA center Christmas party! After a social hour and tasty dinner, we had some special presentations before dancing the night away! We also shared our joy and gratitude with the staff through some Christmas carols. All of us love to dance, and it made us really excited to visit state convention dances!

This weekend has been very relaxing as we have enjoyed a couple days of free time! We were even able to sleep in on Saturday, and we finally had time to get some of our Christmas shopping done before we go home next weekend. We also had some good team time, and Dr. Doerfert and his wife invited us over for dinner. We were so excited to decorate Christmas cookies with their son, Michael! Other than that, we have worked on our speeches and other correspondence.

As you prepare for this Christmas season, take some time to count your blessings. It is a beautiful season to give and share a joyful heart wherever you go! Thank you for letting me share my joy with you, and know that our team is behind you every step of the way as you find your passions and build them into your own success story. Build your own flame of excellence!

December 9, 2001

"He is conscious of touching the highest pinnacle of fulfillment . . . when he is consumed in the service of an idea, in the conquest of the goal pursued." - R. Briffault

What a week! I feel truly blessed to be surrounded by amazing people and opportunities!

One of my favorite experiences this week was when Abbie and I visited Pendleton Heights High School on Thursday night. We were greeted by Sara and Amanda, two dedicated members who took us to meet the rest of their chapter. The chapter has grown tremendously in the last four years under the guidance of their advisor, Mr. Kevin Wolf. The members are so excited to develop their leadership skills, and their generosity is second to none! They surprised Abbie and me with personalized paper that they made themselves! Jason, the chapter president, truly leads by example with his positive attitude and commitment to the agriculture industry. I also really enjoyed talking with Willie and Kenneth, who were kind enough to give me a tour of their greenhouses and new lab. And I will never forget the great stories about ostriches! J To all of the Pendleton Heights FFA chapter members, thank you for sharing a great evening with us, have a blast on your ski trip and paintball wars, and remember to box out in your basketball games! Good luck on the rest of your season!

I'll take you back through the rest of the week. On Monday, December 3, we finished up our BLAST OFF training and learned the magic formula to write speeches this year. We also learned about the other levels of leadership and how we can truly make a difference that will last longer than our year of service. That night, Abbie took us to *Dark Armies*, a 1.5-acre paintball course! The six of us had the miniature city to ourselves, and we had the best time!

Tuesday morning, we worked with Mrs. Jennifer Conway Folkers, who gave us many tools to stay healthy this year. We learned about the best foods to eat, that sleep really is important, and how to exercise anywhere, whether we're in a hotel or on the plane. The highlight was definitely learning some yoga, which we can use to energize us and relieve stress! That afternoon we met the entire national FFA staff during a reception. Over 110 dedicated individuals work at the national FFA center to keep quality in programs, create merchandise, and communicate the value of our organization! That night, we got to know one of those staff members and his family even better. Mr. Tony Small invited us over for dinner. We truly enjoyed the warmth of their home, especially when they provided Christmas stockings for us to decorate together!

On Wednesday, our team split up to learn more in-depth about what each of the nine work teams does in the national FFA center. I spent the day with the Teacher Services team, and I left with a grateful heart and loads of valuable information! I learned about Career Development Events, logistics of convention, new technology and resources available to teachers, and the PALS program. I learned about the growing scholarship program, diverse opportunities in members' Supervised Agricultural Experiences, and specialized attention to help states reach their highest level. So many resources are available to our agriculture educators and FFA members! The most important part of my job shadowing day was learning more about the hearts of dedicated staff. They have a tremendous passion to serve FFA members and create more opportunities for us! If you have any ideas or questions about curriculum, don't be afraid to share them.

Friday was another full, exciting day. We learned about strategic partnerships and how the FFA Foundation provides valuable resources to our organization. Last year, over \$8 million was raised to fund FFA programs – opportunities for all of us, including Career Development Events, Proficiency Awards, and leadership conferences! In the afternoon, Abbie and I went to Dow AgroSciences for a practice Business and Industry Visit. We met with Mrs. Elin Miller, a Vice President who specializes in global policy. She also served as a National FFA Officer in 1979-80! We learned how we can effectively promote the FFA and develop strategic partnerships during our year of service. That night, Barrett took us to Chuck E. Cheese's[®]. We had a blast being kids again, as well as playing with many of the children in the fun restaurant!

Saturday was a wonderful day, when Mrs. Debbie Dodson from California taught us about developing and appreciating virtues, a list of 52 qualities that define our character. It was an amazing time to share with each other the qualities we appreciate, and it was also a day to learn about ourselves. We really grew as individuals, but more importantly, as a team.

Our great week was topped off on Sunday with an uplifting church service to celebrate Christmas and our individual coaching sessions. I am so excited to grow and learn more about myself so I can be a better servant and leader. I truly want to give my whole heart!

December 2, 2001

"Stop trying to live up to others' expectations for you. They aren't good enough!" My

youth pastor once challenged me with these words, and I have been reminded of them several times since I was elected to be part of the 2001-2002 National FFA Officer Team. The greatest dream I could imagine as an FFA member came true for me on Saturday, October 27, and our team has already begun to reach for new heights since that day.

The sea of blue and gold left Louisville right after convention, but our team stayed a few more days to piece together the Crest of Leadership, which included eight keys to success. We developed our Team Code of Ethics, discussed goals for the year, and dug deep within ourselves to find our true passions. We also had some fun in Louisville, including a night at the Derby Dinner Playhouse, a dinner theatre where we watched Agatha Christie's "Ten Little Indians." We caught a movie in town, enjoyed some great restaurants, and met a few of the amazing national FFA staff with whom we will work this year.

I left the southern hospitality of Louisville to return to Iowa State University, where I am a sophomore in Agricultural Business and Communications. I spent two weeks wrapping up my fall semester, hanging out with my wonderful friends, and preparing for an exciting year of service! Iowa State University has a very strong College of Agriculture, and the faculty are all very supportive of the FFA. I also cherished my last few days making music with Iowa State Singers and watching our football team beat our biggest rivals, the University of Iowa Hawkeyes. Go Cyclones!

I made a trip to Illinois for the dedication ceremony of the new Illinois FFA Center on November 9. I felt so proud to see the hard work of many state officer teams, state staff, and foundation supporters turn a vision into reality. When I was a state officer, we worked out of an old grain elevator office in a small town in northern Illinois, but the new center is located in our capital city, Springfield. Beautiful office spaces and resource rooms are used by state staff and state officers, and even chapter officer teams can use the facilities for training retreats. I was reminded of the strength and tradition of agricultural education when I met the first National FFA President from Illinois, Glyndon Stuff, who served in 1945-1946. My heart was truly smiling during the celebration and reunion of phenomenal people in Illinois agriculture and FFA.

I was able to spend Thanksgiving at home with my family in Hillsboro, IL. We celebrated the holidays in the warmth of my grandparent's home. My favorite place to be is on their farm, a huge part of my Supervised Agricultural Experiences. I had a great time making traditional Swiss cookies with my great grandma, playing ping pong with my cousins, and learning more about my grandparents. My family is a very important part of my life, and I will always cherish the times I am able to spend with my parents and older sister, Karla.

On November 25, I drove into Indianapolis, IN, to meet my teammates for an exciting month of training. It is great to work together again, and we have learned dynamic concepts this week, ranging from team trust to media relations.

While we're in Indianapolis, each of us has the opportunity to plan a "Night of Passion," a night where we can take the team wherever we choose to share something that means a lot to us. Well, two things I love are singing and making people smile, so I decided to take the group Christmas caroling. We started at a local nursing home, and after practicing a few of our favorite tunes, we shared our hearts with some beautiful people. We stopped at several rooms asking for requests and helping our older generation remember their favorite Christmas memories. It was so special to give them hope. We decided it was time for dessert after our first stop, so I took them to enjoy one of my favorite foods - ice cream! We walked into the Marble Slab Creamery, and thanks to Abbie's boldness, decided to carol to the customers and employees! Their faces turned from shock to pleasant smiles, and we had a great time there! We then traveled to the homes of several people who work at the national FFA center to go Christmas caroling, and we even caroled to some of our friends and family at home over our cell phones! At our final stop, we decorated our own Christmas stockings before calling it a night.

We are all looking forward to the next several weeks at the national FFA center, learning more about our responsibilities and opportunities to serve! FFA members, I am so excited to meet you this year and serve you with all my heart! I am humbled to have this opportunity to work with an amazing team! Thank you to everyone whose life has impacted my FFA career. I would not be here without you! My family, friends in Illinois and Iowa State University, former teammates, past and present state and national officers have helped me believe in myself and maintain a positive mental attitude. FFA members, I challenge you to strive for your personal best. Don't settle for other's expectations, but strive to exceed them! Through hard work, passion, and integrity, we can reach new heights!

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The 2001-2002 National Officer Journals

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May 5, 2002

"Change ... doesn't scare me." - Mindy Dye, 2001-2002 Ohio FFA State President

I started the week with a quick layover in Minneapolis, where I spent a great day and a half with a good friend of mine who is also a bride-to-be. We spent a lot of time catching up on each other's busy lives and meeting friends. I even got to see her beautiful wedding dress! On Monday night we went salsa dancing, and oh my goodness, it was FUN! We went downtown for dinner, and then headed over to The Quest, where we learned the basic steps of salsa and merengue. Once we stepped on the dance floor, there was no stopping us! Many skilled dancers led us through turns and other smooth moves.

On Tuesday, we stopped by the Mall of America before I flew to Kentucky. The Minnesota FFA State Convention was just ending, and many FFA members were in the mall. I naturally stopped to talk with many of them, and one thing that made it fun is that no one realized that I was a national officer! It was fun to hear them explain their convention experiences with excitement and talk about their chapter's activities. They were also surprised a "stranger" knew the lingo of CDEs! I also heard many wonderful comments about my teammate and friend, and your Central Region Vice President, Amber Haugland, and that was super-cool!

I flew to Owensboro, Kentucky, on a 19-seater plane, which is the smallest commercial flight I have taken! When I arrived, Robin Schwartz and Logan Beyke, the chapter presidents of the Apollo and Daviess County FFA Chapters were there to meet me. We headed to Apollo High School, where I met the rest of the Apollo FFA Chapter Officer Team (who leads a chapter of 360 FFA members!) for pizza and final banquet preparations. It was so cool to be a part of their excitement and hear about agriculture in Kentucky, which includes commodities like corn, soybeans, wheat, and cattle that is similar to the agriculture near my home in Illinois. Products that make Kentucky agriculture unique are large poultry houses and tobacco production.

On Wednesday morning I met Mrs. Linda Story for breakfast and a great day! Mrs. Story is a former National FFA Alumni President, and her husband is one of three FFA advisors at the Apollo FFA Chapter. After breakfast, she took me to Daviess County High School, where I was greeted by the great smells of barbeque pork they were cooking for the banquet! Logan showed me around their school, and I met with the school's administrators, who are very supportive of their FFA Chapter. I also met dedicated FFA members like Kevin, Jacque, and Keith.

After lunch, we went to McLean County High School. Emily showed me their school and introduced me to their administration before I talked with a couple agriculture classes. I learned that many of their members love to hunt, and they are excited about the upcoming State FFA Convention. Leaders like Eric, Craig, and Heather will be filling the shoes of graduating seniors like Jill and Miles.

On our way back to Owensboro, we stopped at a local poultry farm, which had three houses that each hold 23,000 broiler chickens. It was interesting to learn about tunnel ventilation, feeding procedures, contracting, and transportation for the poultry operation.

I met even more excited FFA members at Apollo High School before their banquet. I was so impressed by their decorations! They had "landscaped" an area in front of the head table that included antique farm equipment, soil, tobacco and corn plants, and flowers "planted" in the formation of FFA. It was amazing! I had fun hanging out with members like Baker, Luke, and Tyler. Everyone's Kentucky accents were so fun, and I found that their passions made them even more fun to listen to. Melanie is on her way to Western Kentucky when she graduates, and her huge heart to help people shines in all of her actions. I also learned a lot from Kellie, the new chapter president, who is passionate about taking her chapter to a higher level and developing strong relationships with people.

After I presented a keynote, I left for Daviess County High School, which is on the other side of Owensboro. This FFA Chapter increased their membership by almost 100% this year, and they are off to great success, especially with some of their new chapter officers like Chastity, Jordan, and Brian.

I spent Thursday traveling to the Buckeye State of Ohio. When I stepped off the plane, I was greeted by one of my dear friends who was a state officer in Ohio when I was an Illinois State Officer. We had a great time catching up over dinner and a stop at the mall to get a souvenir to remember The Ohio State University! After a fun-filled evening, we made our way to the hotel, where I met up with Abbie Kammerzell! It had been a month since we had seen each other, so it was great to catch up on our experiences on the road. The next two days would be spent creating more memories with over 5,200 Ohio FFA members.

Friday morning came bright & early. We met all of the state officers and members like Dan, who was in the State FFA Chorus. Abbie and I each presented two workshops to these energetic members, and I also had the opportunity to address a group of agricultural and education leaders at the Ohio State Leaders Luncheon. It is so important to thank the people who make agricultural education and FFA possible! And Ohio FFA sure has some talent! The whole morning was filled with FFA members sharing their talent, like the bluegrass band from the John Glenn FFA Chapter and Stephanie, who sang "On My Knees." We also heard the amazing talents of Jeremy, a freshman from the Greenville FFA Chapter, who sang "It's Your Song."

It was great to see FFA members recognized for their achievements, and I had a blast meeting some of the outstanding secretaries, reporters, and treasurers. I also met Jeremiah Logsdon, who is an incredible swing-dancer. He even teaches his fellow FFA members after chapter meetings! And Jodel was a super-sweetheart who was excited about receiving her State FFA Degree and competing in the Ag Communications CDE.

For dinner I joined Ohio's proficiency winners and other foundation supporters for an awards dinner. I sat with many of the state officer candidates, who were in suspense to find out the results of the election. Priscilla, Tami, Lindsey, Amy, and Jason, I am so proud of you, and thanks for keeping me laughing! I also had a great time hanging out with State Sentinel Aftan Campbell and meeting members like Owen, Michelle, and Cassie. State Vice President Anne Knapke did an awesome job emceeding the event and making everyone feel welcome, and Abbie thanked and congratulated the award winners in her remarks.

I was excited that evening to see my mentor from the national FFA center, her family, and a couple more national FFA staff. They were all so kind in their support, and it was like having a family away from home. I had fun presenting a keynote and sharing a message about attitude and chance. Ohio FFA members were so enthusiastic throughout the entire session, especially in thanking their many sponsors!

After the session, we put on our dancing shoes for the Ohio FFA Convention Dance, where I learned that Ohio FFA members know how to have a lot of fun and keep some great traditions alive! I had a blast dancing with Jazmin, Abby, and the gang from Hillsboro, Ohio! Steve from the Clyde FFA Chapter also kept me laughing, and it was fun to hang out with the state officer team on their last night together for a convention dance! We crammed into the car to head back to the hotel, and I had a great time getting to know Marlene, Jenni, and Ryan a lot better. Marlene was elected the new State FFA President, and she will lead the Ohio Association with grace, warmth, and professionalism.

We awoke bright & early Saturday morning, and I was surprised to see some of my friends from Michigan! Jon, Kyle, Jeremy, and Kendra were visiting state officers, and we had a blast catching up since the last time we saw each other at their state convention in March. I also found the Preble-Shawnee FFA Chapter. I had visited their school a few years ago along with many other state officers during NLC SO, and their advisor's name is even Mr. Niehaus! Heather and I had a great time doing the twist before the session, and Jeff & Barney joined us to create a tunnel for the state officers as they walked in. Abbie motivated Ohio FFA to be everyday heroes through courage, passion, and confidence, and I was so proud to see my teammate and friend touch lives like that!

After the session, Abbie and I joined a very special group of past state officers. The 50th anniversary team conducted opening ceremonies, and many former officers reunited with their teammates. I had the honor of presenting remarks about the importance of their leadership and continuing support to the Ohio FFA members, and I hope I can one day continue to serve FFA members in the same way.

It was time for the final session, which would prove to be emotional as the state officers honored their parents and supportive parents of all FFA members. Anne's warmth continued to light up the state as she introduced State President Mindy Dye for her retiring address. Mindy simply sparkles when she talks with people around her, presents awards to FFA members, and leads her teammates to unity and success. She continued to motivate her fellow FFA members with a strong message about welcoming change and new opportunities. The session closed with excitement and the closing of another great year as the 2002-2003 Ohio FFA State Officers were elected.

Abbie and I joined the new and retiring state officer teams for an orientation dinner, where we certainly saw a bright future for the Ohio FFA Association. My great week was wrapped up wonderfully at the convention, and I am so thankful for the opportunity to meet Ohio FFA members and reconnect with old friends. And to the outgoing state officer team, thank you for welcoming us into your convention and your hearts. Mindy, Anne, Marlene, Lucy, Luke, Aftan, Jenny, Mindy, Ryan, Heather, Brittney, Jenni, Kevin, Jennilee, Heather, and Jessica, your hearts of service are beautiful. Your sincerity made a lasting impression on me, and you should be proud of a successful, professional, and motivating state convention.

I'm looking forward to a week and a half in Texas with my team!

April 28, 2002

"Don't let the alarm clocks of life stop you. Realize the power of your dreams." - Holly Willardson, 2001-02 Alaska FFA State President

I studied the Iditarod when I was in 4th grade, and I had heard Alaska was beautiful with kind people, but nothing could have fully prepared me for the wonderful experience I had in Alaska this week! I sat by a gentleman who raced in the Iditarod a few years ago, I saw a small part of the beautiful, pristine state, and I met over 80 outstanding FFA members, but each of these far exceeded my expectations.

I arrived into town on Sunday evening in the middle of a snowstorm, which is very uncommon for Fairbanks, Alaska, at the end of April! But I was excited anyway and amazed by the beautiful mountains. It was 10:00 at night, and it was still light outside! I settled into our hotel and got ready for a great convention.

The Alaska FFA Convention is held on the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) campus, and FFA members from Fairbanks, North Pole, Palmer, Delta, Homer, Polaris, and King Career Center (KCC) quickly filled the room on Monday morning. I led a leadership workshop in the morning, and everyone was so awesome as we learned about integrity and building confidence in people around us. There was one point in the workshop when I was running back up to the front of the room, and I totally biffed it on the front of the stage! But everyone just cheered and turned an embarrassing experience into a hilarious one! They showed me how leaders can make people feel welcome every day, and that inclusiveness and support encourages others to get involved. I was so impressed by the members from Fairbanks, which is a brand new FFA chapter that started by one student who was interested in the FFA. Phil got his sister Crystal involved, too, and after he convinced his mom, who is a science teacher, to add curriculum in agricultural education, they were able to recruit members to start a chapter! That Alaska Association is truly growing, and I was honored to experience part of it.

After lunch, we started the first convention session, and FFA members competed in public speaking and job interview events. I really learned about the diversity of agriculture in our great nation. Issues in Alaska include growing fish in hatcheries versus in the wild, preserving the natural resources of the state, and preventing wildfires. I also learned a lot about the oil pipeline and "Alaska Grown," a label placed on Alaskan agricultural products to promote their sales. It was a great competition, and members like Katie and Sarah

from KCC, Dani from Delta, and Dauna from Homer really showed their passion for agriculture.

I joined the KCC FFA Chapter for a great dinner at Pizza Hut. I had a blast hanging out with them, and I learned that one of their FFA advisors grew up in eastern Iowa near where I was born! Talk about a small world! That night, the state officers ran another great session and started the series of retiring addresses. Afterwards, it was time for an open mic at the talent show! Alaska has some incredible talent! Bret, Skyler, Calvin, Keith, and Coltan from Palmer brought out their baby blue tuxes to serenade the crowd with some barbershop-style songs, Holly played a grand piece on the piano, Tonya from North Pole sang beautifully, Crystal from Fairbanks played a harp solo, and the delegates even put on a hypnotist show! I also had the honor of being a part of the show with my new friend John from KCC, who is an amazing swing dancer!

On Tuesday morning I loaded the bus with the Palmer FFA Chapter, who was getting ready for their CDEs that day. Most of the members went to events like Natural Resources Management, Livestock, and Ag Mechanics. I saw part of these events, and one of the best parts for me was the Natural Resources event. One of the USDA experts took us out to look at a soil profile, in which we saw a fairly deep 'O' horizon, which is an organic layer on top that is basically untouched by cultivation or anything. The Land Use CDE was one of my favorites as a member in Illinois, so it was neat to see the different soils of Alaska!

I joined Chase, Calvin, Coltan, Kurt, and Quintan for lunch, where we started telling "stories with holes," which are basically big puzzles and brainteasers to figure out. That kept going all afternoon and brought a ton of members into a joint effort! I had the opportunity to meet with the class of UAF freshmen who are studying Natural Resource Management. We discussed opportunities and careers in agriculture, and we also talked about the importance of conservation and sustainable efforts in agriculture. Back at the convention, I also learned an Alaska FFA-original game that requires great concentration, rhythm, and a whole lot of fun! What is it, you may ask? Be sure to ask an Alaska FFA member about "Big Booty!" After a few more competitions, I joined the Palmer FFA Chapter for a quick dinner stop and had a great time hanging out with the girls. Jessica and I shared our love for ice cream, and I was so impressed by her leadership. As a sophomore in high school, she is the chapter president. Palmer FFA members respect and look up to her because she truly cares for them, and she works hard to find the best for her fellow members.

During the evening session, two more state officers gave their retiring addresses, and we also learned more about the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. Tons of fun followed, though, with the first-ever Alaska "FFArival." Everyone was split up into groups to achieve nine different teamwork activities. When each activity station was completed, the team received a letter, which added up to spell "influence." We also had a fun Hawaiian theme! I was really impressed by Kristen from the Palmer FFA Chapter, who was on the winning team. Everyone wanted an FFA bear, and there was one short on her team. She selflessly offered to take a different prize so the rest of her team could have the coveted prize. It was so kind of her!

On Wednesday morning, everyone gathered for a service project. We worked together to plant pansies and marigolds in hanging planters, which will be used for the UAF commencement and the spring plant sale. I had a blast with Dani, Crystal, Brian, and the rest of the Delta crew! I also gave a workshop that morning about goal-setting, and I am excited to see where these ambitious FFA members will succeed! After lunch, we rounded up into another session, where State Vice President Jennifer Poindexter gave her retiring address. It was obvious how important people in her life are to her, and she encouraged members to realize the same in their own lives. After the session, we had a break before the long-awaited banquet. We drove out to the Gold Dredge, where many used to mine for gold. The atmosphere was quite rustic, and everyone was excited to find out who had won the various Career Development Events. I was so proud of these members! Skyler from Palmer won two state events, and it was amazing to see the excitement on Nicole's face when her name was announced as the Creed Speaking winner! I was also very proud of the Polaris FFA Chapter. This is their first year as a chapter, and they won both the Floriculture and Natural Resources CDEs! At the end of the banquet, the Palmer FFA Chapter totally surprised me when they gave me a dozen beautiful roses in honor of National Secretary's Week! I was truly humbled by their thoughtfulness.

After the banquet, we pushed the tables to the side and danced the night away! I had a blast swinging with Dan, Coltan, and some of the advisors, and we all just had a blast on the dance floor! We learned line dances, ate ice cream, rapped a little bit, and just had fun! Before we could leave, though, we had to play one more round of "Big Booty!"

It was so sad to see everyone go the next morning. I had a blast getting to know everyone, whether it was learning from Tim's sincerity or rooming with Holly and Jennifer. There were 83 members at the convention, which is probably the smallest I will see all

year. Even though it was small in size, it was huge in heart, and I am blessed to have had the opportunity to meet every member, who all touched my life. And I can't wait to see what the new team accomplishes! Calvin, Coltan, Cameron, Brad, Amy, and Justin, I'll see you at NLCSO!

I joined State FFA Advisor Mr. Werner, Washington FFA State Reporter Dan Tedor, and past Alaska FFA State Presidents Jason and Kurt Miller on Thursday to see more of beautiful Alaska. We drove down to Denali National Park, which is home to Mt. McKinley. The drive was amazing with huge spruce trees and gorgeous mountains. We climbed a few rocks at the park and soaked in as much of the beauty as possible, and we even spotted some wildlife! Caribou were grazing in the distance (they look like tall, thin reindeer), and as we were leaving, we saw a huge moose along the side of the road!

On Friday, Dan and I went to the Museum at UAF to learn about Alaskan history. It was quite interesting to see the tools used by Eskimos and a video of patterns made by Aurora in the Northern Lights. We were once again in the middle of an unusual April snowstorm, but we still managed to make our way to the Chena Hot Springs Resort that afternoon. It was amazing! We were swimming outside in the snow in natural water that comes out of the earth at 146 degrees! It was absolutely relaxing, and we all had a great time!

Saturday was another fun day in beautiful Alaska, and I got to meet with some of the dedicated state leaders in Alaska FFA to talk about future programs for FFA members and other ways to make Alaska FFA even stronger. That afternoon, Mr. Werner took me to Santa's House at the North Pole! North Pole, Alaska, that is! I really did meet Kris Kringel, and the city decorates for Christmas year-round. Even the light poles look like candy canes!

There were many times this week when I just stopped to say "I'm in Alaska!" It was an unbelievable experience! It was a dream that I never thought would come true because I put so many roadblocks in front of it. FFA members, don't let these roadblocks or alarm clocks stop you. Take the advice of Alaska FFA State President Holly Willardson and realize the power of your dreams!

April 21, 2002

"Iowa ... where dreams come true."

I have read this slogan on many road signs as I drive to my alma mater of Iowa State University, and I realized it is true this past week more than ever. I saw dreams come true for new state officers at the state FFA convention, and then I realized the dreams of many as I walked across campus just thinking about how blessed we are to have that opportunity to grow, and I learned about many more dreams created and come true when I was in the eastern part of the state for chapter visits and banquets. And many of my dreams have come true in Iowa, too. I have true friendships at Iowa State University and in FFA members that will last a lifetime, and I have learned that it is people who really make life worthwhile.

My week started on Monday morning, when I was able to meet with my advisors at college to talk about my year and also start planning for when I return to campus next January. They sure take care of me, and unbelievable talent is in that College of Agriculture! That night I did one of my favorite things in the world and cooked for many of my friends. The apartment was crammed, but it was a great way to see everyone! The weather was so beautiful all week, which was great, because VEISHEA was just starting. VEISHEA is an annual spring celebration on campus that started 80 years ago. The acronym represents the original five colleges on campus, Veterinary medicine, Education, Industrial Science, Home Economics, and Agriculture. Last year I was in charge of all of the student barbeques and events on central campus during the week, so it was fun to see friends and enjoy the celebration this year! One of my good friends and I continued our tradition of singing karaoke on central campus, and I was able to hang out with so many great friends. I also visited Iowa State Singers rehearsal, which is the choir in which I sang on campus. Music is one of my biggest passions, and I am blessed to be a part of this talented group! I also visited one of my leadership groups, and it was wonderful to see everyone, reminisce great memories, and create new ones! Campus is so beautiful, especially in spring. In those few days, I realized more than ever what great friends I have. The laughter, tears, joys, and challenges we have shared have certainly shaped my character.

I left on Wednesday morning to begin a series of chapter visits and banquets in eastern Iowa. I started with an all-chapter assembly at Benton High School. The school is in an extremely rural area, and the chapter is growing tremendously. In fact, Benton FFA was named the first place chapter in Chapter and Community Development and the superior chapter overall last week at the Iowa FFA State Convention. I learned so much from their current programs, and we really got creative on some new activities and how to make

existing ones even stronger. With members like Josh, Christina, Garrett, Hope, Jake, Ryan, Cassie, Luke, Matt, and so many more, we will continue to see amazing things from this FFA chapter!

Benton FFA Advisor, Mr. David Hill, took me up to Vinton, Iowa, where I checked in to a charming bed & breakfast. The Victorian home also doubles as a setting for a murder mystery dinner theatre, and my entire experience there was unforgettable. On Wednesday night I met the Vinton-Shellsburg FFA chapter officers and senior members for a pizza party. We worked on details for the banquet and just hung out. I got to see Ben's scrapbook, which placed third in the state, and I learned a lot about their upcoming senior trip to Colorado. The guys also taught me a little about racing in eastern Iowa, and we just had a blast hanging out.

My day started very early on Thursday as I headed up to Wapsie Valley High School, which was the third-place chapter in the state. I learned very quickly that FFA chapters in the Northeast District strive for excellence! Mrs. Doese and her student teacher, Ms. Koenig, provide great leadership for the chapter, and I met some awesome FFA members. I met with nine classes that day, including one from Denver High School and the entire 7th grade class. We set a lot of goals, learned about opportunities in the FFA, and showed tremendous leadership. I met some very energetic 7th-graders, like Betsy, Mike, Heather, and Caleb. They all showed that leadership is influence, courage and FFA. Wapsie Valley FFA members show unbelievable dedication. The senior class sells malts during their lunch hour and candy all day to raise money for their Chicago trip, and Jake was working hard with plans to landscape the greenhouse. Spencer takes his role seriously as chapter president, and Ashlie's joy and kindness sparkles through her eyes. The chapter had held a mock accident the previous day to help the student body think about wearing their seatbelts and the consequences of drinking & driving as they approached prom. Members like Lisa and Josh really put tons of hard work to make a successful day happen.

That night I attended the Linn-Mar FFA chapter banquet as a guest speaker. Linn-Mar is a rural/suburban school in Marion, on the north edge of Cedar Rapids. Sonny Deke gave me a ride to the celebration, and he must be one of the most dedicated and supportive alumni I have ever met. His daughter is a past state officer in Iowa FFA, and Sonny continues to encourage FFA members. In fact, he purchased the Chevy Truck from the Alumni Auction at national convention in 1995, so I got to ride around in Big Blue, which shows some incredible FFA pride! The banquet was run very well. The officers had worked hard to decorate the banquet hall and provide a set-up similar to a miniature state convention. The senior officers each gave a retiring address, and one that really stood out was Sarah Cooper, the retiring president. She put on her grandfather's old FFA jacket and talked about his influence on her decision to join the FFA. She also left a beautiful challenge to her fellow chapter members to take advantage of the opportunities around us. "Don't wait for tomorrow, for it may never come," she said. The members were all great, and I enjoyed visiting with members like Susan, Amanda, Sarah, James, Lindsey, Wyatt, and Milia.

I visited the Linn-Mar High School the next morning, where I got to know the chapter officers and members even better. We had a great time together, and after class, Ashley and Kelsy showed me around the school. I also got to see their outstanding greenhouse and plans for a brand new aquaculture center. I then went to lunch with Ashley, who is the northeast district vice president. She has such an unbelievable passion for the FFA, and I truly enjoyed getting to know her better. We even ate at Maid-Rite, which was one of my favorite restaurants when I lived in Tipton, Iowa.

I spent Friday afternoon at North Linn High School, another very rural school. I met the freshmen and sophomores, and we worked together to set goals and discover opportunities in the FFA. I met members like Joey and Melissa, who hope to run for state office someday, and I learned that four-wheeling is the name of the game to these guys! I also enjoyed meeting Matt, who is truly kind to everyone he meets, and his intelligence helps him succeed. I got to chat with Chad and Josh, who are well on their ways to successful careers as an electrician and driver. I also got to hang out with Amanda, who was the state winner with her Floriculture SAE. She works so hard, and she put together a great slide show for the banquet! All the members were tons of fun, including Ryan & Chris Nielson, Megan, Lynette, Cody, Darren, and Maggie.

On Saturday, I enjoyed a morning at the bed & breakfast before I joined the Vinton-Shellsburg chapter officers as they set up their gym and auditorium for the banquet. We turned jobs like folding programs, blowing up balloons, and putting up streamers into a fun afternoon! Their hard work paid off that night as they had a great banquet! The retiring officers were awesome, and they put together an incredible parent appreciation program. Katie, Mike, Mandi, Nathan, Ben, Adam, and Ben - you should be proud of yourselves! Thank you for making me feel like part of the family! I also enjoyed learning about Whitney's experience in the rodeo, Kelsey's selfless dedication, and Lisa's love for life. We had a great time at the banquet, but it didn't stop there. Chapter president Katie

had all the seniors and officers out to her house for a party, and it was great to hang out, play cards, and have more great food! Katie did such an awesome job leading her chapter. Her character is strong; her actions show strength, joyfulness, and a desire to help everyone succeed. I was truly impressed, and I cherished every second I got to spend with her and our third "Dixie Chick," Lisa. Lisa and I went to church together on Sunday, too, and no matter what we were doing, we had a great time talking, laughing, singing, and even crying. I am so thankful for my new friendships, and can't wait to hang out even more in the future!

FFA members, the road sign that says Iowa is where dreams come true is certainly right, but it doesn't stop there. You have the ability to make your dreams a reality today.

April 14, 2002

"Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." - Emerson

After a great weekend in southwest Minnesota, I joined my teammates in Indianapolis for a few days of training. We worked hard on the curriculum for National Leadership Conference for State Officers (NLCSO), which we will present this summer in nine locations across the country. Our trainers helped us take our presenting skills to a higher level, and we focused on incorporating our theme into the conference to make it a true success. It was also great to see the staff at the national FFA center, and we had some great meetings about the 75th national FFA convention this fall and updates with the convention site and other programs. After a long day of work on Tuesday, we joined part of the staff for a great game of wallyball, which is volleyball played in a racquetball court. It is tons of fun because you can even hit the ball when it bounces off the walls! Dane also celebrated his birthday this week, so we had a surprise party for him when we were working late at the center. His surprised reaction was typical Dane-style because he always shows his gratitude, excitement, and care for others quite readily.

After three great days in Indianapolis, we headed our separate ways across the country. Convention season is in full swing, and I love it! I went to the Iowa FFA State Leadership Conference in Des Moines, and it was truly wonderful! Iowa is a second home to me for two reasons. I lived in Tipton, Iowa, until I was 10 years old, when my family moved to Illinois. But I just couldn't stay away, and nine years later, I headed to Iowa State University for college. The College of Agriculture has outstanding programming, and the campus is beautiful, but I value the people at Iowa State more than anything. Those people include some of the current and former state officers, convention staff, and other great FFA friends. I knew I had arrived at my 2nd home from the minute I stepped off the plane, and I felt that warmth all week.

Convention started bright and early on Thursday morning, when I met the nominating committee, who would choose the new state officer teams. Excitement continued to build as I presented a couple workshops and met great FFA members and advisors. Throughout the morning, Iowa FFA members competed in various Career Development Events (CDE). I stopped by the Conduct of Meetings waiting area, where I met members from the Graettinger FFA chapter. TJ, Jeff, and Shamos were hilarious guys, and their dedication to succeed helped them earn their way to state, and it also helped Shamos become the State Rising Star. I



even had the opportunity to go to lunch with the Fairfield FFA chapter at Stella's, which is a 50's-style diner with a very distinct trademark. Whenever someone orders a milkshake or malt, the waiter stands on a chair and pours it into a glass that the customer holds on the top of their head. Our poor waitress had eight milkshakes to pour! I had such a blast hanging out, dancing with Adam, talking about prom with Heidi and Kolby, hearing about Mark's farm, and learning about Phoebe's passion to serve as a leader in the FFA. What a great chapter! I then met the 29 enthusiastic state officer candidates right before they took their test. They impressed me with their sincere kindness and enthusiasm to serve. The future of Iowa FFA is in good hands!

Before the first session started that evening, I had the honor of brushing shoulders with some talented FFA members! I emceed the talent show, with acts ranging from the Rockford Poms, David on the traditional bagpipe, a skit by the Mid-Prairie FFA chapter, and many great singers. The energy of convention filled Vets Auditorium as the session

started with retiring addresses, award winners, and more FFA talent. After the session, the Vinton-Shellsburg FFA chapter took me out for a great steak! Lisa, Katie, Ben, Cara, and the whole gang were tons of fun!

The convention started early Friday morning with more sessions, and I presented a few more workshops. I joined the nominating committee and state officer candidates for lunch, and they had just completed the interview process. They were quite nervous as the ballot would be announced within a few hours! Once the ballot was announced, the candidates gave their speeches to the delegate body, and I was probably just as nervous as they were! I was also impressed by the great work of the Courtesy Corps. Newly-elected district officers make up the group, and they work hard to control the crowd, which includes monitoring the election process.



The district officers were always fun to talk with – Ashley, Josh, Courtney, Kim, Danny, Cassie, Cory, Amy – I'll never forget you, and keep finding those cell phones! J The Boone FFA chapter was also a very instrumental part of the Courtesy Corps, and I am thankful for their help in setting up workshops. Lorelee Shultz was the chapter president, and she took her leadership role to heart. The chapter members really looked up to her guidance, and they sure were successful!

The Friday evening session is one of the most energetic of the week. Ron Gustafson shared a powerful keynote address, dignitaries like the Iowa Director of Agriculture showed up to support the group, and the Stars Over Iowa were announced. I also had a great time meeting more FFA members, like the Southeast Polk FFA Chapter, who was sure excited for that convention dance! The dance was awesome – Kyle from Mid-Prairie, Kayla from Crestwood, and Kevin all helped me have a blast, and it was great to hang out with the gang from Vinton and Katie, who doubles as a district officer and Iowa High School Rodeo Queen. Busy girl!

Saturday morning was the final session, when 400 members earned the State FFA Degree, the state officers showed their advisors and parents appreciation, I presented a keynote, and the newly-elected team was announced and rushed to the stage. Some of my best friends from Iowa State University came down, too, and that meant the world to me. After the session, I had the honor of meeting with the new and old state officer teams and guiding the new team through their first team exercise! Rob, Eric, Toni, Stefan, Matt, Cassie, Thomas, Kathy, and Betsy, I am excited to see the ways you will trust each other and work to see Iowa FFA grow and FFA members succeed this year! And the outgoing officers did an amazing job on their retiring addresses and entire convention. It was obvious that they had grown tremendously during the year. Jesse, Amanda, Kyle, Angela, Jill, Rob, Holly, Blake, and Amanda, thank you for your friendship and for making me feel right at home in Iowa. You should be proud of a job well done!

After convention, I headed up to Ames with my buddies for a few days on the campus of Iowa State University! The weekend was filled with great memories and reflections of when I was on campus. I have enjoyed my time in Ames tremendously, whether we were going out to eat, playing games, going to church, or shopping. I am truly blessed with some great friends at college.

Thank you, Iowa, for welcoming me back!

April 7, 2002

"Great works are performed not by strength, but by perseverance." - Samuel Johnson

Wow! What a week! It started bright and early Monday morning in Indianapolis. It was great to be back with the whole team, and that excitement grew as we became models for a day! We had a photo shoot to model FFA apparel for the new catalog. There are some great new items, from workout clothes to trendy shirts and the Americana line. Our day was full of good laughs, because the staff and photographer were tons of fun, too! We worked on convention speeches and had fun catching up with each other over dinner that night. Most of the team left for conventions and banquets early Tuesday morning, but Barrett and I spent the day in the National FFA Center. I also had the pleasure of a lovely lunch with my mentor. Each of us is paired with one of the wonderful people who work in the center, and we spend extra time with them to share our year, get some great

advice, and learn more about these special people. Lee Anne Shiller (who manages all that cool stuff in the catalog) is my mentor, and we always have fun together, whether it's talking about the latest news, sharing experiences we've both had at Iowa State University, or getting to know her family better. I am blessed!

I left Tuesday night for Anderson, Indiana. I spent a couple nights with my cousin, who attends Anderson University, a small Christian college. We are the same age, and when we were growing up, we always called ourselves "twin cousins," even though the only thing we really had the same was our hair color! She is training for a 13-mile mini-marathon later this spring, so one day I got out the running shoes to train with her group. I didn't make the 7 miles they ran that day, but I enjoyed the workout nonetheless! A lot of memories came back to me, too, not just from the times we have spent together in the past, but even about my own passions.

I spent most of the day Thursday driving home, but I first made a stop at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana to visit with Beth and Abel, my state officer teammates. Even though hundreds of miles have separated us since we hung up our "Illinois Association" jackets two years ago, our common experiences have kept a close friendship between us. Our shared joys and struggles brought us so close together, and I learned a lot about the trust of teamwork from them!

On Friday, I ran some last-minute errands at home, prepared for my next string of workshops, and prepared for the next six weeks on the road! I also spent special time with my parents! We went to see the movie "The Rookie." Let me tell you, it is a good one! I would recommend it for everyone – it's a great movie for dreamers, athletes and achievers. It's a family movie. It was a tear-jerker for me, but one that even guys would like.

I boarded the plane bright and early to attend the chapter banquet for the Southwest Star Concept Chapter Banquet in Okabena, Minnesota. This chapter is unbelievable! It is an extremely rural area, yet the community support and member dedication keeps the chapter strong. With approximately 60 members, two ag teachers help the chapter strive for excellence. The strengths of Mr. Place and Ms. Worm compliment each other perfectly to create a strong, well-rounded program. Over 225 people attended the banquet, which was a great program. The officers and a few other members opened the evening with a skit based on "Fear Factor" to preview the evening, and then talented FFA members provided dinner music on the piano. After the meal, awards were presented, I gave a speech, foundation sponsors were recognized, and everyone celebrated the chapter's success. The SSC FFA Chapter has a long history of success in Career Development Events. Five teams competed in national CDE's at the 2001 convention, two of them were 1st place teams, and two individuals earned 1st place honors. Impressive is an understatement! They work so hard to earn those honors, and their community supporters provide a great knowledge and morale base for them. After the banquet, everyone headed down to the ag room, where the chapter served root beer floats and other desserts. It was a fun and delicious way to see everyone after the banquet!

My favorite part of the evening was hanging out with members and learning more about them. Amber did an awesome job with the Creed, and the enthusiasm I saw in freshmen Laura and Jenna will help them succeed in the FFA! I had a blast joking around with Andy, who has a joyful attitude, and he's always ready to try new things. Julie and Jessica provide solid leadership for other members, and I was impressed by Ryan, who has earned three national CDE championships. Before the banquet, I had a great time hanging out with Amanda, Brittany ("Midget"), Sami, and Alexa, and I hope to see them all in Louisville at convention! And before the night was over, Angela entertained us all with her amazing talents on the piano. Every member of the Southwest Star Concept FFA Chapter impressed me with their heart and dedication to excellence.

Before I headed back to the lovely Bed and Breakfast, I went out for a night of bowling with some of last year's graduates! Kim, Abby, Bre and I met some guys from the chapter at the bowling alley. Let me tell you, it was the worst game I had bowled in a long time, but it was still tons of fun! That group continues to show the strength of the chapter. Bre and Abby are at South Dakota State University, and they are preparing for careers in landscape design, an area introduced to them through the FFA (and one of the biggest strengths for the SSC chapter). And Kim is just one great girl - her passion for life can light up any room, and I really admire her strength of character!

On Sunday morning, I went to church with Jessica, Julie, and Ryan. The church was celebrating "Farm Sunday," and the farmers drove their tractors to church, just like many FFA chapters drive their tractors to school during National FFA Week. The service was dedicated to the product of our toil and honoring the work of farmers and ranchers. After

the service, we went outside to bless the soil, animals, seed, equipment, and farmers. It just reminded me how important each community is to the strength of agriculture and our future.

Afterwards, Mr. Place picked me up, and on our way to the airport, we stopped to have dinner with his family. I had met them the night before at the banquet, and it was a joy to spend more time with his thoughtful wife and three lovely daughters.

The SSC Chapter banquet was a perfect way to end a great week, and it has left me charged up for another great week with my team and at the Iowa State FFA Convention. Thank you to the communities of Okabena and Heron Lake, Minnesota, for making me feel so welcome! Your community strength is a strong pillar for the FFA chapter, and more importantly, our future.

March 31, 2002

"FFA is more than contests and awards. It's an organization that encourages believers and pushes people to achieve their best." - Leon Adams, Illinois FFA State Secretary

That is exactly what the FFA has done for me. As a freshman in high school, I wanted to become a math professor or a pharmacist. But through the FFA, I started to dream. I set goals, met amazing people, and directed my career path into the industry of life – agriculture.

I shared a message about the opportunities to develop character through courage, commitment, and responsibility to the people who have given me those opportunities for so long. That's right, my travels took me to my hometown banquet in Hillsboro, Illinois! It was wonderful to see long-time community supporters and media, family, and friends. Many memories from my high school days flooded my memory, cleaning up after a great banquet, the emotions of ending a year with one chapter officer team and starting with another, and just hanging out with good friends to reflect on our failures, successes, and goals.



One new twist on the banquet was that I had the honor to work with one of my best friends, Leon Adams, the State FFA Secretary in Illinois. We became instant friends when I was a state officer two years ago, and we've had some good times since! We teamed up on a joint keynote to the 140-member audience. The unusual late March weather brought us snow and ice outside, but we were keeping everyone warm with laughter and motivation inside. We talked about the diversity of agriculture and FFA on a nation- and state-wide scope, even between us. Leon grew up on a large family farm, and his goals have always been tied to agriculture, but I found

agriculture through the FFA. Some of the local members helped us show how each of us has the courage to take the lead. Our teaming was a true success, and it is great to see that Illinois FFA is in such great hands!

I was so proud to see my friends in the local chapter earning awards, from state proficiency Awards to chapter star. Veronica did a great job with the decorations and a beautiful scrapbook. She has always worked hard within the chapter, and it is wonderful to see her getting the recognition she deserves. Nick's enthusiasm and willingness to try new things keeps everyone smiling. My friend Nathan sang with the National FFA Chorus, and he willingly shared his talent with the whole group to sing as the flags entered. Jacqui has always been a steady strength of the chapter, serving as a strong parliamentary procedure team member,



leading the way with excellent record books, and making sure everyone has a good time. She will be missed when she graduates! Every member of my home chapter made me so proud to have Hillsboro with my name everywhere I go. Thanks, gang, for welcoming me home and reminding me of the good ol' days!

For the rest of the week, I was able to spend quality time with my family and friends. It was a treat to get back on a (temporary) regular workout schedule and catch up on some things at home. That workout schedule even included time at the gym and good walks with my parents! Their love and generosity always makes my home a cozy place for me! My sister even came home for Easter weekend, and I am thankful for the closeness we share! We worked together with my cousins to reverse the roles and cook Easter dinner. Usually my grandma treats us with her culinary talents, but it was fun to turn the tables and serve our loved ones. We have the opportunity to share that love and service not only on holidays like Easter, but all year. I am blessed to know that we are loved and that many sacrifices have been made for us. But the result of that sacrifice is eternal joy.

March 24, 2002

"If you know what you want to do, you don't have to get it right away to do it." - Larry Quinn

Our team celebrated National Agriculture Day in our nation's capital. We started on Monday morning at Freedom's Answer, where we discussed our role in preserving our liberty. We are blessed to have the right to influence national decisions through our votes from the time we are 18 years of age. As the leaders of our agriculture and our nation, it is important for us to pay attention to political decisions and exercise our rights to make the right decisions.

We quickly boarded the Metro and headed to our next meeting at GLOBE, an organization that promotes science education. It is important to value the science of agricultural education, for it is the science that will help agricultural technologies meet the demands of a changing world.

We continued our adventures with a visit to Kansas Senator Brownback's office, where we met with one of his staffers. Senator Brownback is a past national FFA officer, so we know agriculture policy has wonderful advocates in our nation's capitol. We discussed the farm bill, biotechnology and international agriculture trade.

Our education and discussion in agricultural issues continued as we visited the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF). We had the honor of visiting with AFBF President Bob Stallman about the Farm Bill, Trade Promotion Authority (TPA), other trade issues and energy policy, which was a preview to discussions with many other experts in the Farm Bureau. The update on agricultural news and policy was truly welcomed!

Tuesday was spent in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). We were greeted by many staff at the USDA for a brunch reception, where we were able to meet many influential agricultural leaders, and then we left for individual job shadows. I spent the day in the Office of Communications with Deputy Director Larry Quinn. His wisdom and kindness gave me incredible insight – not only to the art of communications, but also to the importance of people. He helped me realize that we should never settle for less than our best in any position, and we can always find a way to fit into a job. He gave me an overview of the Office of Communications, which includes press secretaries for the Director of Agriculture, the design division, and the audio/visual division. I met many people dedicated to promoting the efforts of the USDA, whether it is through visual displays or radio reports.

Our team also had the opportunity to visit with Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman and Deputy Secretary Mosely. We expected to have a quick photo opportunity with Secretary Veneman, but we were able to sit down with her to discuss the future of agriculture and the FFA. She gave us further insight on the Farm Bill and her path to such a successful career.

"The U.S. needs agriculture, and the world needs agriculture." Mr. Little of the Farm Service Agency provided these words of encouragement during an early morning meeting on our final day in Washington, D.C. The FSA supports the FFA through all of the Stars programs, starting at the local level. It is obvious how much they believe in the future of agriculture by providing opportunities to the future leaders of agriculture.

It was National Ag Day, and we joined the dedicated staff at the USDA in their program for elementary students from downtown DC. We split up into pairs to teach 90 4th-graders about agriculture, land, and where our food comes from. Dane and I had a great time teaching over 20 energetic students. Their eyes lit up when they learned that oranges are grown in the south, gasoline can be made from corn and agriculture is in almost everything around us.

Before we left the city, Amber, Dane, and I met with Mrs. Jean-Mari Peltier of the EPA. We were excited to learn that she is a former FFA member, and it was helpful to learn about her career path and how the FFA has helped her reach success.

We went our separate ways, and when I got off the plane in St. Louis, I was thrilled to see the familiar smiles and hugs of my family and one of my best friends from Iowa State University. Over the next few days it was wonderful to reunite with friends and family. I was able to go swing dancing, which always brings a smile to my heart, and I also saw the Hillsboro High School musical. It brought back many memories from when I was in high school because musical season was definitely my favorite. I was even able to go to State Awards Day, which is a day of interviews for all of the state proficiency award and star finalists in Illinois.

There's no place like home! It was great to see Illinois FFA members who I knew from my time in the FFA. I was able to reconnect with so many members and advisors, like Natalie from Hartsburg-Emden, Nick from Seneca, and Jill from Cissna Park. I got to celebrate fellowship for Palm Sunday in my home church, too. I am looking forward to seeing more familiar faces at my chapter banquet this week!

March 17, 2002

"Our patience will achieve more than our force."

"From sea to shining sea ... " I have sung that many times in "America, the Beautiful," but until this past week, I had only seen one of our nation's shining seas. I finally got to see for myself how beautiful the west coast really is as we traveled through California and made a quick trip to Washington.

Abbie and I flew from our retreat in Michigan to the sunny shores of San Francisco. We joined Foundation staff from the national center and drove to our hotel with the windows rolled down! We drove across the bay on a bridge that actually sits on top of the water, and we were in the midst of beautiful mountains! I was glued to the window the whole time, but fortunately we were able to focus on our visits.

The National FFA Foundation is the separate, but supportive organization to the National FFA Organization. Last year, the Foundation raised over \$8.1 million to fund FFA programs. It is this funding that provides opportunities for convention, leadership conferences like MFE, scholarships, proficiency awards, and Career Development Events (CDE).

On Monday we had lunch downtown with folks from Arvesta, a crop protection company. I was fascinated by downtown San Francisco! The hills really are as big as they look in the movies, and we even saw trolley cars! Before we left the city, we drove out to the Golden Gate Bridge. I was so excited to walk across part of it. The pure majesty and vibrant orange are just what I expected, but I also found amazing views of the city and the mountain range. There were even surfers in the water trying to catch some of the waves. It was so windy!!

We drove into the central valley, which is called the Salad Bowl of the U.S. because so many commodities are grown there. We saw tons of almond and pecan trees in the northern part, and as we traveled farther south, I was amazed by the diversity. Fields of onions, alfalfa, broccoli, grapes, cotton, lettuce, and huge dairy farms all bordered each other. It was fun trying to guess what each field was! We also noticed the incredible irrigation used to keep the soil fertile.

Our visits on Tuesday included ChevronTexaco, who sponsors the Tractor Restoration Contest. It is always reassuring to meet businesses who continue with a leadership continuum for their employees, and we sure saw one here. Our next stop was to Morning Star Farms, who export tomatoes and tomato paste. In fact, the next time you eat a pizza from Dominoes or Pizza Hut, you're probably tasting California tomatoes from

Morning Star!

Our visits in the valley continued through Wednesday. We visited World Wide Sires, an international artificial insemination company. The great people we met were all former FFA members, and two of them had even served as state officers in California!

Our next meeting was Dan Dooley, a practicing lawyer who once served as a National FFA Officer. Abbie and I learned a lot about his experiences that will help us serve more effectively.

We next learned about irrigation in California at Rain for Rent, a family-owned business. We discovered that we share similar passions for agricultural literacy to support the livelihood of agriculturalists.

Our final stop was at Calcot, a cooperative for cotton farmers in California and Arizona.

We enjoyed a beautiful drive as we left the central valley and headed to the Los Angeles area. To get there, we had to drive through the Grapevine, a winding road through the mountains that border the valley. It was gorgeous, and we went from 4400 feet above sea level to 2000 in around 15 minutes! And Abbie and I got quite excited as we saw the lights of Hollywood and started planning even the smallest windows of free time for a side trip! J

We had some great visits in the L.A. area, starting with Kubota tractors, which was cool for me because we have a Kubota at home!

ConAgra Grocery was next, and we learned about some of their new products and toured their research & development plants.

Our last stop was to Olympia Tools, and we talked about some great ways to partner with local chapters.

And then, we were fortunate to have a free evening! So after checking into our hotel, we loaded up and headed to Hollywood! Abbie and I were soaked into the bright lights and excitement as we visited the star walk and the Chinese Mann Theatre, where all of the stars have their handprints, footprints, and signatures. We saw Ripley's Believe it or Not "Odditorium" and the Wax Museum, and so many other sites that make Hollywood Boulevard light up! We ate dinner at a small "hole in the wall" restaurant, which helped us see the other, more eccentric side of Hollywood.

Friday continued the excitement of the week. We visited the Santa Anita racetrack, where we met with the Oak Tree Racing Association. They have sponsored curriculum about thoroughbred horses, and it was a gorgeous day to watch the horses and trainers warm up on the track! Just as we were about ready to leave our sunny spot, we saw our first star in California – Jay Mohr! He played the bad agent in "Jerry McGuire," and he now hosts his own show on FOX Sports. Before we knew it, Abbie and I were being interviewed on camera with him! We got through some good messages about the FFA, and we had a lot of fun with it!

We left to take our advisor (from national staff) for the week back the airport, but Abbie and I still had several hours before we had to fly out, so we took the rental car to Beverly Hills. Rodeo Drive, baby! We were blown away by how expensive everything was, but we still had a great time looking! Just as we were about to leave, we went up a small side street to find lunch. As we were getting our table, an older gentleman came to the counter and asked if Ben Stein had come yet because he was to have lunch with him. Abbie and I looked at each other. "THE Ben Stein?!" we thought. And sure enough, the "win Ben Stein's money" Ben Stein showed up at the restaurant and sat literally right behind us!! This was far more than I ever expected in California!

Even though the traffic was absolutely unbelievable, L.A. was a lot of fun! Abbie and I headed back to the airport after a great week, mixed with successful business & industry visits, out-of-this-world sightseeing, and even encounters with some stars! We boarded a plane and flew to Washington, and we spent Saturday in Colfax, Washington, home of the one and only Abbie Kammerzell! I truly enjoyed meeting her family and friends and getting to know more about one of my teammates. We went out to see their family's cattle, and I even got to feed the Highlanders. That is one breed I don't really see in the Midwest, and I enjoyed learning about them, seeing the new calves, and hand-feeding

them with bakery items! And the hills surrounding the area were so gorgeous. I was amazed that such steep slopes are really farmed in fields of wheat!

Abbie and Chuck also took me down to the Snake River, where the breaks were absolutely majestic. I heard some great stories about their summer water sports, and even whitewater rafting in other areas nearby. We then traveled over to Pullman, which is home to Washington State University. The campus sits beautifully on a hill, and even though it was snowing, we were able to see most of the campus, including the College of Agriculture and where Abbie lived while she was there. We ran into several of her friends, and it was obviously a great place to be! On our way back to Abbie's, we drove through Colfax to see the high school, flood control on the river, and rent a movie! We chilled out and caught up on some of our work, but most importantly, hung out with family and friends. Kindness and love are truly the ties that bind Abbie's family, and I am grateful for the warmth and generosity they showed me while I was there. It was so relaxing to have home-cooked food, catch up on sleep and work, and get to know the people who have shaped the character of your vibrant Western Region Vice President! I look forward to seeing them again this year! And if you're looking for some beautiful country, you won't have to look far when you're in Washington!

We will spend most of this week in Washington, DC, working with agricultural supporters and the USDA. Have fun celebrating National Ag Day!

March 10, 2002

Abbie and I joined the rest of the crew for our team retreat. Michigan sure let us know we were up north as we experienced one of their first snows of the season! Crazy winter! Fortunately, I was able to make my way to the Michigan State University campus in East Lansing for the 74th Michigan FFA State Convention. WOW! A huge smile was stuck on my face as I had the honor of meeting so many outstanding FFA members, hanging out with the state officers, talking with legislators and agricultural education supporters, and even reconnecting with old friends.

When I got there, not even the cold air could stop the energetic state officers from painting "the rock!" Different organizations paint this rock all year. It is at least 6 feet tall and wide, and we painted the whole thing blue and then painted a huge "FFA" on the side along with "74th State Convention" in yellow. Even though we (and the paint) were freezing, we had a great time!

The convention started on Monday morning. Over 2,000 FFA members and guests would come to "Light the Fire." I sat with members from the Cassopolis FFA Chapter during one of the sessions, and I learned about the passion for excellence in members like Justin, Amber, and Matt. I saw this same dedication to success in members like Matt from Mason and Katie, who both competed in public speaking events. Talent flooded the auditorium as four members of the Olivet FFA Chapter kicked off the talent review, and those who followed were great, too! And the state officers put on a great convention! The six regional vice presidents gave reflections, encouraging Michigan FFA members to shine their light through Influence, Trust, Integrity, Enthusiasm, and Diversity.

I also had the opportunity to present a motivational workshop and then meet the parents and advisors of the state officer team. Their support and love was an apparent part of their success, and it reminded me how blessed we all are to have people who invest their time and energy in us. And what is a convention without a kickin' dance? Michigan FFA members know how to make it fun, too! Whether I was swingin' with Glenn, chillin' with Jessica, doing the electric slide with Derek, or dancing with Apollos, I had a blast!!

On Tuesday morning the delegates had a very special opportunity to visit the state capitol building and go onto the floor of the State Senate. They presented a resolution to the state officer team, and Kat, who was a member of national FFA talent, sang a beautiful rendition of "God Bless America." Our legislators are very important in supporting agricultural education and making FFA programs possible. Several faculty from the MSU College of Agriculture joined us, too, and the new college dean even put on his old FFA jacket!

Once we returned to the convention arena, it was time for the afternoon session. One tradition in Michigan that I love is that they bring back the state officer team from 20 years ago to do Opening Ceremonies during one of the sessions. Several of them this year wore their blue & gold corduroy, and I was especially taken by the pride of the 1981-82 state president. His excitement as he tapped that gavel to open the session showed me the strength of the FFA and how deeply members are impacted for a lifetime. What a

model he provided to show continued support and Alumni involvement!

I had the privilege of addressing the entire group in a keynote, and I was even backstage with the state officer candidates as the slate was announced! Talk about exciting!!

After the session, I attended the State FFA Degree Banquet before I left for Cassopolis to join Dane, Amber, Barrett, Abbie, and Elio at our team retreat. I will never forget "Lighting the Fire" at the first state convention in the country! Thank you, Michigan FFA, for making it so memorable, and congratulations to the new state officer team – Royce, Luke, Alyssa, Sam, Scott, Bill, Matt, Brandon, Chris, Laura, Miranda, and Sofia. We look forward to getting to know you better, and I know you will do wonderful things for Michigan FFA members! And the 2001-02 state officer team – Kendra, Loretta, Nikki, Jeremy, Jon, Mallory, Todd, Dene', Mark, Katie, Kyle, and Jennifer – congratulations on a great year and convention. Thank you for making me feel right at home with you. You are all so talented, and you will always hold a very special place in my heart!

When I was a state officer in Illinois, we visited the Michigan FFA State Convention, and it was great to be back to see how the association has grown in just two year! It was great to see some old friends, too, including some visiting state officers from Illinois, Kentucky, and Indiana!

I returned to Cassopolis, Michigan, for the remainder of our team retreat at the Edward Lowe Foundation Center for Entrepreneurship. We felt like the characters in the Boxcar Children books series because we stayed in boxcars that have been converted into cabins. Everything was cozy, from the fireplace in the dining hall, to the antiques that tastefully decorated the conference rooms and cabins. The people were so friendly and always provided home-cooked meals and interesting conversations.

We worked on curriculum and themes for NLCSO. We are so excited to work with the new state officer teams this summer to help them present engaging workshops and work effectively as teams! We also had the opportunity to focus on our workshops and speeches for the state convention season, which included some fun team time! We reflected on our progress and accomplishments, but more importantly, we focused on our desire to grow. Every day is a blessing with this talented team!

While we were at the retreat center, we also learned about the ecological features of the site. Fortunately we had some strong four-wheel drives to take us through the snowy trails, and we saw beautiful diversity, from wetlands to forested hills. We also visited with the Foundation Board of Directors to thank them for their generosity and commitment to excellence while helping them understand the FFA.

Our team has grown tremendously since we were elected back in October, and as we grow together, we challenge each other to grow. In the same way, FFA members are seeking new and better opportunities, just like I saw in Michigan this week, whether it was Cathy, who started an 8th grade agricultural program at her school, Belding. Or Lane, who plans to pursue a career in international business. But it is no quick or simple process. As you navigate yourself and others to the highest potential, remember that you can't make the whole trip in one day. Have persistence and patience!

After a great week of relaxation and good work completed, I'm ready to hit the road again for business & industry tours!

March 3, 2002

"When you are navigating for others, remember that they can't make the whole trip in a day."

As we completed our weekend in Delaware with a tour of research facilities and a luncheon with employees, we quickly learned that our kick-off was just what we needed to prepare for a great week of business & industry tours. Abbie and I had a whirlwind schedule from Lancaster and New Holland, Pennsylvania, to Washington, D.C., to Memphis, Tennessee, and finally, to North and South Carolina. I realized the importance of map-reading and navigation as we maneuvered between tight schedules! But we still had successful visits at companies specializing in turf grass management, farm machinery, seeds and chemicals, farm tires, biotechnology, communications, and country apparel.

Overall, we learned how widespread support for the FFA is. Many people simply don't understand what these blue & gold corduroy jackets are all about, but once they do, they are ready to sign up and help out! FFA members, next time you talk to a sponsor, be sure to thank them for their support. Without it, we would be missing many of the leadership opportunities we have today.

We also developed a greater appreciation for the FFA Foundation staff who work diligently to manage relationships with the generous people who support us the FFA. Syngenta even surprised us while we were there to present a grant to support a program to recruit, retain, and recognize agricultural teachers. Thanks to their contribution, the FFA is better equipped to solve the problem of the teacher shortage.

February 24, 2002

"When a person feels encouraged, he can face the impossible and overcome incredible adversity."

FFA Week was wonderful, and Georgia certainly left an impression on me, even in the way I talk. On my last night there, I even said, "So what time are we fixin' to leave in the mornin'?" Now, to you southerners, this is nothing new, but it's quite a change for this Midwestern farmer's granddaughter!

I flew into Atlanta on Monday afternoon, where I met Mr. Wilkinson and the state officers for a fun night at Hard Rock Café. Kit, Trisha, John, Lori, Jonathan, Caci, John, and Catrina sure know how to have a good time, whether it's singing in the car, planning events, or just hangin' out. It was fun to hear about upcoming convention plans that Georgia FFA members must be looking forward to! I had a fabulous time, y'all!

We woke up bright & early on Tuesday for FFA Day at the Capitol. We kicked the morning off with a legislative breakfast, and I quickly learned how much support Georgia FFA has from their state policy makers. During the breakfast, state legislators and the Agriculture Commissioner, Mr. Tommy Irvin, spoke. Not only were most of them FFA members, but they had also served as chapter and state officers or FFA advisors prior to their term in the capitol. We spent the rest of the day visiting with individual legislators, the House of Representatives, Senate, and Senate Agriculture Committee. We had the opportunity to address each group about the ways FFA members are Making it Real, and I was blown away when the House gave Georgia FFA a standing ovation. How wonderful!

Tuesday night I went with Mr. Wilkinson to the Franklin County Livestock Show. The facilities were beautiful, and the agriculture students raised most of the money for the building. I met some great members like Kara, Josh and Marie. Even though I have never shown livestock before, that didn't stop them from asking me to judge a very special class – the adult showmanship class, which is used as a fundraiser. It was great to see so many supporters out there, and I had a great time!

On Wednesday we visited some schools in Georgia and the Atlanta Farmer's Club. The Atlanta's Club was formerly the Chamber's agriculture committee, so I was able to meet with some long-standing agriculture supporters. It was also special to meet many former FFA and NFA members, which just goes to show how strong traditions in the FFA really are! That afternoon we visited Pope High School, which is in suburban Atlanta. They have a brand new horticulture program, but the administration is very supportive, and they are building a brand new beautiful classroom and greenhouse! We finally made our way to Athens, and I saw the University of Georgia. I also met former National FFA President Hillary Smith, and I learned a lot from her kindness and advice from her experiences as a national officer!

Go Dawgs! I was very impressed with the Collegiate FFA Breakfast on Thursday morning. Amanda did a phenomenal job planning the details, and Marcus, the emcee, kept a great show rolling! I also had fun with Julie, Abby, Andy, Claudea, and many professors, including some from one of the few poultry science programs in the country. The Georgia State FFA Advisor, Mr. Woodard, took me through Madison, which is an historic town that still has many of the plantation-style homes. Before we left the city, though, we stopped at the elementary school, where I had the honor of reading a book to his daughter Claire's kindergarten class! Their innocence and excitement for life brought a huge smile to my heart!

Our next stop was at the Georgia Farm Bureau, where we met their president, Mr. Dollar. He showed tremendous hospitality, and I learned a lot about the agriculture in Georgia

and global issues. After a great meeting and lunch, we went to the impressive fairgrounds in Perry for the Georgia National Junior Livestock Show. So many members did a great job showing, and I was impressed by how many FFA Advisors were there to help their students. FFA members put their classroom knowledge into hands-on experience every day, and that was just one example. That afternoon wasn't the last time we would visit the fairgrounds at Perry. We came back for front-row seats at the rodeo!

I flew from Atlanta to meet the rest of my team in Wilmington, Delaware, where we would spend the rest of the weekend for our Business & Industry Tour Kick-off. We met Mr. Jim Borel, who serves as the chairman of the FFA Foundation Sponsors Board, and several other folks from DuPont. We had a great Italian dinner, and then went to the Elton John & Billy Joel concert! We had a blast, and the concert was jam-packed with great music!!

We started our formal training on Saturday morning, and after lunch, we went to the Hagley Museum. DuPont is celebrating its 200th birthday this year, and its rich history began in black gun powder. The Hagley Museum includes the home of the original owners, an old barn, the machine shop, a large steam engine, and the old mills. We were all impressed by the ingenuity that machine operators had even in the 1800's. We take electricity for granted, yet they found many ways to incorporate automation without computers! After a great day, we had the honor of joining the Borel family in their home for a lovely dinner. Mr. and Mrs. Borel are Iowa State University graduates, so it was special to hear about the places and programs that are familiar to both of us. Mrs. Borel had even placed red and yellow tulips on the table! We all had a great time talking, sharing, and even playing pool. As our team reflected on the evening together, Dane said, "There is nothing greater than the heart of a volunteer," and it is so true. Mr. Borel and many other supporters prove that every day. We felt honored to get to know him on a personal and professional level.

Sunday was an exciting day as we met with other DuPont officials for brunch in the beautiful Green Room, where we also enjoyed live jazz music! We then joined members from the agricultural community and FFA members from Delaware, New Jersey, Maryland, and Pennsylvania in a warm reception. Thank you for making us feel right at home! I am excited to meet many other supporters through our business & industry visits this week!

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Robin Niehaus

2001-2002 National FFA Secretary

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Where I'll be this week:

75th National FFA Convention

October 20, 2002

"Go out into the world today and love the people you meet. Let your presence light new light in the hearts of people." ~Mother Teresa

What a week! I got to show Dane around my hometown, and then we met up with the team to get ready for convention!

Dane flew in on Sunday, and we spent Monday and Tuesday rehearsing for convention, seeing the sights of Hillsboro, Illinois, visiting my family, and watching some good movies! We visited the Lawlers, good friends who farm south of town. Ron let Dane ride in the combine with him as he harvested soybeans, and Dane even drove a combine. It was interesting to share with each other the differences of agriculture as we move geographically around our country. Dane also learned what Midwestern eating is all about. From the culinary skills of my grandma, who is a traditional farmwife, to the endless desserts and great meals from my mom and other grandma, we were stuffed when we left home! I also was able to indulge in my love of music as I played the piano, and I even taught Dane to play a little bit! It was just fun to catch up as friends and prepare for the next couple weeks.

On Wednesday we drove over to Indianapolis, and we were able to see the FFA Center one final time for the year. My good friend Lisa was in town, so we were able to catch up, and then our team left early Thursday morning for Trafalgar, home of the Indiana FFA Center. We stayed in the Fellowship Center, a large cabin in which we stayed to rehearse for convention. We marked off a model stage in the conference room, and the surroundings were beautiful. Our cabin was surrounded by woods, and the trees were just approaching their prime of fall colors. A small lake was just over the hill, and we had great nature trails to explore, too!

On Friday night, we had a surprise when our mentors came to the cabin to enjoy dinner

with us. We've just had a great time in Trafalgar! This week we'll spend a few more days here before we go to Louisville on Wednesday. Get ready for the one and only 75th National FFA Convention!

October 13, 2002

"Man's mind once stretched by a new idea never regains its original dimension." -Oliver Wendell Holmes

I have often sung about the Shenandoah Valley, but until this week, I had never been there. I am so fortunate to have had the chance to visit with FFA members and friends in Virginia!

I arrived on Monday evening, and at the airport, I was greeted with a huge neon green sign held by Abram, Becca, Tarinda, Johanna and Renee. We shared some good times in just those few minutes, and then we joined a larger crew at Olive Garden for dinner. Derek, Becky, Stewart, Jordan, Laura and Johnny added to the laughter, and we quickly became the loudest table in the place! As current and former state officers, we all had tons to talk about, and I was blessed to be with such a fun crew!

That night we drove from Roanoke to Blacksburg, home of Virginia Tech. I sincerely enjoyed my conversation with Abram, who is a current state officer, and then Johnny took us on a night tour of campus. It was absolutely beautiful!!

The next morning, Jordan and Josh picked me up, and we recorded some radio interviews for the university before helping with registration and pictures. I was able to meet almost all of the 600 students there as they came in to get their picture taken. Enthusiasm ran across the board, whether they were in sixth grade or seniors in high school! I also got to meet some of the other state officers, like Forest, Katie, Beth, Laura, Jared and Wendy, whom I had met earlier at SPC.

The conference was really run well, and I enjoyed getting to know members like Timothy, Becca, Laura and Tommy. I had a blast with FFA members from the Franklin County FFA Chapter, who are just absolutely nuts! People like Laura, Daniel and Cody led the groups with their enthusiasm!

Once the conference was over, Dr. Hillison took me to the FFA Historical Room. I saw the table at which our founding fathers started the Future Farmers of Virginia back in 1925 and 1926! We have a rich history of which we can be very proud, and I am excited to celebrate that at our 75th National FFA Convention in just a few weeks!

After dinner, Jordan drove me up to the home of Matt, Andrea and Caroline Lohr, who are good friends of the FFA and our national officer team. I enjoyed spending the day with them, hanging out on their farm, and just learning more about the incredible people they are! On my way back to the airport, Matt and baby Caroline took me on the Skyline Drive, which is a road on top of a mountain through Shenandoah National Park. It was beautiful.

I came home on Wednesday evening and spent the next few days with family and getting ready for convention. On Friday, I had the chance to go to Springfield to hang out with some fellow Illinois FFA members. They are a sincere blessing, and I am proud of the job these state officers are doing for 16,000 Illinois FFA members!

On Sunday, Dane flew in from California to hang out, see what Midwestern agriculture is all about, and to get ready for convention together. He will be here until Wednesday morning, when we will meet the team in Indiana to rehearse for convention!

October 6, 2002

"The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to his commitment to excellence, regardless of the chosen field of endeavor." -Vince Lombardi

What a week! I was able to enjoy it at home with my friends and family in Hillsboro, Illinois. I really enjoyed taking walks with my parents, visiting my grandparents, working

on the farm, and even seeing my cousin Doug, whom I hadn't seen since Christmas!

Most of the week was spent working on our plans for convention. I am so excited for the big 75th, and our whole team is just thrilled to spend it with you! I've been to so many conventions as a spectator, and it sure is amazing to be a part of the creation!

On Friday night, I saw a lot of the members in my home chapter. They were having another one of their tailgating parties, where they sell pork patties as a fundraiser for Greenhand members to buy their FFA jackets. I really enjoyed talking to adult supporters in the community and good FFA friends like Bobbi, Matt, Garrett, Billy, Danielle, Robert, Amanda, and Annie.

This week I will be in Virginia for a leadership conference, and then I'll be home to spend more time focusing on national convention! Remember to smile and greet each day with a positive attitude!

September 29

"If you want to feel rich, just count all of the things you have that money can't buy."

This week showed me exactly how rich I am by that definition. Terrific friends, a beautiful alma mater, phenomenal teammates, opportunities to meet FFA members and other friends in the agriculture industry, a loving family, milestones of celebration, and a powerful Savior.

I started the week in Des Moines with a good friend and in Ames at Iowa State University, where I will return in January. While I was there, I met with my academic adviser, choir director, and countless friends. Campus is gorgeous in the fall months, and I just soaked it all in!

Monday night I flew back to Indianapolis to meet Elio and staff from the National FFA Foundation. We drove to Chicago on Tuesday morning to visit some of the leaders of Case New Holland. Mr. Monferino, the CEO and President of CNH, sure believes in the FFA! That night I flew from Chicago to Lexington, Ky., where I was greeted by Josh and Matt, students at the University of Kentucky and former state officers. We ate at Joe Bologna's, a fabulous Italian restaurant, along with many others who would be presenting at the University of Kentucky FFA Leadership Conference. On Wednesday morning, we left at 6 a.m. to drive to Princeton in the western part of Kentucky. The van ride was tons of fun! I enjoyed getting to know great people like Christina, Laura, Curtis, Andrew, and Danielle better. Fun times!

Once we arrived in Princeton, we set up for the conference and joined the Caldwell County FFA Chapter for lunch at the Majestic steakhouse. They are a Models of Innovation Chapter in Student Development. What an honor to hang out with them! I had such a blast talking with Smiley, Brandi, Ladaira, Brittney, Seth, Sara, Daniel and so many more! And I just adored my friend Josh's attitude. When I asked him how he was doing, he said, "I'm getting better every second!" His pride is evident in more than just his FFA jacket! I also got to hang out with my buddies like James from the Crittenden County FFA Chapter, and I discovered that their advisor is even a family friend! The conference had about 80 participants, and it was a true success! We all piled into the van for our trip back, and we stopped at Texas Roadhouse for steak. It was a great night, and I even got to swing dance with Curtis! Almost every FFA Chapter celebrates their advisor's birthday when they go out for dinner, and the UK bunch is no exception to that rule. We even celebrated the "anniversary" of Dr. Peiter and Chad!

The next morning Tracy and Sara picked me up from my hotel to show me around Lexington and the UK campus. Even though it was a rainy morning, we had a great time, and we enjoyed Lexington cooking at Ramsey's, where I had my first hot brown sandwich and Ale 8! That afternoon, Stephanie kicked off another great conference for more than 300 FFA members from central Kentucky. Wow, did we have a good time! Tiffany and Brooke did a fabulous job of getting everyone involved in their workshop, and state officers Julie, Lindsey, and Chad put their talents into action to help develop the leader in other members. I'll never forget talking to FFA members like Holli, Justin, Marty, Casey, Sheldon, the Scott County Chapter, and my enthusiastic Bourbon FFA Chapter! The conferences in Kentucky were just what I needed – to hang out with FFA members again! Thank you for a phenomenal experience, and to the presenters, my new

friends, thank you for making me a part of the Wildcat family!

I got home very late on Thursday night, and I spent the next two days with very special friends to celebrate a beautiful occasion. My friend Amy, a buddy from high school, got married, and I was honored to stand up with her as one of her bridesmaids. The love she and Bryan share is fabulous, and every detail of the wedding was just wonderful.

On Sunday I had the chance to get together with my good friend Michelle to see my absolute favorite recording artist, Steven Curtis Chapman, in concert. WOW!!! It was a great show and worship experience, and something that I will always cherish in my friendship with Michelle.

What a week! This week I'll be home preparing for convention and spending time with family. I feel truly blessed with many riches that money cannot buy.

September 22

"I don't know what your destiny will be...but one thing I know...the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve." -Dr. Albert Schweitzer

As our team spent our final week in the National FFA Center, people who serve every day surrounded us. The center staff works diligently to provide opportunities for hundreds of thousands of FFA members, whether they are developing leadership programming, taking catalog orders or raising money to provide more opportunities. FFA members, we are blessed to have a team that works diligently and faithfully to ensure that this organization we love continues to grow!

Abbie, Dane, Elio, Amber, Barrett and I had a great week in the center, working on the 75th National FFA Convention. We are getting so pumped, and we can't wait to see you there! This week we fine-tuned our retiring addresses, put together convention scripts, recorded our parent recognition segments, scripted reflections, and had our exit interviews. It seems impossible that convention is only a month away!

A highlight of the week was our day-trip to Louisville. As we walked into Freedom Hall, tears filled my eyes as I envisioned thousands of blue jackets and smiles flooding the convention. We even stopped at our hotel, and the whole day was a trip down memory lane. Before heading back to Indianapolis, we visited the Derby Dinner Playhouse, where we saw a musical that has been a long-time favorite for both Abbie and me, "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers." The show was fabulous, and afterward we worked with Georgette, who directed the show. She helped us with our retiring addresses as we began thinking about how we can use a round stage and theatrics to improve the effectiveness of our presentations.

Friday was sure a crazy day! We traveled about 30 miles outside of Indianapolis to record our parent recognition segments and some other videos for convention. As we started to head back, terrible tornadoes started tearing through the city! Fortunately they did not hit us, but the damage the storm left behind caused many roads to be closed. As a result, a trip that should take 30 minutes took three and a half hours! Once we got back to the city, we headed straight to the FFA center, where we were greeted by many of the center staff. We spent one last evening with all of them, and we were able to thank them with in song, and we presented our staff mentors with small gifts. Lee Anne is fabulous, and I sure enjoyed playing with her son Aidan that night, too!

I will never forget the memories our team created together in that last week in Indianapolis. Memories like capture the flag, a broken toe, late-night ice cream runs and even cleaning out our lockers and work stations. We truly are happy because we have had the opportunity to serve. We all have that opportunity every day. It doesn't matter where you are, how old you are, or even what title you have. When we serve others, we find true happiness.

September 15, 2002

"If you judge others, you have no time to love them."
Theresa

-Mother

This week was jam-packed with sponsor visits in New York City, Washington, D.C. and North Carolina. I also spent the weekend with a good friend in Boston, and then we started a full week of convention planning in Indianapolis.

Elio and I flew into Newark on Monday morning and met two National FFA Foundation Staff to start our week of visits. We took a bus into New York City and headed out to our first two visits, Phillip Morris and Mitsui. It was sure fun to reminisce about our Japan trip with those sponsors! We also went through Grand Central Station and Times Square. After freshening up at the hotel, we went down to Ground Zero, where the World Trade Center once stood. It was incredible to be in the place of which we had seen so many pictures and a place that symbolizes tremendous patriotism and unity in our country. Walking down those streets made me think about what it must have been like one year ago. I can't even imagine the pain felt by those close to the scene and the hearts of people affected that day.

We made our way back up to 42nd Street to see my first Broadway production, "42nd Street!" The show is about Broadway, so it was a great one to see, and going to Broadway has always been a dream of mine! We walked around the busy city for a while longer, and headed to bed. On Tuesday morning, Elio and I got up bright and early to be at the NBC Building before 6 a.m. for the "Today Show." We made our way into the front row. The first time they came on for weather, we were right there with huge smiles and excited waves. We went to our next two visits, had visits at China Town, and boarded a plane to Washington, D.C.! We had several more visits in D.C. on Wednesday, September 11. We were able to honor the victims of September 11 with a moment of silence at the flagpole. We flew out that night to Greensboro, North Carolina, and the airports were pretty empty.

On Thursday, we had a marathon day with six business and industry visits in Greensboro, Raleigh and Charlotte, North Carolina! We headed our separate ways Thursday evening, and I flew up to Boston to visit my good friend Kyle, who goes to Boston College. We went to high school in Hillsboro, Ill., together, sharing experiences in high school musicals and tons of other fun stuff. He's now a theatre major, and I had a great time being surrounded by people involved in musicals and theatrical stuff. Kyle introduced me to many of his fabulous friends. On Friday we hung out around the beautiful campus. Saturday, we hit downtown. The choreographer-extraordinaire, Karen, joined us, and we ate at unique restaurants before walking through historic downtown. Then we took a duck tour of the city, which was so cheesy that it was hilariously fun! We learned about the history of the city, including the battles of the Revolutionary War and even why the public transportation lines are assigned with certain colors. Before we headed home, we made our way to the Harvard University campus and ate at a fabulous Mexican restaurant. Let's be honest, Kyle and Karen are tons of fun!

I said goodbye to the BC gang on Sunday morning to join the team in Indianapolis, where we kicked off a week of convention planning. I can't believe how close it is, and the 75th is going to be fabulous!

September 8

"Spend your time and words wisely. They are the only two things you can never take back." -Joe Hampton, Illinois Director of Agriculture

This week I spent a few more days at home, traveled to North Carolina for sponsor visits with Elio, and then I went to the Chiarelli home with Elio for the weekend.

What a week! I truly cherished spending time at home with my family, whether I was taking walks with my parents, shopping with my grandma, sharing pictures with my grandpa and grandma, or visiting my great grandma. I am blessed to be surrounded with love, and they truly create a warm home for me. While I was home, I also caught up with a few friends and attended the first-ever Agriculture Breakfast in Hillsboro. Toby Dean and the Hillsboro Chamber of Commerce started the event in conjunction with an auction to raise money for scholarships for an FFA member and 4-H member in the county. Illinois Director of Agriculture Joe Hampton was the featured speaker, and I always appreciate learning from him. He is a great personal friend and friend to Illinois agriculture. The breakfast had a great turnout, and FFA members from Hillsboro, Nokomis and Lincolnwood were there to help out. It was great to catch up again with friends like Tim from Nokomis, whom I hadn't seen since MFE three years ago! I also loved hanging out with good friends like Cody, Suzanne, Whitney, Rory, Sandra, Jamie, Robert, Matt and many more!

I flew out on Thursday afternoon to meet Elio in North Carolina, where we would have a business and industry visit with Bayer CropScience. We had a great morning of nine back-to-back meetings, and we quickly found resounding support for the National FFA Organization. Several former FFA members work there, and we enjoyed learning about their future in biosciences. After our visits, we flew back to Pittsburgh to spend the weekend at Elio's house, which is about 25 miles west of the city. We arrived safely, but my luggage sure didn't! I knew that it was too good to be true that I hadn't lost my luggage yet! I was thankful that I was at Elio's house and not a conference or something! Fortunately the airline found it with no problems, and we were reunited the next day.

It was a true joy to be at Elio's house. When we arrived, we stopped in Chiarelli's Pizza, their family's pizza shop. Our team has heard about this pizza all year, and it was a real treat to finally taste it. Talk about delicious!! The weekend was just fabulous. Elio lives on 110 acres in the gorgeous Pennsylvania hills, and he showed me the farm and the beautiful woods behind his house. We even walked down to a waterfall, which is one of my favorite things in the world! On Saturday night, we had a special treat when some of our friends from Texas called Elio because they were in Pittsburgh for the Aggie football game. It worked out really well to meet up for dinner on Mount Washington at a restaurant overlooking the city. The food, view, and company were absolutely amazing. On Sunday morning, we went to Elio's church, and then Elio, his mom and I went shopping. When we came back home, it was time for the acclaimed traditional Chiarelli Sunday feast. Traditional Italian pasta and salad overflowed our plates, and it was magnificent. We enjoyed an evening relaxing as we also celebrated Elio's dad's birthday.

I am looking forward to a busy, yet fun week of business and industry visits in New York City, Washington, D.C., and North Carolina.

September 1

"When nothing is sure, everything is possible." - Margaret Drabble

If you had told me a couple years ago that I would grow to love Chicago, I would have never believed you. But after spending a summer there interning with the farm department at WGN Radio, I do love the city! It was great to spend a few days there catching up with friends and celebrating Midwestern agriculture.

On Monday, I went to Navy Pier with my friend Kenan, who is a senior at the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences (CHSAS). We had a blast catching up and talking about our goals and dreams. He is serving this year as the Section 8 President, and they sure are in good hands! We walked to Michigan Avenue, where we did some window-shopping, and I joined my teammates on a conference call about Washington Leadership Conference. Afterwards we went to a restaurant that features jazz music, which was an absolute blast! As we walked back, we stopped at the Summer Dance dance floor to brush up on some moves. Back at the hotel, I worked on convention items, mainly my retiring address. I was able to catch up with another friend on his way home from work, and it felt great to catch up on my work.

Tuesday was a walk down memory lane as I took the public bus to the Tribune Tower to visit the crew at WGN Radio. Orion, Lottie and Max were in their places as usual, working on the daily farm news! I was also able to see my good friends Jim, Karen, Carol and many more who work in other parts of the station. Lottie even put me to work a little bit as I fell into the routine of gathering market reports! I was honored to join Orion and Max on part of the Noon Show to talk about the 75th National FFA Convention, and then Orion took us all out at the 410 Club. Quite a treat!

That night, a couple other friends from CHSAS called me up, so we took a walk through Grant Park. What a beautiful city, and Dan and Helen are wonderful people! After working hard on my retiring address, I decided to have my first professional massage on Wednesday morning. I was ready to start a conference after that relaxation. Soon state officers from Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin began to show up. I enjoyed lunch with the Illinois crew, and then we rehearsed for our flag entrance. GROWMARK is a regional cooperative that services Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and Ontario. Each year they invite three state officers from each state and young agricultural representatives from Canada. One of our main responsibilities is to present the colors for the main session. After rehearsal, we toured our hotel, the Hilton Chicago. When it was built, it had 3,000 rooms, which was a record-setter for the time. Since then, they have renovated the facilities to make the rooms larger, but its grand appearance has not changed. It has

been home to many movies, like "My Best Friend's Wedding" and "The Fugitive." We were able to see behind the scenes in the huge kitchen and sneak a peak at the largest suite, which was 5,000-square-feet!

After the tour, I went on a walk with Kathy, Rob, Eric and Miss Kim from Iowa. We went down to Buckingham Fountain and headed back to prepare for the evening's activities. It was a joy to see friends from my home church, like Steve and Penny Wait and Roger and Anita Marcoot. I saw other familiar faces in Illinois agriculture, like Mr. and Mrs. John Scholl and Illinois Farm Bureau Vice President Phil Nelson. We all found our seats in the conference room for the banquet and entertainment, Ricky Skaggs. He played some great bluegrass music.

Once the evening's festivities were over, many of us took a walk in another part of the beautiful city. We walked right by the water's edge near Shedd Aquarium and the Adler Planetarium before heading back. I enjoyed hanging out with the Iowa crew and Emilee from Illinois. I also learned a lot about Canadian agriculture from Andrew and Jim. Back at our hotel, I couldn't resist playing the beautiful grand piano in the lobby before heading to bed. We kicked off Thursday morning with the Young Leaders' Breakfast. It gave us great hope to be among ambitious leaders, and I was honored to address the group. The main business session started, and we kicked it off with the flag entrance. Throughout the next few hours, we helped GROWMARK celebrate their 75th conference, which gave us great ideas for our own celebrations in FFA! The state presidents and Ontario leader Beth-Ann presented remarks to the group that made me proud to be wearing the blue and gold! The end came quickly, and I had to say goodbye to my friends from Iowa as well as Matt, Laura and Brooke from Wisconsin. Scholarship recipients were also honored at the conference, so I saw friends from Illinois and my school, Iowa State University. I once again joined Jay, Drew, Emilee Mr. Craft, my buddies from Illinois, for lunch, and then we were on our separate ways. I joined a fun and generous group from the Rolling Hills FS in southwestern Iowa on a shuttle to the airport, and we spent some great time laughing.

After a great flight, my parents greeted me at the St. Louis airport for the beginning of a week at home. I spent the next couple days catching up with family, working on my retiring address, and talking with friends. On Saturday, I headed down to Highland for a very special day. My friend Amy is getting married later this month, and we had a bridal shower for her. Many friends and family showed up to celebrate and wish her well, and then we headed down to St. Louis for a girls' night out. We ate dinner and went to the Blues Festival, but we had specific tasks. We went on a photo scavenger hunt downtown, and it was hilarious.

On Sunday I went to my home church, and then I spent the afternoon with my great grandma. She is 93-years-old, and I always love to hear her stories. That night my parents and I went to the drive-in theatre at our neighboring town to see "Signs." I was scared half the time, but we still had a great time!

I look forward to a few more days at home, and then I'll join Elio for some sponsor visits on the East Coast.

August 25

"Everyone owns their own career." - Jody Horner, VP of Human Relations, Cargill Global

This week I was reminded how much other people and companies believe in the future of agriculture through visits to two generous sponsors of the National FFA Organization. Abbie, Elio, Amber, Dane, Barrett and I spent the entire day on Monday visiting the Toyota Company in Georgetown and Erlanger, Kentucky. Toyota and the FFA have a lot in common, because both organizations value being connected with the community. Our morning began with breakfast at Georgetown College with the college president, Mr. David Crouch, as well as several folks from Toyota. We then headed to the Toyota Motor Manufacturing plant in Georgetown, Ky., where we took a tour of the plant. We were so impressed to see finished Toyota Camry, Avalon and Sienna that all came from a huge coil of steel! Quality and detail were so important to the workers, too. In just 56 seconds, one small detail such as the headlights or cooling systems are added to each vehicle! It was amazing!

After our tour, we met many community members at the Chamber of Commerce dinner. Included in the group were many former national and state FFA officers, including Illinois native Bob Quick. His state officer team played a special role in the convention when I was a state officer, and it was a joy to see him again and hear stories from his national

officer year. During the luncheon, the six of us delivered a presentation to explain what FFA is all about, and we met FFA members from the Scott County FFA Chapter! We quickly made our way to the Toyota North America Headquarters in Erlanger, Kentucky, where we met with many of the business executives. After our meeting, several Toyota folks led us to the Holly Hill Girls' Home, which shelters girls from the age of 12-18 who have experienced hard times at home. Their enthusiasm was incredible, and we enjoyed an evening of pizza, activities to get to know each other, and a photo scavenger hunt. Mallory, Amanda and Courtney were on the team of "Robin's Rock Stars" along with past national officer Doug Kueker, who just completed a summer internship with Toyota. We did cartwheels, got all of us off the ground at once, found purple things, and much more on camera. Our creative juices were sure working, and we won the event! It was so amazing to see them work together and take pride in something they had achieved. There is so much potential in every person we meet!

The entire day at Toyota proved how valuable strong ties between our organizations and the community truly are. Much of the day's success should be credited to Doug Kueker and Mrs. Helen Donaldson, who arranged the visits and made us feel right at home.

The next day, Amber and I boarded a plane to Minneapolis, where we would visit with the folks from Cargill. On Tuesday evening, National FFA Sponsor's Board member Alan Willits welcomed us into his beautiful home for dinner. He is a former FFA member from Joy, Illinois, and he has lived all over the country as well as in Argentina and Switzerland while working for Cargill. Suzanne McCarty, who works with Community Relations at Cargill and will receive her Honorary American FFA Degree at convention, also joined us. We enjoyed getting to know each other and learning about the many business ventures of Cargill.

On Wednesday, we drove to the beautiful Lake Office, home to the offices of many Cargill senior executives. We had the opportunity to once again meet with Mr. Willits and Mrs. McCarty, and we were joined by Mr. Bill Buckner, who explained the meat business of Cargill, also known as Excel. Jody Horner, who serves as the vice president of human resources, helped us understand what they look for in employees. We also learned about the sweeteners business of Cargill from a former Nebraska FFA state officer!

After our morning meetings, we enjoyed lunch with Cargill President and CEO, Mr. Warren Staley, Chief Financial Officer Bob Lumpkins, Horizon Milling President Guy Shoemaker, Mr. Buckner, Mr. Willits, and Mrs. McCarty. It was exciting to talk about the future of agriculture and FFA with them, especially as we talked about the Farm Bill. It was also interesting as questions about the Canadian Wheat Board were presented to Amber. Every person we met who is connected to Cargill is simply passionate about agriculture and constantly adding value to what they do. Their desire to improve and nourish the world really impressed me.

After our visits, Amber and I jumped on a plane to Minot, North Dakota, where her mom met us! I got to spend the next few days at Amber's house between Crosby and Ambrose, North Dakota, which is located about six miles from Canada and 25 from Montana! It was a true joy to see where my teammate and friend comes from, and I quickly learned that her family is as great as she is! We spent the next few days checking cattle and horses, riding around to see the pastures and countryside, watching movies, and sharing many stories. One night we took a trip to Canada for dinner, and I felt like I was in a whole new world as we went shopping in their Wal-Mart, even though it was just a few miles from the border! Amber, her dad, and brother Drew are all professional auctioneers, too, so one night we "auctioned" off the silverware at the dinner table! We also rode horses through the beautiful prairie land, and I was excited to go faster than a trot for the first time in my life! The rolling hills and fields of wheat, canola, and sunflowers were absolutely beautiful, and we saw more of that gorgeous countryside as Amber's mom, Amber, and I drove down to Medora for the musical on Saturday night. On the way, we stopped at the North Dakota Badlands, which is one of the most beautiful places I've even been. The rocks form smooth plateaus and tapering slopes, and a river cuts through the middle. We drove all the way up to the top, and Amber and I hiked around some of the rocks. Our next stop was Watford City, where Amber's sister Paige was playing in a volleyball tournament. She had some awesome blocks and serves! Once the game was over, the four of us girls headed to Medora, which looks much like an old western town. After strolling through some of the shops, we found our seats at the show, which is set among the beautiful Badlands. Musicians in the show were from all over the country, and their talent shone through a variety of country, gospel and patriotic songs. They also clogged and danced, the live band wowed us, and we learned about the history of past U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, who once ranched in that area. Chinese acrobats even entertained us during part of the show!

We drove several hours to Minot that night, and I flew out of North Dakota on Sunday morning after an unforgettable stay with Amber's family. I arrived in Chicago that afternoon. Even though I live about four hours from Chicago, the city feels like home to me because I had an internship there last summer. I lived with my aunt, and we were able to reunite on Sunday afternoon as we walked through Viva Chicago, a Latin festival, and down to Navy Pier. Many memories came back to me in one short evening, and I look forward to experiencing more of the city and seeing the good folks in Illinois agriculture at the GROWMARK annual conference this week.

August 18

"Expressed affection is the best of all methods to use when you want to light a glow in someone's heart and feel it in your own." -Ruth Stafford Peale

The 75th National FFA Convention is 75 days away! That was the first thing we mentioned in our Convention Steering Committee meeting on Friday afternoon. It really hit home that the hard work of our team national staff, and members around the country is about to pay off in one of the most amazing celebrations FFA has seen! This week our whole team was in Indianapolis working on convention plans, and we can't wait to see all of you there!

On Monday we started with the parent recognition ceremony and the first brainstorming session for the Reflections/Kick Off session. That night we had our mentor night, and Amber and I went with Jason and Amy Givan, who graciously filled in for our out-of-town mentors. We traveled to New Salem to eat at the Red Dog Saloon, an awesome hometown family restaurant! We have always enjoyed hanging out with them, and that night we grew to respect and appreciate them even more! After dinner we went through Danville, where we stopped at the Mayberry Café. Sitting on the street in front was an old cop car, so Amber and I jumped in, being sure to run the siren and lights as loudly as possible! Before we headed back to Indianapolis, we stopped for ice cream. The whole night just reminded me of how blessed I truly feel to have such wonderful friends, whether they are at home, college, in Indianapolis, or across this whole wonderful country!

We kicked off Tuesday morning by wrapping up parent recognition, and we spent the rest of the day working on convention scripts and other personal work. Wednesday morning was filled with tons of excitement because Dane had just come back from a special trip to Texas. He represented the National FFA Organization at President Bush's Economic Roundtable, where he met with dignitaries like President George W. Bush, Vice President Richard Cheney, and seven cabinet members, including Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman. He had a great day, and we could not have had a better representative of youth and the future of agriculture. He sure made us all proud! Wednesday was simply a full day, too. We planned teacher recognition, walk-ins, installation ceremonies, and part of reflections. At the end of the day, we were exhausted and excited from the progress we had made.

On Thursday, we met with our coach at the center to start processing through our retiring addresses. We also enjoyed a luncheon function with the corporate leaders of Dow AgroSciences. They are our neighbors at the National FFA Center, and their friendly relations extend much more deeply with generous sponsorship of programs such as BLAST Off and other state officer enrichment programs. Our team truly enjoyed our time there, which just added to a spectacular day. That night we celebrated with a very fun dinner before turning in for the night.

We wrapped up all of our ceremony work for convention on Friday morning, and we also met our new travel agents. After lunch, we became part of an all-staff birthday celebration with "The Weakest Link" – National FFA style! Abbie, Barrett, Amber, Dane, Elio and I were matched up against each other, and they asked questions ranging from "What is 2+2" to "How many kernels of corn are in the cross section of the FFA emblem?" We had a blast, and the final duel came down to Dane and me. The rivalry was on, and in the one minute we had to rally points, I won! What a fun team activity. Our afternoon continued with the convention steering committee meeting, and we wrapped up for the day. I met my mentor, Lee Anne Shiller, and her son Aidan for dinner at an amazing restaurant, and we just had a great time talking and catching up on the events of our lives! What a true joy her friendship is!

While the team stayed in Indianapolis, I had the opportunity to drive back home to Hillsboro for a day to celebrate the 50th wedding anniversary of two of the most special people in my life – my grandparents. More than 120 people joined our family in the

celebration, which was filled with food, music, a video and even a reenactment of my grandparent's first date by my two youngest cousins! It was hilarious! More than anything, the day was a celebration of 50 years in a solid foundation of faith, love, and joy. They have always shown us how much we are loved, and I am so blessed to have grandparents who are amazing role models in my life!

Before I headed out on Sunday, I was able to spend time with my parents and sister Karla. I joined the team in Georgetown, Kentucky so we could prepare for our visit to Toyota. Doug Kueker, who was a national officer last year, is completing an internship there right now, so it was also a true joy to hang out with him!

I am looking forward to business visits at Toyota and Cargill as well as visiting Amber's home with her in North Dakota!

August 11

"You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop and look fear in the face. You must do the thing you think you cannot do." -Eleanor Roosevelt

That is exactly how I felt when I stopped to look fear in the face as I went mountain climbing with some of my teammates on our retreat...it was the fear of failure. But just like anything in life, we will sure miss out on a lot if we're too scared to try. The last few weeks have certainly been a whirlwind for all of us, and I have loved spending quality time with the team and phenomenal FFA members from all over the country.



During the July board meeting, we discussed the future of FFA, including opportunities for short-term agriculture students, convention activities, awards for the 75th National FFA Convention, and the new delegate process. Our team works closely with nine adult board members from across the country, who are dedicated to ensure a bright future for FFA members. We truly enjoyed our time in downtown Indianapolis, and while we were there, we met the national officers from MANRRS (Minorities in Agricultural, National Resources, and Related Sciences) and PAS (Postsecondary Agriculture Students). Our organizations have similar

goals, and it was exciting to bring the three groups together. I saw some great friends like Sean Arians, with whom I worked on a team in Illinois. He now serves as a national PAS officer. I also caught up with Penny Haas-Wittler, a former staff member in the University of Illinois ag ed department and Corey Flournoy, a good friend from Chicago. What a week!

Our team left on Wednesday for Washington, D.C., where we would spend the next week and a half for State Presidents' Conference (SPC). We prepared for the conference by designing our kick off session, practicing reflections, and forming other workshops for the state officers who would arrive. It was the first time our team has planned something together that we would also present together, and it was wonderful! The National FFA Staff leading the conference also gave us some very special surprises. On Friday evening, we went to dinner at the Holiday Inn where Amber, Barrett, Abbie and Elio had all gone to SPC when they were state officers. Then we hopped into taxis, and much to our surprise, ended up at the beautiful Kennedy Center, where we watched one of my favorite musicals, "Aida." The show was spectacular, and we enjoyed the beautiful view of the city and illuminated fountains before we headed in for the night.

We worked hard over the weekend and experienced our second big surprise on Sunday afternoon, when we drove to Baltimore for an Orioles game. We were all singing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" as we got a small tan and watched a very close game with the White Sox. After the game we walked to the inner harbor for dinner and some great laughs! We spent Monday in final preparations for the conference, and that evening we had planned to go out on the evening tour of the city so we could guide the officers when they came. What we didn't expect, though, was to go on the tour in a beautiful limo! Our team sang "My Girl" to thank the staff who gave us more than we deserved, and we simply had a blast that night!

State Presidents' Conference officially began on Tuesday, as two state officers from all 50 states and Puerto Rico arrived to the Sheraton hotel. Each of us reunited with friendships that had begun earlier in the year, and we also started new friendships. Our parents were also able to join us for the week, and we enjoyed sharing with them a small part of what we do all year. The afternoon began with our kick off session, "Scenes of America: Lighting the Way." We personified wacky characters in four different settings, Karayza High School, the Interstate Agriculture Fair, Golden Years Retirement Home, and at State Presidents' Conference. Our characters were hilarious, and we even busted out in a choreographed dance to Vanilla Ice! Also, when we were in the retirement home, we brought our parents on stage and introduced them as our "kids" visiting us in the home!

That evening Abbie emceed a dinner at which we thanked our major sponsors, GMAC and Chevy Trucks. GMAC Representative David Jones addressed the entire group at dinner, and he reinforced the message that we need to set high standards for ourselves to achieve. That night we created The Perfect Storm as we discovered the power of using resources and partners to improve local programs. Tony Small from the National FFA Center provided the Local Program Success CD-ROM to each state officer as a tool to use for local programs. Every local chapter can benefit from it, whether they use it to download applications or find information about CDEs and SAEs. Jo Lynne Pierce explained the Chevy R.O.C.K. (Reaching our Communities and Kids) program, and Dr. Pamela Riley shared the vision of the S.A.V.E. (Students Against Violence Everywhere) program as potential partners and resources for FFA chapters.

Once the workshop was over, we boarded the buses and headed down to the Capitol Building for reflections. Our overall theme for the conference was "Lighting the Way," and each day had its own theme. Tuesday's theme was "The Power of One," when we talked about lightning. It takes just one bolt of lightning to break the darkness of an entire night sky. In our reflections we talked about the power of one in lightning and in the storms of our own lives, including our nation's history, agriculture, state officers and other people. We sang "God Bless America" as we faced the Capitol and watched storms in the distance roll overhead.

Wednesday was "Sparking Hope," and we started at the U.S. Department of Education, where we learned about the future of education and the President's new program that includes the concept of "No Child Left Behind." Education is essential to our organization because its foundation is in agricultural education. Afterward we prepared for congressional visits on the Hill. Our afternoon was kicked off with a Congressional Luncheon. I had the opportunity to hang out with my hometown officers from Illinois and the Indiana gang, Kyle and Amanda. I would be failing to mention a very important part of the event if I left out the bell. I was the official bell-ringer, which captured everyone's attention as each congressional guest arrived. During the luncheon, Barrett delivered a phenomenal speech to the group centered around "FFA members, why are we here?" We begin each FFA meeting with that question, after which we respond, "To practice brotherhood, honor agricultural opportunities and responsibilities, and develop those qualities of leadership which an FFA member should possess." His speech displayed many of our proud accomplishments and promises for the future, and it was powerful!

That afternoon everyone split up to visit their senators and representatives, and I headed out with Jay and Rebecca from Illinois. They have been good friends for quite some time, and I was so proud of them not only when they were elected, but as they continue to work hard throughout the year, always standing for integrity. We visited with the agriculture correspondent for Representative Ray LaHood, and then we watched part of a session in the House of Representatives from the gallery. Decisions are made there daily that affect our freedoms, and we had the opportunity to watch part of it! On our way back to the hotel, I had a great time on the bus. Mike from South Carolina and Stan from Utah even tested me to see how gullible I was as they told me they had met President Bush! I eventually figured out they were lying, but we sure had a great time! Once we got back to the hotel, we all changed into our matching conference polos and left for the evening tour of Washington, D.C. We started at the Vietnam Wall, Korean Memorial, Lincoln Memorial and Reflecting Pool. I enjoyed my time with officers like Marlene and Lindsey from Ohio, Rob and Stefan from Iowa, and Jeff from Louisiana. We ran into many other FFA members and good friends, like Illinois FFA members Kenan, Lisa, and Sarah, who were there for WLC. I also saw some great friends on the Illinois Farm Bureau and Affiliates Cooperative Activities tour. There's no place like home, and it's powerful to realize the influence we as FFA members can have every day, especially when we understand the freedom we have in this wonderful country. Once we left the area, we also saw the Jefferson Memorial, and we finally made our way to Iwo Jima, where we would have reflections. Amber and Elio told the beautiful story of the soldiers posting the flag at Iwo Jima, and we all talked about sparking hope through selfless service, faithful service, and by believing in a cause. The view over the city was

fascinating!

Thursday was a day of "Illumination," and there was nothing but excitement in the air! This is the day we would meet the President of the United States of America, George W. Bush! Anxiety filled our hearts as we went through security of the White House Executive Office Building. Once everyone was seated, our team was pulled out of the room to be briefed on what would happen once the President arrived. Before we knew it, President Bush came around the corner, and tears filled my eyes. He shook each of our hands as his staff took a picture with each of us. We then took a team picture, and I had the opportunity to present a gift on behalf of our team, SPC and the entire National FFA Organization. When my grandparents found out we would have the opportunity to meet him, they asked that I tell him they are praying for him and that they are proud of him. I shared those thoughts with him, and I was amazed by his response. He said that the greatest gift anyone can give the President is prayer. How powerful! We all headed back into the main room with the rest of the SPC participants with tears in our eyes as we awaited the President's remarks. Dane came from the holding room with President Bush and provided a beautiful introduction. The President commended our involvement with leadership and agriculture, and he also addressed the fact that we are at war, but a different kind of war that we will win. The event was totally closed to the press, and he was very frank with us. After he spoke, he came down to shake hands of those sitting in the first few rows before he had to leave. We also hear about the Freedom Corps and a report from the Department of Agriculture at the building.

We left to eat lunch at Union Station, and I joined Amanda from Indiana and Brandon from Colorado. We had a great chat, and then we also enjoyed some great Ben & Jerry's ice cream. Ice cream is always fun to share, especially with state officers like Tracy from Oklahoma and Dan from Kansas! Our next stop was the Arlington National Cemetery, where many fallen soldiers are remembered. Some of the most famous sites include the Kennedy graves and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Marines guard the tomb 24 hours a day, and they have a ceremonial changing of the guard every half hour. We were able to witness the beautiful ceremony, and Abbie, Elio, Amber and Barrett presented an FFA wreath on the tomb. What a tremendous honor, and how humbling it was to realize how many have given their lives for our liberty.

Once we reached the hotel, Dr. Rick Rigsby empowered us to not only make an impression, but an impact. He kept us laughing, crying, and challenged. We can't wait to see what he will do on stage at the National FFA Convention in October! Dr. Case, our National FFA Advisor, also joined us that day, and he helped us introduce the new delegate process, which is driven by issues that members have sent in throughout the year. The 101 state officers there embraced some intense issues that will direct the future of our organization! That night we went up to the top floor of the hotel as Abbie and Dane led a beautiful reflections about Illumination, focusing on people who act as stars that guide us through our lives.

Friday morning kicked off the "Timeless Beacon," when we visited the U.S. Department of Agriculture. I visited the Agricultural Marketing Service, where we learned about a lot of internship and job opportunities while helping us understand the work they do to help maintain quality standards on all agricultural products. We then ate lunch at the Ronald Reagan Building, and I had a blast hanging out with Matt from Wisconsin and Trevor from Wyoming. As we left, we finished the delegate process before getting all dressed up for a very special night. It was time for the infamous dinner cruise. Everyone looked gorgeous all dressed up, and we made a stop at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial. I truly appreciated my conversation with Jordan from Virginia, and I will never forget how his words challenged me to say what was truly on my heart. At the memorial, water and waterfalls run throughout to symbolize the importance of water in his life. I will never forget the great talks I had with people like David from Pennsylvania and Tory from Arkansas. We boarded the Potomac Spirit Cruise ship, and we took the opportunity to enjoy a nice dinner with our parents. Our team sang karaoke to "When You Say Nothing at All," and then we danced the night away. What a blast! We also walked the deck and looked at the beautiful city all around us. The evening was concluded with a reflections led by Barrett and me. A timeless beacon is a lighthouse that provides direction for ships lost at sea, but we also have lighthouses of our own that guide us through life. As state officers and leaders in the FFA, we all act as lighthouses, and the only thing that will make a true and lasting impact is strong character. It's a challenge that we work hard to follow daily.

We kicked off the day on Saturday with an opportunity to send news releases to home papers, and then we went to downtown Washington, D.C., for some free time. Many of us went to the American History Museum, and I admired the gowns of the First Ladies with Marlene and Lindsey from Ohio before we enjoyed some great ice cream! We met up with a larger group and made our way to the Holocaust Museum. Our friend Marty from

Wyoming was even able to join us, and we went through the sobering displays. The museum clearly depicts what it felt like to live through World War II and go through the concentration camps. My wildest imagination cannot even come close to understanding how people could be so cruel. Christy from Mississippi and I had a great chat about the museum, and it was also special to help Eladio and Christian from Puerto Rico understand the history of what was happening.

Our late afternoon activities included a delicious barbeque and entertaining carnival at a beautiful park. I even got to play "Big Booty" again, led by our friends from Alaska and Matt from Oregon. I finally learned the "Pony Dance," a favorite game of Amber and the North Dakotans. One of the most interesting events of the night was the way our parents dressed. Since we had introduced our parents as our "kids" before, they decided to really play it up, coming to the barbecue with fake tattoos, hair extensions and even nose rings! And people wonder why we're crazy! Our main activity as national officers was to be a part of the sponge-throwing carnival game. State officers lined up to throw wet, dirty sponges at us as we stuck our heads through a painted sheet. Let me tell you, Abbie and Amber can out-trash talk the guys of our team any day!

That night I really enjoyed some great bus conversations with Adam from Vermont, Holly from Arizona, Jordan from Virginia, Travis from Montana, Wendy from Virginia, and Trevor from Wyoming. Wonderful people are leading this organization we all love! Once we returned, we were able to thank the many people who made the conference possible and lead our last reflections, the Cracklin' Corduroy Campfire. We created the warmth and glow that week, but everyone can create their own campfire with great friends and memories, too. Afterwards, we watched the SPC video edited by Mr. Mo, and then we plugged in Shrek so we could hang out even longer! During the movie, I just loved talking with officers like Jay, Holly, Marlene, Lindsey and Jordan. Even after the movie, I had a great chat with Johnathan from Oklahoma about true service and the responsibility of a role model.

State Presidents' Conference 2002 is a week that will always remain a highlight in my year of service as a national officer. It is one of only two times when FFA members from all 50 states and Puerto Rico come together. Powerful things happen in the wonder of our nation's capital, but I am mostly awe-inspired by the talent and passion of each of the officers. I will always remember the way our team trust was strengthened, the high fives I shared with Cody from Idaho, lots of laughs, and deep talks with Stefan from Iowa, Stacia from Wyoming, Bryan from California, Kori from Nebraska, and so many others. National FFA, be prepared for 101 people who will be Lighting the Way for FFA!

Before we flew out of the city on Sunday, my parents and I worshiped together at the National Cathedral. It was absolutely beautiful, and I felt complete gratitude as I realized that a major reason our country was founded was for religious freedom. What a joy! Anne Marie and Bryan from California were there, too, which was a special surprise!

I spent two very busy days at home. On Monday, July 29, the Hillsboro FFA Chapter Officers, Section 19 Officers, and first year Hillsboro FFA members came out to my house for the annual new member party. Bobbi, Matt, Jennifer, Matt, Sandra, Robert and Vicki did a phenomenal job of helping the first year members meet new people and understand the exciting opportunities in the FFA. We headed outside for the traditional water balloon volleyball, which always turns into an all-out water balloon fight! What fun! We enjoyed dinner over the campfire and a couple more fun activities. I truly enjoyed getting to know members with tons of potential like Garrett, Jenny and Billy. Robert has always been a faithful friend, so it was fun to hang out with him again, and I also got to know the Section 19 Officer team. Some of my favorite FFA memories come from serving on that team a few years ago, and I appreciated the opportunity to get to know Ryan, Amy, Jake, Mindy and Kacy.



I spent another day at home, and it was a busy day as I had the opportunity to catch up with some good friends! On Wednesday I headed up to Monticello, Illinois, for Leadership Camp! Just being there in Allerton Park brought back so many wonderful memories, and the next day would prove to be just as wonderful! Miss Elvidge leads camp with excellence, which was evident in the great opportunities for all 260 campers to develop their leadership skills. I presented a kickoff session, in which they responded



to the challenge to be the most enthusiastic place I go this year! I enjoyed reconnecting with members like Casey, Justin, Staci, Christina, Katie and Ryan

and meeting many others like Connor and Bryce from Monticello, Amy from Rantoul and Justin from Maroa-Forsyth. After dinner, I helped the state officers with some daily dynamite eye openers, and I was blown away by the tremendous energy flowing back at us. That night I ended up in one of the girls' cabins for some great girl talk. Tanya, Kelly, Chelsey and Michelle, thank you for the great conversations and friendships that will last a long time. I believe in you!

We gathered again in the pavilion before heading to the campfire for reflections, beautifully led about the value of a penny and the way we spend each day. After reflections, I enjoyed talking with Brian as we watched the fire and reflected on some great opportunities we have to serve others. As we walked back to the main camp, I couldn't help but stare at the gorgeous stars, something I don't always see anymore! The 25 Section Presidents and State Officers met to prepare for the next day and discuss the great events of that day. This team has incredible potential and opportunities to serve. I was honored the next day when Nick presented me the "Hats Off to You" award on behalf of the group!

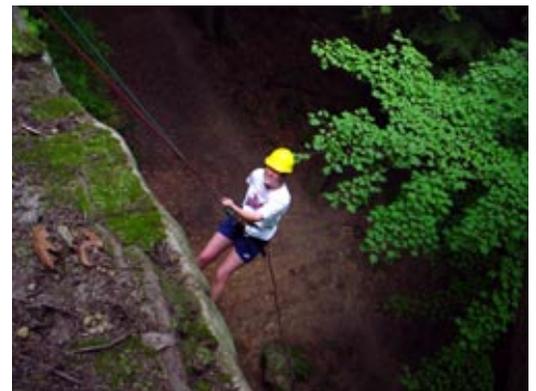
To the Section Presidents – I knew you were a talented group when I first met you all at convention, but I know now more than ever that you will do some great things for members this year. Keep up the great enthusiasm, and as you continue to put your heart in all you do and hold to standards of integrity, you will make a lasting impact on many members.

Jay, Rebecca, Emilee, Drew and Meagan – I am so proud of you, and I believe in you! Thank you for welcoming me home and for showing me the value of having open hearts. You will reach incredible heights this year. Remember to show how much you value each other. This is it! You've reached your dream, so live it for the members!

It was a true joy to be back in Illinois to give back to my home FFA members. Whether it was seeing former teammates now on camp staff, meeting FFA members from familiar places, or reminiscing with state staff, I loved every second. There's no place like home!

On Thursday I joined the rest of my team as we drove from Indianapolis to southeastern Ohio for our team retreat. We stayed in log cabins in the middle of the woods with no e-mail or phone access for nine days. How relaxing! And we even had hot tubs on our back decks! Our purpose is to catch up on everything, form ideas for our retiring addresses, and continue building together as a team. Whether we were cooking together, sharing in reflections, going to crazy barn dances, canoeing, working out, or just hanging out, it was a relaxing and refreshing week we had all been waiting for!

One of the most memorable activities of the week was rock climbing. Amber, Elio, Barrett, and I rappelled off of a 60-foot cliff, climbed a 50-foot cliff, and rappelled off of a 90-foot cliff. Before we started, I was scared of failure, but once we began the physical challenge, it was one of the most amazing things I have ever done in my life! We had a talented guide to help us along, but nothing will ever replace the feeling of hanging freely from a cliff in the middle of God's beautiful creation!



We spent the weekend in Indianapolis, reconnecting with e-mails and starting our preparation for the week to come. On Saturday, Elio, Dane and I went to the Indiana State Fair. None of us will have the opportunity to visit our home state fairs, so this was an excellent opportunity for us. As we walked through the barns, I kept expecting to see the families that always show at my home fairs. It was truly a different experience, but the Indiana State Fair had tons to offer. We spent most of our time at the FFA Pavilion, which is HUGE! We immediately met Tim, who is serving as the District 11 Reporter, and I was amazed at how much we had in common. We also got to hang out with the Indiana FFA State Officer team, who showed us their leadership alley, agriculture theatre, fishing pond, "FFA studio," and numerous displays. Kyle, Amanda, Tristen, Jeremy, Ben, Sara and Kara were very dedicated to creating a fun and educational opportunity for fair-goers, and they made me proud to be in FFA!

We enjoyed some fair favorites, too, like salt water taffy and snow cones, before we started to make our way home. Then we experienced what fairs are all about as we ran into some old friends, past Indiana FFA state officers and other members like Cody, Jake, Stacie and Renell. It's amazing how many wonderful memories can come from the fair, and I hope everyone makes the most of this time in our lives!

As we head back to the center, we will spend the next week in Indianapolis preparing for convention as we write our scripts and various ceremonies. We are so pumped for the 75th National FFA Convention!!

July 14, 2002

"The beauty of friendship is that it cannot be made, described, or measured, for it is a gift of the heart."

What a week! I am so blessed to be on a team who has not only become a strong group of teammates, but also a strong group of friends. It was a true blessing to reunite this week for the board meeting and convention discussions after going our separate ways since May. We met up with the adult board to talk about the future of the FFA, including our 75th anniversary celebration, budgets, and the convention delegate process. It is so promising to realize how many people are committed to success at the local level in agricultural classrooms. Our discussions have reassured me that FFA provides hope to all students, and passion for excellence in teaching is what has made millions of students successful! I look forward to spending the next two days directing the future of our organization with the board and heading out to Washington, D.C., for SPC.

I began the week at Barrett's house near Plant City, Fla. We went to the beach with some great friends – Kayla, Brittany, Erica and Jordan. Even though it rained on us and there was a slight case of red tide, we had a good time soaking up some rays! I also enjoyed getting to know them, especially when Kayla and I took a nice stroll along the beach. After we left, we hung out at Erica and Lauren Der's house to watch a hilarious movie they had made. Karen also came over for a while, and I was just amazed to realize what a small world it is. When I was a state officer, I met two FFA members from Plant City who were serving as delegates to represent junior high membership. I became instant friends with Erica and Jacob, and just three years later, I had the opportunity to hang out with them in their hometown!

We went back to Barrett's house for a while before he gave me the grand tour of Plant City. I was able to see his high school, historic Main Street, and many other parts that give Barrett's hometown great character. The area really was beautiful, with vibrantly colored flowers, Spanish moss, green vegetation and cattle roaming the countryside. I am so thankful for the time we were able to spend together. It was a joy to be in the circle of Mr. and Mrs. Keene's love (and thank you for making me smoothies and cheese grits!). Barrett and I grew closer in our friendship as I was able to understand him just a little more. God has blessed us with this opportunity to grow and learn from one another!

I boarded a plane Tuesday morning for the West Virginia State FFA Convention, one of the last two in the country! I was greeted by the kind and hard-working Kim, who works in the state center. I also found myself in the middle of beautiful mountains, valleys, and green trees. When I arrived at the beautiful Cedar Lakes campground near Ripley, W.V., I met the enthusiastic team of state officers. We had such a blast sharing stories, eating dinner, and preparing for the week. They immediately made me feel like part of the family!

FFA members started arriving on Wednesday morning. The state officers had planned a tailgating party, so many FFA members enjoyed free food, fun games, and music! I headed over to registration, where I met FFA members from Ravenswood and Ripley, and I hopped on the Greenbriar bus at one point. I received some pretty strange looks, but I enjoyed meeting FFA members like Caleb and Brent. Once I was up by the cabins, I met Mr. Lovington and his FFA Chapter. I tricked them into thinking I was from Hillsboro, West Virginia. Fun stuff. I appreciated their genuine kindness, and we sure had a good time joking around together!

Convention kicked off that afternoon with the state officer special. The officers worked hard to put together some hilarious skits based on FFA Feud, "Who's Line is it Anyway", "Fear Factor", and some pretty funny commercials. It was fabulous! As I walked across the bridge over to the cabins, I heard the words, "If you spit into the pond, the fish will

eat it." "WHAT?!" I thought. But soon I was throwing crushed Smarties into the pond alongside the Middleton girls, whose smiles and encouragement would be welcomed all week.

Before the evening session, I had the opportunity to meet the state officer candidates and nominating committee – what a great group! That night I also met FFA members from the Doddridge FFA Chapter, including the state Creed speaking winner, Susanne! They were great. Matt Lohr, a good friend to the FFA and our national officer team, presented a keynote for the evening session. Andrea, Nathan and I helped with his hilarious skit on stage, and everyone loved the messages he offered. At the end of the session, State President Nathan called me up on stage. The entire group of 500 members sang Happy Birthday to me. Then I was surprised when two officers came in from the back with balloons, other West Virginia gifts, and cards from many of my friends and family from home. I am so blessed to have phenomenal people in my life, and I will never forget my 21 birthday! That night, they even had a birthday party for me. OK, so it wasn't really for me, but they did have two of my favorite things – ice cream and dancing! I really enjoyed a deep talk with Chris from Jefferson, JP and Robert. On the dance floor I met great people like Keith and Drew. What fun!

On Thursday morning, I had breakfast with FFA members from the West Virginia School for the Deaf. Selena, Corey and Billy were so joyful. I really enjoyed talking with them with my extremely limited sign language and mainly the help of their teachers. It was also special to share with them that our national president, the one and only Dane White, has a passion to share his heart with people through sign language. The morning session started with the middle school quiz bowl and parliamentary procedure finals. How exciting to see so many days of hard work in action. I enjoyed sitting by Stephen and even doing the twist in between sessions! For lunch, I joined FFA members from Clay County and Doddridge. I enjoyed meeting members like Heather, Fallon and Brent.

In the afternoon we watched the prepared public speaking finals before past officers Alicia and Ashley presented a leadership workshop. Talk about hearts of gold. They serve so selflessly, and I am grateful I had the opportunity to meet them. We became instant friends as we share many of the same values, and I can't wait to see them again! I also met Brent from Doddridge, who is serving as chapter president as a sophomore in high school. He is phenomenal, and often puts others ahead of his own agendas.

The proficiency winners were honored that evening at dinner, and I was even able to meet some dignitaries in the agricultural world. West Virginia has the agriculture commissioner with the longest term of office, and the real Bob Evans was even there! He made a sizable contribution to the W.V. FFA Foundation.

Before the evening session, we had a special flag lowering ceremony to commemorate the 10-month anniversary of September 11. The power of those reflective moments was chilling. Everyone was pumped up for the evening session, and I was excited to give my speech. I decided to put all of my heart into it since this was my ninth and final convention. It felt so great to simply flow with it! We enjoyed talking and hanging out a bit longer before we called it a night, and then we had a great girls' talk back in the cabins.



We all had a good week, and I'm thankful my convention season ended on a good note. I can't wait to see the newly-

elected officers again! And Nathan, Amber, Andrea, Jonathan, Amy, Serena, Susan and Katie, thank you for such a great week! You put your hearts and energy into an awesome convention, and I'm proud of you!

I flew out on Friday morning, and I enjoyed the beautiful countryside of West Virginia and the great company of Alicia and Ashley again. It was sad to leave, but I was also greeted by a special group of people when I arrived in Indianapolis. My FFA Chapter took a summer day trip to Indy, so they were able to pick me up and hang out for just a little bit. What a treat



to see my parents and my good buddies John, Leroy, Bobbi, Robert, Tiffany and Kyle.



July 7, 2002

"Keep your eyes open...you never know what you might see."
 – Carl, Woodward, OK, Chapter President

California NLCSO continued on Monday with Showtime, when the state officers presented workshops they had prepared within the last 24 hours about teamwork, leadership, FFA opportunities, and communication. It's exciting to realize that their hard work at the conference can be taken back to local chapters to serve members. During this time I also took on one of my favorite roles as a coach. The creativity of each team was impressive, and they all worked so hard to incorporate great themes to make the learning last. Whether we were fighting killer Chico mosquitoes, jumping on the leaderSHIP, experiencing Dead Man's Curve, or finding "Who's on First," we witnessed rich workshops and dedicated presenters. We opened our session on teamwork, and then we adjourned for a casual evening and delicious steaks with many of the Superior Region officers at their advisor's house. Amber and I rode with the Nevada team, and we enjoyed sharing stories and singing together. Cassie, Samantha, Brooke, Shay, Morgan, Carl and Ann-Marie truly stand for integrity and have a passion to promote the FFA! When we got back to Chico State, Oregon led a flag lowering service, and the Nevada team led us through reflections.

Tuesday we continued with a very full day with three laws of teamwork: The Law of Purpose, Choice, and Price Tag after a beautiful flag raising service by the Idaho team. Our favorite time of the conference is when we get to play "Let's Make a Deal!" and this time was no exception! I also played Big Booty once again with the original game founders, the Alaska State Officer team. It was great to see Calvin, Coltan, Justin, Cameron, Amy and Brad again! During dinner that evening, Amber and I joined Per, Jameson, Matt, Christine, Ric, Carl and Kimi for intense mind games. Hey, the spoon is in my left hand. When we finished that night, the California team did a phenomenal job with their patriotic moments, and then we all enjoyed ice cream, karaoke, and dancing. Toward the end of the dance, Amber and I closed the conference with Oregon and Washington, who had to leave early to catch their flights home. Matt, Elias, Lauren, Ben, Tia and Catie from Oregon will lead their officers through a fun year, and it was exciting to see the enthusiasm and growth that Ric, Marissa, Melissa, Dustin, Angie, and Per from Washington brought to the conference. To close out the evening, Amber and I led the final conference reflections, and it was such a joy to spend special moments with these 38 special people. It was powerful to share our common passions of faith, wonder, and true team values. Before we went to bed, though, we had a great talk with Kimi and Mindy from Idaho. Their excitement to empower others will make a tremendous difference, and their entire team, including Christine, Cody, Casey, and Boone, is working hard to improve Idaho FFA.

The final day of our final NLCSO sure came quickly. We closed up the conference, and everyone joined in to help clean up. Once Amber and I packed a few things away, we enjoyed lunch at The Graduate with the California team. We had a blast hanging out with them, and Amber even became involved in a vicious air hockey competition with Mark! Amber and I reflected on our time together as we truly celebrated our strengthened friendship. I feel so blessed to have worked with her, and FFA members, you have a one-of-a-kind Central Region Vice President. Before I flew out of town, we joined Dr. and Mrs. Dodson, their daughter Brianna, and Louis Horton for dinner and wonderful company.

I took my first domestic red-eye flight into Tulsa, Okla., where the FFA Alumni Director, Mr. Murray, picked me up to go to Wagoner for the second session of the Oklahoma FFA Alumni Leadership Camp. Oklahoma FFA has four camp sessions each summer, one of many ways the FFA Alumni shows their support. Chapters can send their members at no cost depending on how many Alumni memberships and lifetime memberships they recruit in their chapters. Once I reached the campgrounds, I quickly set up for my workshop and met Grandpa Dean, some of the dedicated FFA advisors, and all 22 small group leaders, including the current eight state officers. I sat with Beth, Brian, Jason and Charles, who helped me quickly feel welcome. After lunch we headed to our first general session, and the enthusiasm of 225 campers blew me away! Loud music jammed over the speakers, and I quickly learned about the traditions with hot spots, the power "stud" and many others. Then I had the honor of presenting a workshop to the group, and we had a lot of fun. Thanks, Ross, for being such a lovely Princess Jasmine!

After the session, I moved in to my cabin and joined Group 1 for Water Olympics, which felt great on the hot day! I was able to hang out with members like Eric, Ashley, Laurie and Luke. Nathan and I shared stories from the National FFA Band and Chorus. I also got to know Jason and Sean from the Yukon FFA Chapter. I found new wonderful friends in their entire group. We talked about good movies, four-wheeling, our faith, favorite bands, and Oklahoma agriculture to fun on the waterslide and at the banquet. I will never forget Jason, Sean, Jared, Kody and Cameron. They taught me about selfless service through every action as good friends who truly help each other in every situation. Their positive attitudes, sincerity, and hope for future opportunities are amazing!

We had a couple hours for rec time, and I joined Grant, Chris, Jared, Christina and the gang for sand volleyball. Then we cooled off in the pool, which has a wicked water slide! I also found how mischievous Billy really is as he randomly dunked me in the pool! After dinner I joined Jordan and Group 5 for a session about integrity. Whether it was Lauren sharing the importance of personal accountability or Kayla and Amber talking about their desire to do their best, we really learned a lot from each other. That night we piled into the pavilion for a hilarious hypnotist show, reflections about "going to the ball" to make things happen and vespers. I then joined the small group leaders for delicious Oklahoma-made Braum's ice cream and their nightly planning meeting.

Friday came quickly, and I had the opportunity to share one of my favorite eye openers, "Little Cabin!" After breakfast I joined Jaime and Group 13 for the Final Frontier, when we built our very own enterprise ship, just like in Star Wars! The phenomenal skills of John, Matt, Dakota and Group 16 won, though. I really enjoyed talking with John, who is going to a Christian sports camp at which my cousin is a counselor. It's a small world! After a quick game of sand volleyball during our break, I joined Small Group 22 for the ropes course. Kristen led her group well through the whale's tail, trust fall, giant wall, and Indian walk. Ashley, Whitney, Zachary, Kathryn, Brian, Kody, Katie, Elisha, Carl and Billy were simply the coolest! I truly felt like I was hanging out with friends from back home. During the trust fall, Carl mentioned that he kept his eyes open and watched the sky. I have done the trust fall many times, but I always had a small amount of fear, so I closed my eyes. But this time I decided I would take his challenge and keep my eyes open – it was the coolest! Then we skipped, yes skipped, to lunch and exchanged some super-cool handshakes. I truly enjoyed talking over lunch with Carl, Elisha, Becky, Kody and Jason, and then we piled into the pavilion for a Mr. Billy Petricelli, a powerful keynote speaker. I had the honor of sitting with Tara, Cale and the entire enthusiastic crew!

I once again played volleyball with Courtney, Drew, Kirby and many others before heading into the pool. I joined Laura, Heather and Greg for an intense game of keep-away. Cole, Rusty and the guys were tough offense. Josh and Jack were relentless, too, and I really had to fight to get the ball! I also must have had a sign on my forehead that said "Dunk me," because I was a frequent target for many people in the pool! It was sure fun. I quickly stopped by the state officer's house to hang out with Kelly, Jonathan and Tracy before we got ready for the banquet. The banquet officers, talent, and flag lowering crew took great pride in their work! That evening I joined Adam and Group 6 for a session about role models, and I was touched when Heather talked about her grandpa, Brandon talked about the Apostle Paul and Brannon looked up to his dad. We closed up the night after another session and reflections by Colby, and I joined the staff for their final meeting. Then, we took a midnight swim with several of the small group leaders and state officers. Talk about fun stuff!

The final day came quickly, and after breakfast I once again joined Group 22 for the delivery of Happy Grams and final awards. I was honored when they gave me an award called "The Real Deal." I was truly honored. Camp wrapped up, everyone said their goodbyes, and a new set of small group leaders came in. We enjoyed lunch together, and then I got to hang out with the 2002-03 Oklahoma FFA State Officer Team. Jonathan, Tracy, Isaac, Colby, Katie, Kelly, Jordan and Adam work hard to set a professional example for everyone!

I flew from Oklahoma to Florida, where your very own Southern Region VP, Barrett Keene, picked me up from the airport. One thing I hope to do this year is visit each of my teammates, and I would have the opportunity to spend the next two days with Barrett and his generous family. We shared fun talks, stories about our NLCSO conferences, and a few firsts. The Keene family introduced me to my first sample of delicious potato sandwiches, spaghetti sandwiches, black-eyed peas and boiled peanuts. I even had the opportunity to worship with Barrett in his church, meet his extended family, and see the beautiful countryside, including swamps, Spanish moss, orange groves, and strawberry fields. I really look forward to another day with Barrett in Florida, the West Virginia State FFA Convention, and rejoining the entire team in

Indianapolis!

June 30, 2002

"Teamwork + Communication = Success!"

-Georgia & Florida State Officers

Amber and I kicked off our second NLCSO Conference on Monday morning, where we were fortunate enough to be right on the beach near Jacksonville, Florida! State FFA Officers from Georgia and Florida brought excitement to the conference, and we were ready for an awesome week. We spent the first day getting to know each other and preparing workshops that would be presented on Tuesday. We truly enjoyed the beauty of our surroundings over lunch, when we ate on the veranda overlooking the ocean.

After a full day, we took time to really think about the value of our teams and the "wonder" reflected by our goals and actions. Amber and I really realized how successful these officers would be when we watched these talented officers present workshops the next day. Whether it was Blake and Rachael presenting their FFA Jeopardy and army stunt, Alex and Jorge racing to success through teamwork and communication, Shannon and Julie experiencing leadership in outer space, or Nathan and Stacy competing in the mallowball Super Bowl, they all did a fabulous job! Lunch on Tuesday was entertaining as we found a common reason to pick on Blake that I promised not to mention! Bless his heart. He sure is proud of his country roots, and he must be one of the most sincere people I have met.

That evening we had a special treat with a dinner cruise on the St. John's in downtown Jacksonville. Everyone looked absolutely stunning, and we enjoyed the beauty of the waterway on a two-hour cruise, complete with dinner and dancing! Amber, Julie and Rachael even got to drive the boat! Katie, Bo, Ashley and Alex sure kept me laughing over dinner, and we were all cutting a rug on the dance floor! Julie kept the tunes rolling all night! Rudy, a state officer from Miami, Fla., is a talented salsa dancer, so he helped me revive some of the moves I learned a couple months ago in Minneapolis! I also had a blast swing dancing with Justin, breaking it down with Amber, hanging out with the ladies, and even getting Mr. Wilkinson on the dance floor! As we headed back to the hotel to close up the day, we went out to the beach for beautiful reflections led by the Florida FFA State Officer Team. Stacy, Kelly, Rudy, Blake, Michele, Jorge, Shannon and Justin helped us all think about the impact we can have as officers, the power of our actions, and the way our troubles always settle out with no worries. Afterward we stayed in a reflective mood for a while, but Amber and I couldn't resist the waves and ran into the ocean for an evening swim. What fun!

Wednesday morning came bright and early, and the Georgia state officers led a beautiful flag raising ceremony about the pledge of allegiance. It was pretty ironic that on that day such events would happen declaring that pledge unconstitutional in schools out West. Standing with that group made me so proud that FFA encourages strong values of integrity. That day we began the laws of teamwork, and it was exciting to hear each team's purpose statement. FFA members, I hope you're proud to be a part of an organization in which your state officers commit to integrity and growing into shining examples for you and the agricultural industry. Their passion and excitement to truly serve will bring many great people to the FFA!

The afternoon included the traditional Florida NLCSO Volleyball tournament. We quickly changed into our gear and hit the beach for a tough game of beach volleyball. I became an honorary Georgia Bulldog, while Amber served as an honorary Florida Gator. The wind was vicious, and it added an extra element to the natural friendly, competitive spirit. Florida won the first match very easily, but Georgia came back to win the second. The third match was close, but Georgia pulled out to win the game! Go Dawgs! Sic 'em! Woof! We ran down to the beach, and the officers taught Amber and I how to ride the waves. Talk about fun stuff! We headed to a beach house on the edge of town, where Mr. Register, an FFA Advisor, brought us BBQ pork. Afterward we walked down by the beach, and it was a picture-perfect evening. I will never forget the good talks I had with Alex, Julie, Katie, Bo, Brian, Ashley and Justin.

When we returned, we finished up the Law of Choice before Georgia led reflections. Each team went to several stations, and I led one that was a 3-D spider web. It was a tough cookie to get through, especially since it was made out of duct tape! But as soon as the first team arrived, the web started to fall! But in the Georgia team's typical helping hands and thoughtful spirit, we reconstructed the web and had a successful night. The reflections they led that evening was about integrity, which takes truly strong character to discuss. Afterward, it was fun just to talk with the team. The maturity and pride of the Georgia team will help Bo, Katie, Alex, Nathan, Ashley, Julie, Brian and Rachael make

an incredible impact this year.

Our final day on Thursday sure flew by, and we had some great moments reflecting on the memories we created together. Georgia and Florida state officers will be Creating the Wonder this year! We enjoyed a final lunch together afterward, and I had the pleasure of sitting with Michele, Rudy, Rachael, Justin and Jorge. They served delicious chocolate cake, and before we knew it, Rudy and Rachael were in a miniature war with the chocolate icing and whipped cream. Soon Jorge was involved, too, and it was a fun way to end the day.

I flew into Iowa for a short stop before I reached my final NLCSO with Amber in California. Two very dear friends and role models, Lisa and JR, united in marriage on Friday. I was recharged to see some of my best friends again, and was reminded of how small the FFA world really is. I saw many friends, but the coolest connection goes back several years. When I was a member of the National FFA Chorus as a sophomore in high school, I met many wonderful people, including Chris from Montana. Almost six years later, I met his older brother Alex, who was an usher in the wedding! Small world!

I left very early Saturday morning to fly to California, where I met up with Amber in Chico for our third and final NLCSO. We spent the afternoon setting up the room and hanging out with the California state officer team. We also had the opportunity to go to Dr. and Mrs. Dodson's house for a wonderful dinner. Thank you, Brian, Anne Marie, Amber, Mark, Audrey and Tyler for making us feel at home and for all of your help setting up the room. You're all wonderful!

We worked diligently to prepare the room and materials for the conference, which started Sunday morning. As 38 state officers from Nevada, Idaho, Washington, Alaska, Oregon and California entered the room, we felt incredible energy, which would continue through the week. Everyone worked hard to create workshops and prepare them for the next day. I also found that Matt from Oregon and Ric from Washington share my love for music, and Amber and I were able to join Idaho's team in the heated volleyball tournament.

The heat was scorching, and the cool waters of the swimming pool tempted us as we started to head back inside for dinner. We naturally had to jump in – with all of our workout clothes on! Ric, Per, Dustin and Coltan gave us pretty fair initiations as we got into some great dunking wars! After dinner everyone prepared their workshops, the Nevada team led a flag lowering ceremony, and the Oregon state officers helped us think about unity in their reflections.

After such a great first day of NLCSO, Amber and I could not be more excited to get to know these officers better. What a special role we have to help guide these talented teams through workshop skills and team decisions.

June 23, 2002

"It takes as much energy to wish as it does to plan." - Eleanor Roosevelt

NLCSO! When I was a state officer, it was one of my favorite conferences of the year, but I had no clue how much went into it! Our national officer team has been working hard on the conference since January, and the development team at the National FFA Center had been working long before that. Hours of planning and hard work finally paid off as we had our first successful conference in Arkansas this week. NCLSO (National Leadership Conference for State Officers) is a time for us, as national officers, to work with newly elected state officer teams to help them prepare effective workshops and develop a strong start to their teamwork.

Twenty-seven state officers from Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas and Alabama joined us at Camp Couchdale near Hot Springs, Ark. We kicked off the conference on Monday morning, and we immediately knew we would have a fun and energetic group. It was exciting to watch everyone put together workshops with their partners, who were from a different state. They all worked so hard, and that definitely paid off the next day, when Amber and I were WOWed by their performance! Cody from Alabama and Jacob from Louisiana did a great job with their workshop. They are so much FUN when they present, but they also take the content deeper. I was also impressed by the creativity of Amy from Arkansas and Jeff from Louisiana. Christy from Mississippi and Jennifer from Alabama show such sincerity when they present. I was truly impressed by everyone's hard work, and I can't wait to see what wonderful things they will do in their home

associations this year.

Everyone worked with their teams on upcoming camps and other responsibilities until reflections, which were led by several of the state officers. I had the honor to hang out with the Mississippi state officer team. As I sat around the circle with David, Jason, Crystal, Darby, Christy, Meredith and Miss Amy, I realized the powerful influence each of these wonderful people will have on their associations this year. The theme of the evening was "Go Light Your World," and we all lit individual floating candles off of a larger candle in the center. As we left, we took our candles to the lake and let them float away. It was powerful to realize the influence we can all have when we let our lights shine and work toward the same purpose as the candles reflected off the water. The Mississippi team showed us their true southern hospitality as they escorted us back to our cabin, and we also had a great time singing and talking together.

On Wednesday morning, we took our pictures together before starting a jam-packed day focusing on teamwork. Each officer team wrote their team purpose statements and presented them to a small "panel." Arkansas will do a great job of getting their advisors and younger members more involved, and Louisiana displays team unity in almost all they do. As we were waiting for the other two groups to finish, I learned the power of seven people working toward the same goal, as I joined the Arkansas team in a hula-hoop! Jameson, Caroline, Amy, Tory, Carmen, Kristin and I all crammed into a regular hula-hoop and moved around like a little caterpillar. And what would a team be without their advisor? So, Mrs. Collins joined us, and we showed our FFA spirit as we made our way back into the main center.

After lunch, Amber and I started our favorite part of the conference, and everyone had a great time with "Let's Make a Deal!" After that, each team traveled to seven different teamwork stations, and I was so impressed by the openness of the Alabama team. I heard Chris, Jennifer, Toni, Daniel, Cody and Crystal share the strengths they saw in each other. How powerful it is to realize the potential of a team when everyone works together! Later in the afternoon, I led the Louisiana team through a competitive activity with hula-hoops. It was hilarious to watch their strategy, and they finally became successful when they learned to cooperate. Jeff, Kelly, Jacob, CC, Matt, Bryan, Ashlee, JD and Ty added so much enthusiasm to the entire conference. We wrapped up the afternoon's activities and quickly prepared for the banquet, which was led cooperatively by officers from all four states. They handed out various awards, including one to Mr. Bob, who made the best homemade ice cream in the world. Amber and I were grateful for the Arkansas FFA bears they gave us and humbled by the sincerity Tory showed as she presented gifts of gratitude to many people.

We finished the evening with another teamwork session in which each team created their action plans for the year, and then we experienced our final reflections for the conference. It was a beautiful time to realize the friendships we had developed during the week as we sat in a circle and sang together, "I Hope you Dance." After a homemade ice cream break, we had a special surprise, when two of the state officers got "married!" Ty led the ceremony between his teammate Bryan and Christy. Amber and I were the ceremony musicians, and we had a "reception" afterwards at the conference dance. Fun times. Mr. Leger, the Louisiana FFA executive secretary, taught me how to Cajun two-step, and then he gave us lessons to waltz. Amber and I body-surfed for the first time, and I was even able to swing dance with friends like Daniel, David and Chris!

The next morning we closed the conference, and several of us shed a few tears as we said goodbye to our new friends and some wonderful memories. The theme for the week was Creating the Wonder. I know these state officers will create that wonder for FFA members in their home states. The time we spent in the training room was so incredible, but the most memorable times for me will always be the random moments and meaningful conversations in between, like the night Christy, Kristin, Tory, Amber and I stayed up past 2 a.m. for a great girl talk. Or when I put myself on the "Bloopers Wall" for stumbling over my words so much, or when we tried chocolate gravy on our biscuits for the first time. I enjoyed learning about Chris's SAE of planting trees, and I'll never forget Jeff's Cajun accent as he explained "Hey La Ba" and life hunting in the swamps of Louisiana. I will never forget the warmth of Amy's sincerity, learning about Jason's desire to become an elected politician, and hearing stories about Darby's long-time commitment to the FFA. The week was also evidence that I serve on an amazing team, and I am simply honored to be partners with Amber for the NLCSO conferences. Her dedication to excellence, passion for family, agriculture and God, and fun-loving spirit are incredible. True wonder is created in moments like these, when friendships are real. I can't wait to see these wonderful people at future events!

As Amber and I arrived in Jacksonville, Fla., for our next NLCSO conference, we were

hopeful for sunny beaches, especially as our hotel sat right on the oceanfront. But for the entire weekend, it remained rainy, windy, and 75 degrees. But we still had a great time, made a couple short appearances on the beach, and even tried some delicious seafood. We still have four days in Florida, and I look forward to the sunny weather and people we will meet here.

June 16, 2002

"There's no place like home."

Familiar faces. Hugs from good friends. Section 13 wins Penny Wars. Supportive Illinois farm broadcasters and journalists. Watching friends create success. Seneca FFA named top Illinois FFA Chapter. Sharing my love of music with the State FFA Chorus. Inside jokes. Reminiscing about the good ole days. More than 3,000 energetic FFA members. Phenomenal state officers. Dedicated advisors. As Kenny Chesney would say, "it's the good stuff." I would just call it the 74th Illinois Association FFA State Convention. Home, Sweet Home!

I arrived to the Prairie Capital Convention Center in Springfield, Ill., on Monday, June 10. Memories from many past conventions flooded my mind and a smile came to my face that would stay for days. It was a true joy to see the state officers, section presidents and state officer candidates that evening. We had a great time preparing for convention through meetings and catching up over pizza.

On Tuesday morning, FFA members from across the state started to arrive, and the familiar buzz of friends reuniting and new friends meeting filled the air. I visited the State FFA Chorus with State President Colleen to welcome them to convention and thank them for their efforts. As a former member of that group, I saw many familiar faces, and we shared a true bond all week! I also visited the chapter exhibits that morning. My home chapter of Hillsboro had created a Plinko board in the shape of Illinois to represent the journey we can take in the FFA. I also talked with members of the Waterloo FFA Chapter and learned about Adam's passion as a fifth-generation farmer on their swine operation. His desire to continue on the farm is truly inspiring!

The state officers kicked off convention with reflections to start the theme "Journey of a Lifetime." I sat with FFA members from the Belvidere FFA Chapter as we got pumped up for the session, and then I left to start my first workshop! I had a blast hanging out with the Oregon FFA Chapter, when I saw my good friend Amy and made several new ones. I quickly learned what a great guy Jason is, and we talked as he helped me clean up after the workshop.

I made it back to the convention center for the end of the business session, and I saw some good friends like Trever, Sarah and Daniel, who are now in college. These are the FFA members who shared memories from leadership camp and other activities when I was in high school, and it's always great to catch up with people like that! FFA Advisors in Illinois also made me feel so welcome, whether they provided a huge hug, the latest news, or good jokes. I had the honor of visiting with Foundation sponsors and state award winners over dinner that evening before the second convention session, during which I would give my speech. While I was backstage, I met FFA members from the Mt. Vernon FFA Chapter. Their FFA Advisor, Mr. Kabat, cares so deeply for his students, and it seems that I learn from him every time I see him. I even met Eric, who would go on to win the state extemporaneous public speaking contest! Becky from the Gibson City-Melvin-Sibley FFA Chapter provided a sparkling smile and enthusiasm that draws friends to her, and I can't wait to see what her future holds for her. I was so excited when she agreed to help me with my speech that evening.

Words cannot describe how wonderful it felt to give one more speech to my home crowd at convention. I challenged the group to go "Full Speed Ahead" on their journey of a lifetime, and I had the opportunity to thank Illinois FFA members for making my FFA journey so amazing and for believing in me on my road to becoming a national officer! At the end of my speech, a very familiar song came on over the sound system. The state officers had arranged to play the song that I played at the end of my retiring address two years ago. I started to cry, and then the entire state officer team came on stage to present me with a plaque as if it was the end of my retiring address. Their thoughtfulness was humbling. They created some very special moments for me!

After the session, I met Thom and some of the other members from Cissna Park. We hung out with the visiting Michigan FFA State Officers as we prepared for the convention

dance. At the dance, I had a lot of fun with Ryan, Jessie and the gang from Paxton-Buckley-Loda. My Montgomery County crew from Hillsboro, Nokomis and Lincolnwood was also shaking up the dance floor. I also enjoyed dancing with Brian from Franklin Center. I have always been good friends with his older sisters, and it is a joy to watch how he is making his own way in the FFA!

Wednesday morning came quite early, but I still had fun during the opening session with members from Pittsfield and Chicago. Since I worked in Chicago last summer, I made some great friends there, so it was wonderful to see Irene, Dan and the crew again. I also had the pleasure of hearing the retiring address of State Secretary Leon Adams. Leon and I have been close friends since I was a state officer two years ago. I knew then that his integrity, work ethic and genuine care for people would lead him to a state office if that's where he wanted to go. His incredible influence as a state officer this year sure proved it! After his retiring address, I watched my friend Casey from Lincolnwood sing "Hero" before presenting my second workshop. We had a blast together, and I really enjoyed hanging out with Chicago High School for Ag Sciences afterwards!

I attended the Leadership Luncheon, where I gave a short keynote, but one of the best parts was being able to talk with Lindsey Hess from the Bushnell-Prairie City FFA Chapter. She just graduated from high school and is heading on a mission trip to London. Her joy and faithfulness are sure encouraging! The afternoon session was wonderful because I got to see my good friend Sara from the Kansas FFA Chapter, talk with a long-time friend from GROWMARK, Mr. John Croft, and visit with many others backstage. State Reporter Sarah Swenson also took some huge stands in her retiring address about doing the right thing. I was so proud of her integrity and courage. Mike and Matt from the Newark FFA Chapter kept me laughing, and Cliff from Pleasant Hill even danced with me!

In between elections, I got to hang out with my hometown girls from Hillsboro. We made posters with motivational quotes for the state officer candidates and had some girl talk before heading back over to the convention center, where I saw great friends like Angie and Jill from the Cissna Park FFA Chapter, Mark from Clifton Central and Crystal Eich, with whom I interned at WDZ Radio a few years ago. Before state officer elections, I enjoyed pizza with my FFA Chapter, and then we watched 10 talented individuals put their hearts on the line for the opportunity to serve nearly 16,000 FFA members as state officers. Wow! I was so excited when some good friends were elected! Jay, Rebecca, Emilee, Drew and Maegan, I am so proud of you, and I can't wait to see where you take the Illinois Association FFA! After elections we went to a local bank for the delegate reception with yummy pizza. I enjoyed talking with members like Katie from Sycamore and Curtis and the guys from way down south.

Thursday morning included the annual Past State Officers' Breakfast, and I finally saw my entire team and many other close friends. We went on stage to introduce ourselves, and after meeting some Carlinville FFA members, I sat with the section presidents. This group of individuals is very special to me, and many of them were the delegates cheering me on at national convention this year. I will never forget Adam's huge hugs, Derek's enthusiasm, Cade's pure talent, Karen's kindness, Mike's consideration for others, Andy's sincerity, or Jamie's complete peace with who she is. I could go on and on, for the 25 are very talented. Good friends of mine and of the FFA, Matt and Andrea Lohr, presented a powerful keynote about the power of helping others and finding our inner strength. I also had the opportunity to help them during an onstage skit, and it was hilarious.

After the session, I made my way to the State Degree Luncheon to congratulate all 300 degree recipients and some good friends like Nick from Seneca who were named State Stars! It was great to see members like Erica, Derek and Tony from Ashland, Laura from PBL, Justin from Liberty, Whitney from Marissa and Kent from Hartsburg-Emden! I was so proud of my hometown girl Jessica. Talk about dedication! She tried for her State FFA Degree twice and both times barely felt short of receiving the honor. On her third attempt, her hours of hard work finally paid off as she was rewarded the degree at convention!

During the sixth and final session, I sat with Matt from the Spoon River Valley FFA Chapter, and celebrated with more than 3,000 people in attendance. I also saw my friend Colleen give her retiring address about finding what makes you happy, even if it's not the norm. During the state degrees, I went backstage to congratulate good friends like Kenan from Chicago, and I even met up with one of my biggest inspirations in the FFA, Stacey Dallam. Stacey was a state officer two years before I was, and she was back to watch her brother receive his state degree. I was able to say goodbye to Jordan, Jamie, Jessica, Kami, Amanda, and all my friends from Nokomis, and I saw Ray from Barry, Anthony from Cissna Park, and other good friends before they left. Seneca FFA once

again earned the top spot in Illinois FFA Chapters, and I watched the new officers installed. As the five retiring officers left the stage, it was such a bittersweet feeling. I felt almost as if it was my team walking off the stage all over again because I had grown so close to this group. I am so awe-inspired by the incredible impact they had on members this year through their sincerity and creativity in trying new things. These officers helped me incredibly, too, through their encouragement and friendship as I was running for a national office. It hit me that I was standing in the Prairie Capital Convention Center for the last time in official dress, yet I was so excited for the new leadership taking the reins for the coming year. Illinois FFA is in good hands! Colleen, Phil, Sarah, Leon and Jesse, thank you once again for making my convention so special. You have all served with excellence and integrity. I am proud of you! You make me proud to call Illinois my home.

After the session I went out to dinner with my state officer teammates, Beth and Abel. Talk about the good ole days! We reminisced about our year of service as we ate at Cheddar's, which is the first restaurant we ever ate at as a team! I went back to the hotel and hung out with the retired officers, and we had some great chats that I will never forget! The next day I had the opportunity to go to a meeting with the 25 new section presidents and major state officers. They are off to a great start, and we had some good talks about staying connected, united, and exceeding expectations in order to reach our goals this year.

After lunch I met my parents for some quick shopping before I flew to Arkansas to meet Amber for my first NLCSO (National Leadership Conference for State Officers). We shared a lot of laughs over the weekend as we prepared for state officers to arrive to Camp Couchdale, and I am pumped for these times together!

Illinois FFA, thank you for making my time with you so special. There really is no place like home!

June 10, 2002

You may be disappointed if you fail, but you are doomed if you don't try. -Beverly Sills

I had the opportunity this week to attend two outstanding FFA conventions. Both had many similarities, but were quite unique. Both states were celebrating their 73rd annual convention, and both states are very hot in June! CDEs, motivation, fun, and new friendships filled both conventions, and I realized how phenomenal FFA members really are throughout the entire week! Yet each experience was quite unique! On Monday morning I arrived in Montgomery, Alabama, where I headed to the 73rd Alabama FFA State Convention. I visited with several FFA members as they competed in public speaking, parliamentary procedure, and agricultural construction CDEs. Then I became an official honorary Veeblefester as I enjoyed dinner with the state officer team. When we returned to the hotel, the team gathered around the piano to practice for their retiring session, when they would sing "Lean On Me." But their musical talent didn't stop there. We continued singing familiar ballads, country, and Christian songs in the hotel lobby. Soon FFA members from the Bayminette FFA Chapter came down to hang out, and Devin and I had a great time trying to fill their musical requests! I will never forget that night as we were able to share so much of what we love to do.

Convention officially started the next morning with the string band competition. Alabama FFA members work hard together all year to create incredible sounds and compete to make the state finals. The winning band played a second time during the evening session. Their talent knocked my socks off!!!! I also enjoyed hanging out with the Enterprise FFA Chapter, who had the 2nd place band. Members like Josh, Beverly, Gretchen and John Wayne made me feel right at home in Alabama. Throughout the competition I also had the opportunity to meet FFA members from the Horseshoe Bend FFA Chapter, who kept me on my toes as they joked with me like brothers.

Alabama has a strong support system for their FFA programs. I was able to meet many past state officers, advisory board members, and foundation sponsors who provide guidance and opportunities for FFA members. The involvement of past officers like Laina is crucial to the success of convention! The opening session kicked off on Tuesday afternoon. As I met phenomenal FFA members from the Gaston FFA Chapters, I knew I was in the right place! The Gaston FFA Chapter always brought a huge smile to my face, and they even helped me develop some "southern sass!" Thank you, Brittney, Jared, Michael, Matt and Crystal for your friendship!

We came back that evening for convention, when I gave my speech. The session was plain fun, though, and as the winning quartet from Red Bay entertained the crowd, I got to swing dance with Justin from West Point! After the session, I met Mary Ellen and many other FFA members, and we stayed around to watch "Shrek" on the big screen! I was with the Geraldine FFA Chapter for most of the show, and we laughed together a lot! Bradley, thank you for your friendship. You are just a sweetheart! Lyndsey, thank you for sharing your positive leadership with others and for keeping me laughing, and Hannah, your kindness is a shining example to everyone. Devan, do you want some biscuits & gravy with that sassage? You're awesome, girl!

The next day, I sat with FFA members from Cobert County as one of their fellow members, Pricey, won the tractor driving contest. How exciting! The quartets also competed during that session, and I enjoyed getting to know Josh from Enterprise better as I learned about his desire to possibly become an ag teacher! After the session I had lunch with Mr. & Mrs. Johnson, Mr. & Mrs. Sisco, and my friends from Geraldine. I learned about the value of fried okra, sweet tea and honey spread in the south! They took me back to the convention center for my workshop, and I learned a lot from these members who are strongly grounded in their values! Afterwards, Kyle from Geraldine and Thomas, Alabama's National Officer Candidate, helped me clean up. I love that southern hospitality!

I had the honor of formally thanking the foundation board in their dinner that evening, and then we all joined 1000 Alabama FFA members for the evening session! Laina and past National FFA Officer Ronnie Simmons really helped increase the energy with their chicken-calling contest! Congratulations to Lee and Greg from Red Bay for sounding so much like that sick rubber chicken! As the evening came to a close, I had to say some sad goodbyes. I'm excited to see the new state officers at NLCSO in a couple weeks, though! Daniel can teach me more about watermelon production, too!

Back at the hotel, the state officers once again rehearsed for their closing session, and I stayed with Devin and Ronnie to sing and play away! Then the entire team hung out and chowed down on Wendy's before heading to bed. Alyson, Devin, & Thomas got up with me very, very early to go to the airport. It was so funny...Thomas knew "exactly" how to get there, but we were directed on the wrong exit, so after turning around, we found that we had only been about half a mile from the right exit to begin with! After Thomas's sarcastic remarks about seeing this in my journal, I just had to include it! J

My time in the southern hospitality of the Bible Belt was absolutely incredible! The state officers are truly dedicated to making the association stronger and just love to have a great time! Thank you for making me a part of that! Alyson, it was awesome to get to know you better, and I will never forget our great chats, singing with Kenny, and talks with God. Devin, my fellow card-a-holic, you are a phenomenal friend and musician! Thanks for everything! Dennis, I'll be voting for you someday, and we can work together to promote agriculture! Ashley, your ability to talk with anyone is so characteristic of your southern kindness. Grace, I appreciate your sincerity and the way you handle everything so smoothly! Josh, your desire to make a difference helps you serve with a professional edge in every situation. Thank you, team, for welcoming me to Sweet Home Alabama!

I was leaving on an early jet plane Thursday morning to visit the hot deserts of Arizona for their 73rd convention. I was immediately greeted by enthusiasm, and I found more of it as the week continued. The AgriScience Fair was very strong, and I learned how Leroy and Kevin from the AAEC FFA Chapter are trying to make the hottest chili even hotter, and I learned about the biotechnology lab at Peoria High School from Christie and Allyson. I met the anxious state officer candidates nominating committee, and voting delegates at the business session, and we all had dinner and a social together. Then the moment we had all been waiting for arrived. We walked into Centennial Hall for the Creed Speaking finals and the opening session. Once Arizona FFA members filled the auditorium, I felt more enthusiasm in that room than I had ever seen from 1000 people in my life! WOW!! The convention theme was "FFA...The Road to Success," and the state depicted this theme through a gas station, large rocks, a wagon, a small road on the stage, and the outline of mountains against backlighting that created the image of an Arizona sunset. I met Nicolette, Nicole, and Trisha from the Wilcox FFA Chapter, and watched their excitement continue as one of their chapter members, Brian, was elected State President!

After the session we headed back to the hotel for an evening social with a 50's theme. We danced the night away, and I quickly learned how much FFA members like Trisha from Yuma, Ed from Gilbert, and Lauren from Snowflake really love to dance! It was also fun to see all the state officers in their 50's gear, and I was thankful for Katy's

thoughtfulness, who let me borrow a poodle skirt!

Friday morning came very early, and I met the Gilbert FFA Chapter for breakfast. I was amazed that they have their own meat processing lab in their agriculture department! It is just one more way FFA is preparing students for successful careers. In fact, one of their senior members, Dalton, is pursuing a career as a butcher because of his experiences in the FFA. I really enjoyed talking with all of the members like Natasha, who competed in extemporaneous public speaking and helped everyone have a positive attitude in the morning. After breakfast, we drove to Centennial Hall together to watch Natasha compete and for the morning session. On the way, I was still awe-struck by the cactus. Even though they were small in comparison to many in Arizona, they were the largest I had ever seen. The cactus we see in Illinois are only a few inches tall in a potted plant inside! So we stopped by a cactus, and Nikala and Cedar came with me to get a picture hugging the cactus that was at least three times my height! In the morning session I quickly learned that even though the Westwood FFA was small in numbers, they were huge in sound and energy!

After the morning session, I went with the Yuma District for their meeting. I met Blaine, Brent, Kyle, and the guys from Kofa, who helped me understand the best in Arizona hunting. Then I walked with the Yuma FFA Chapter to grab a bite to eat before my workshop. We had a great time talking and hanging out, and we even enjoyed the music as Charlie and I danced in the middle of the restaurant! I really appreciated the kindness of members like Katie, Jamie, and Samantha. As we were walking to my workshop, we met up with the Cibola FFA Chapter, and I had a blast with Arizona FFA members in that workshop. They were all eager to volunteer and very respectful of each other as we all learned about becoming people of positive influence. I enjoyed hanging out with Jeff, a retiring California State Officer, as he helped me clean up the room. His sincerity and thoughtfulness are incredible!

We made our way back to the convention auditorium, where the prepared public speaking finals took place as well as an afternoon session. I walked around with Jarrod, Natalie, and Dawn as we looked through shops for University of Arizona apparel. I then joined the convention delegates for our evening mixer. I really enjoyed getting to know so many awesome members even better, and we had a great time getting energized before the session. I learned that Ali taught his family English when they moved to the states just four years ago, and Allyson has won national awards in swimming.

That evening session was the most energetic of all. The state officer candidates led yells and cheers, and the entire auditorium was electrified when the state officers entered from a rising stage. It was awesome!! I sat with the Chino Valley FFA Chapter, whose enthusiasm naturally soars through the roof. I really enjoyed getting to know Scott, who hopes to become a state officer someday. A session highlight was when the keynote speaker brought all of the chapter advisors on stage to dance! Arizona FFA members gave their advisors a huge standing ovation, too! And after the session, it was the members' turn to dance at the annual conference dance! I had a great time with members like Jarom from Duncan and Chris from Buckeye. Several of the awesome state officer candidates also helped me bring the washing machine dance that I learned in Alaska to life in Arizona! What a great night!

Saturday morning came very early, but it was awesome to hang out with the Peoria FFA Chapter. I learned more about their biotechnology lab, the mini-camp they put on for Arizona FFA members, and just how awesome the largest chapter in Arizona really is! J I was pleased to see Tammy become one of the stars of Arizona and eleven of the Peoria FFA members earn their State FFA Degree. It was just plain fun to hang out with members like Theresa, Josh, Eric, Ashley, and Kenji!

The final session brought the state officer elections to a close, and I enjoyed presenting a speech to the group. I also helped present the State FFA Degree. It was an honor to see so many of my new friends earning this prestigious award! After the session, I had the opportunity to go to lunch with the Mountain View FFA Chapter. After walking around in the hot Arizona sun, we settled into a great deli, and I learned about Brittany's passion for camping and singing, "taught" Ricky to dance, learned about Ricardo's Mexican heritage, and helped Matt balance all the cups for refills!

Before convention was really over, though, I had the opportunity to meet with the newly elected state officer team. Talk about talent and enthusiasm! Arizona FFA, you are blessed to have this team serving you! And to Amanda, Bryan, Katy, Kevin, John, Holly, Carrie, Danny, Bill, and Todd, AWESOME JOB!! I was impressed by the professional and exciting convention you put on for your members, but more than anything, your kindness, thoughtfulness, and genuine friendship you showed everyone to make the

convention a success!

Before I left Arizona, I was reminded how incredible the FFA is for placing phenomenal people in our lives. One of my section officer teammates from three years ago is training to be a commercial pilot at Arizona State University. He flew down to Tucson to come to convention and hang out, and it was awesome to reminisce about the "good ole days," catch up on what's new, and even try some original Arizona Mexican food! He even took me flying in his plane and saw me off as I flew home for the Illinois FFA Convention. Thank you, KJ, for being such a true and generous friend!

June 3, 2002

Light the fire within. - 2002-03 Nebraska FFA State Officer Team

After spending a few days at home, I headed to Nebraska for their 4th and final COLT (Chapter Officer Leadership Training) Conference on Wednesday. Barrett, Elio and Amber had visited the first three, and after hearing wonderful reports from them, I knew that I was in for a great week.

I was greeted at the airport by three of the state officers, and we got to know each other over dinner before traveling to the Leadership Center in Aurora, Nebraska. Wow, was I impressed! The center includes a huge pool, gym, several breakout rooms, dining room, cabins, hotel, sand volleyball courts, and a pond. Everything was set up for "The Amazing Race," the theme for the conference that took us around the world. We all chatted for a while and headed to bed for the start of a great conference!

FFA members started arriving on Thursday morning, and I truly enjoyed helping them settle into their cabins. After lunch, the conference began with the first of many hilarious skits by the state officer team. All 140 members were split into their groups, and the race was on! I sat in on Jared's group for the first session, and as we all got to know each other, I found that Maggi from Laurel-Concord not only has the same car as I do, but we also celebrate our birthdays on the same day!

We experienced several more great sessions before recreation time and dinner. I had the honor of hanging out with the Sutton FFA Chapter. Megan and Neal take incredible leadership for the chapter, and their entire officer team, that includes Kaylee, Melissa, Brad, Kristi, Chelsea and Lauren, are very talented. I learned about their efforts to help their community by remodeling a house, and they also have tons of fun through activities like "tanking" down the river.

That evening was the Amazing Race Around the World. Chapter officers worked hard as teams at various stations around the world, and they even solved FFA Trivia questions to earn their prize! Kudos to the West Holt FFA Chapter for their efficient work as the first place team and the guys from Albion who even helped with clean-up after they came in 5th! I was then introduced to a great game of flashlight relays. I joined the crazy bunch of Chris's Cruisers, and Bart, Byron, April and I waited together for our team to find us. Before the night was over, everyone enjoyed a pool party and headed to bed!

Friday was another great day with work in individual officer positions and practice for the opening ceremonies competition. Every team worked really hard to perfect their parts and present them professionally. I enjoyed getting to know Brady, who is working hard as chapter reporter in a chapter that is only a few years old. And Ashley from Osceola cares so deeply for her fellow officers and FFA members. I was excited to see her open heart, a risk she takes to help her team.

The afternoon included more fun times with volleyball, softball, and paddleboats in the sun! I enjoyed hanging out with FFA members from the Palmyra FFA Chapter and talking to Sarah, the Bloomfield FFA Chapter President. She understands the importance of student leadership, which will be important for her chapter and officer team this year. She also has a huge heart to serve others!

It was finally time for the long-awaited Opening Ceremonies competition. Everyone gathered in the gym, and while we waited, state officers Josh and Jared entertained us with their phenomenal musical abilities! Then we all piled into the dining room for the awards banquet. Many members received honorary awards, and the entire spirit for the conference was shown in their pride and support for each other. I was humbled to present a speech to the group, and once the banquet was over, we all put on our dancing

shoes to dance the night away!! Nebraska FFA members sure know how to have a great time, and I learned some fun new dances to "Fishin in the Dark" and "Taking Care of Business!" Kim from Holton really opened up to share with me the importance of her relationship with her grandfather, and it was exciting to hear about Andy's goals to play football in college. I love to dance, and I enjoyed sharing a fun night with Nebraska FFA members and meeting members like Brady, Trent and Jason.

After the dance, the state officers used their state theme, "Light the fire within," in reflections. FFA members sat around the pool, which was illuminated by floating lights and an end stand with the theme lit up. Each officer talked about something important to them and paid tribute to the people and experiences that had lit their fires. It was so moving, which was evident in the time afterwards when members wrote letters to themselves.

Saturday was the closing day of the Nebraska COLT Conference, Session #4. In the morning I presented a couple workshops with enthusiastic and classy FFA members like Brittany and Katie. We all enjoyed our final lunch together, exchanged addresses, received final words of motivation from the state officers, and headed home!

The South Dakota FFA State Officers also came to the COLT Conference, and their leadership added to everyone's experience. I was glad to get to know Jamie, Sarah, Jared, Kelly, Mary and Ryan. South Dakota FFA members are blessed to have such a dedicated and caring team leading them!

All weekend I had the opportunity to hang out with incredible FFA members who have a great team of people leading them. State officers Mark, Kori, Ryan, Jared, Sarah, Josh and Chris worked so hard to make COLT the best experience possible for every FFA member. Their enthusiasm, sincerity, and commitment to excellence are incredible. I can't wait to see what impact they make on FFA members in Nebraska! This great team also has a team of wonderful coaches, interns (and past state officers) Amy Rasmussen and Andy Osten along with the State Executive Secretary. Thank you for an awesome weekend!

I was sure exhausted when I left Nebraska, but I also left with some great memories! I spent Sunday in Iowa with cherished friends from Iowa State University. How blessed I am to have such amazing people in my life!

Alabama and Arizona, here I come! I look forward to meeting you and experiencing great conventions!

May 26, 2002

"I love to farm, and that is what I am going to do." - Jeff Blackstone, Easton, ME, FFA member

A couple weeks ago, I would think of lobster, sunrises, and mountains as being part of Maine. But after spending a whole week in the beautiful state, I have learned that Maine is about so much more ... potatoes, kind and generous people, beautiful countryside, adventure, fluffernutters, proud heritage, and "wicked" fun times!

Monday morning brought me to Ashland High School, which is the town farthest west before reaching the "big woods" of Maine. I met with four classes there, and it was welcoming to see familiar faces from convention. We all got excited about the 75th National FFA Convention together! Then I headed down to Mars Hill, where I worked with the officer team, a very enthusiastic group! Alisha and Brionna are taking the reigns as great reporters, and Randi willingly contributes her great ideas. Jenny, Erik, Stevi and Sam all made me feel right at home, too. After hanging out with the officers, we had an all-school assembly, and I quickly learned that Mars Hill has some great people! We talked about leaders who have vision, act with courage and encourage others. After school, I went out on the town with Jordan and Deidre. Jordan works with an area potato farmer, so after visiting their potato houses, we got to see them planting potatoes. I learned a lot about the equipment, and I even got to ride in the tractor for a round! We also took a quick ride in a tractor-trailer before we caught dinner at a local restaurant and enjoyed Houlton Farms Dairy ice cream. Yummy! Deidre and Jordan are so cool. Deidre's joy and love for life draw people to her instantly, and I also respect her strong morals and convictions. Jordan reminds me of one of my buddies from home, and his good ol' boy personality makes it easy for people to trust him. Thanks for a great afternoon, Mars Hill!

I spent the whole day Tuesday at Presque Isle High School. I met all of the students in

agriculture classes that make up the largest program in the state of Maine! Chris's willingness to help, Staci's contagious joy, Ashley and Whitney's leadership, and Heidi and Micaela's enthusiasm about the future of FFA contributed to a great day. I saw many friends from convention, including the ever-smiling Josh, who had played the role of "Buzz Lightyear" at state convention. Presque Isle has an unbelievable team of three agriculture teachers and two educational technicians. The two "ed techs" work extensively with the sophisticated aquaculture program, greenhouse, and school farm. Presque Isle breeds angelfish and supplies them to pet stores across the entire state of Maine! They also work with salmon and other local fish. The school greenhouse had just opened, and the school farm is one of the largest and most diverse I have seen. Crops such as strawberries and apples are even grown there!

I made my way back to Easton for their chapter banquet, and I felt right at home because many friends from our hang out time on Sunday were there. Joe and Sarah opened the evening with the national anthem, and the FFA members served a delicious meal. Chapter President Will stepped up to the podium with confidence, and many community supporters came to show their belief in the future of agriculture. I even had the opportunity to meet the last national FFA officer from Maine, who served in the 1950's! I was truly impressed by Nathan's leadership. He put together a great slide show to explain their trip to national convention, brought his chapter officer team together to run an efficient officer installation ceremony, and show support for his fellow members. Tessa did a great job with the FFA Creed, and a great new team took over the reigns for the 2002-03 year.

After the banquet, I went back to Presque Isle to watch "Stars Wars 2" with several graduates of Easton High School. As former FFA members, they all help tremendously with chapter and state programming and just leading by example. I had a blast hanging out with Jessica, Jeff, Andrew, and Ryan!

Wednesday morning I traveled to Fort Fairfield with Mrs. Jones. Once there, I worked with the entire 8th-grade class to recruit FFA members for the coming years. With the leadership skills they showed me, I can't wait to see what the future holds for this FFA Chapter! Jarrod gave me a tour of their school, including an outstanding alternative education program called "Students Baking a Living." Students work in a bakery and sell their products during school lunch and to local stores like IGA. The program also serves as a community service branch, and they provide delicious goods to non-profit organizations and even visiting national FFA officers! While I was at Fort Fairfield, I met with the active members to create new ideas to continue building the chapter. It was wonderful to see Anne, John, and Jarrod get so excited about new ideas, and I loved the enthusiasm Britney, Brittany, and Raven brought to the table. Before I left, I also had the opportunity to see their rabbits. Craig works a lot with them, and they were precious!

Mr. McCrum picked me up to go to Washburn, but on the way we stopped for my first-ever fluffernutter! It's just like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with one adjustment. Take out the jelly and add marshmallow cream! At Washburn I met the 8th grade class and all of the FFA members to dive in to FFA opportunities and leadership. Then I got to hang out with Chris, Blake, Lacey, Derek, Leslie, Jeremy, Heidi, and the gang in the ag room as we talked about their inside jokes from convention and other adventures throughout the year. They even gave me a Maine t-shirt that I wear proudly! After school, Heidi and Derek showed me around the area and treated me to a delicious dinner! We drove through some beautiful countryside, and they took me back to Easton, where I met Kyle, Eric, Josh, AJ, Colby, Corinne, and George at their church for youth group. Brittany and Chris from Mars Hill were even there! It was a special evening full of ultimate foosball (Eric and I totally beat Kyle and Michelle!), talking, dancing, and praise and worship.

I woke up Thursday morning to my cell phone that rang at 2:30 AM! Jordan from Mars Hill was on the other end of the line to wake me up for the start of a great day! At 3:30 AM, Deidre and Randi picked me up at my hotel in Presque Isle to drive to Mars Hill Mountain, where we met Jordan and Lucas. We drove up the mountain and soon found Matt and Sam following us on their four-wheelers. Lucas had even bolted an old seat into the bed of his pick-up, so we had great seats! We arrived to the top of the hill shortly after 4:00 AM, just in time to be the first people in the lower 48 to watch the sun rise! We bundled up in blankets and hiked around the top of the mountain to find the best view. Majestic reds, purples, and oranges filled the sky, and it was absolutely breathtaking! Shortly after 5:00 AM, we headed back down the mountain and to Randi's house, where we all ate breakfast together and hung out until school started. Then, Mrs. Blackstone picked me up to head back to Easton, where I got to farm with Jeff and his family! Maine has some huge rocks in their fields, so it was amazing to me to pick up rocks, and it had been years since I had worked the field for planting. I learned a lot from Jeff, and he even let me harrow part of the field! I was simply amazed by Jeff's dedication to the future of agriculture. He works hard with his father and uncle, and he plans to return to the farm after college, even though many encourage him to go another way.

On Thursday afternoon I toured the University of Maine and Presque Isle with Mrs. Blackstone, who works there. She took me to the airport, and I was on my way home. It was difficult to leave the new "family" I had developed, but I also knew I had some great times to look forward to at home. After all, it had been six weeks since I had seen good ol' Hillsboro, Illinois! My sister and daddy picked me up from the airport, and I zonked out on the way home! But Karla and I still had some great sister talks before we went to bed.

The rest of the weekend was full of reunions and relaxation. I met up with good friends from high school for lunch and at the Hillsboro High School graduation. I went shopping with my parents and worshipped in my home church. I visited my grandparents, where I worked on tractors with Grandpa and cooked with Grandma. It was just like old times, and I am so blessed by their wisdom.

I look forward to celebrating Memorial Day with my family and traveling to Nebraska next week!

May 19, 2002

"Unless you try something beyond what you have already mastered, you will never grow." - R.F. Osborn

Our team spent ten days in Texas, and we enjoyed everything from the first "Howdy, ya'll!" to traditions of Texas A & M. Most of all, it was wonderful to be in the company of each other and our phenomenal coaches. We stayed in College Station, home to Texas A & M University, as we prepared for the National Leadership Conference for State Officers (NCLSO). NCLSO is a conference that we, as national officers, present to the new state officer teams across the country to help them develop skills in workshop presentations and form strong commitments within their teams. We present the conference in pairs, and our time in Texas provides the opportunity to work together with our partners and actually present a "practice run" to an agricultural leadership class at the university.

The hotel in which we stayed had a grill by the pool, so we had a taste of home during mealtime each evening. After working hard on the curriculum for a couple days, we met with Mark Reardon, a professional coach, teacher and presenter. He gave us incredible tips and techniques to become better teachers and helped us step up the NCLSO conference. At the end of our time together, we set goals for our presentations and discussed barriers that often stand in front of those goals. Then, he busted through an inch-thick board with his bare hand. We were all fascinated, and then he turned to us to tell us we would do the same! Self-doubt and fear of failure immediately filled my mind, but then we practiced our technique. Each of us broke through that board, on which we had written our goals and barriers. We learned that we can overcome anything to make our goals a reality!

On Saturday morning we started teaching NCLSO. Each of us had a group of about 35 college students, and they were absolutely wonderful. Amber and I learned to work together as a stronger team, and we ultimately had a blast with our skits, other teaching, and hanging out with our peers. Two of the students in our class were even named Amber and Robin! We spent each morning from Saturday through Tuesday presenting the conference, and our afternoons included coaching sessions, great Texas food, and preparations for the next day. After our time in Texas, I am excited to start "Creating the Wonder" with state officers from across the country!

We also got to hang out with the students in our classes in a casual atmosphere. On Monday night, they took us out to Chicken Oil, a fun local restaurant. We left for a tour of campus, where we learned about many of the rich traditions at Texas A & M. I have never seen another university more unified with school pride and tradition! After a quick campus tour, we went to see "Spider Man." It had sure been a long time since we had all been to the theatre! Our night truly was special because we got to hang out with many old and new friends who were past state officers from Texas and some of the western states. Thanks for making us feel right at home!

On Tuesday afternoon, we met Dr. Rick Rigsby for lunch. He is the character coach for the Texas A & M football team and one of our speakers for the 75th National FFA Convention! He graciously took time from his busy day to give us a tour of Kyle Field, including the locker room for the football team and the press box overlooking the football field.

One thing we talked about while we were in Texas was the delegate process. It is changing this year to enable FFA members at the local level to have their ideas heard on a national scope. Issues submitted by FFA members, advisors, and other supporters will be debated at convention, and the delegates will submit their recommendations based on such hearings. This is your chance, FFA members! If you have an idea to improve your organization, submit the form found online at the convention page!

I was supposed to leave Texas on Wednesday to fly to Maine, but one of my connections was canceled, so I had to stay another day, unfortunately missing the first half of the Maine FFA Convention. It did, however, give me the opportunity to catch up quickly with a good friend of mine from Illinois. After serving as a state officer in 2000-01 in Illinois, he came to Texas A & M University!

I finally made my way to Maine on Thursday afternoon. I have always wanted to visit Maine, and going for FFA has made it extra-special! I arrived on the first evening of convention, and Jeff picked me up from the airport. He is going to school in New York, but I think we can see him as a state officer in Maine in a year or two! We arrived at the banquet hall, and after meeting a few of the state officers, presented a workshop about leadership and integrity. Thanks to Derek for being a great Abu and Whitney for pulling out the role of Princess Jasmine with such grace! Enthusiasm was high for the rest of the night as we broke it down on the dance floor! The Mars Hill gang was great – we shared dances like the washing machine, mixing bowl, and lawnmower. Thanks for a great time, Deidra, Jordan, and Ashlie! The Presque Isle girls like Ashley and Whitney were a fun dancing crew, and I had a great time talking with the gang from Ashland and Fort Fairfield.

Convention continued through Friday morning, and state officers Keith and Mike presented their retiring addresses during the high-energy session. Maine FFA members also competed in Career Development Events like dairy cattle, creed speaking, forestry, and floriculture. The convention wrapped up with the banquet, and I also had the opportunity to meet some very enthusiastic state officers from New Hampshire and Connecticut. State staff and FFA members were all wonderful, and they sent me off with the Caribou FFA Chapter on our three-hour bus ride to Presque Isle, where I would stay for the remainder of my time in Maine. I enjoyed sharing stories with members like Melissa, Sarah, Lydia, Michelle, and Jacqueline. Everyone was so friendly, and Cole, Tim, and Frank were so sweet to help me with my luggage on the bus. I won't be surprised if I see Tim and Cole as state officers next year!

On Saturday I joined FFA members from Washburn at the Maine Potato Growers (MPG) Co-op for their big fundraiser selling hot dogs and soda. But these aren't just any hot dogs – they're RED! They were absolutely delicious, and it was obvious how much community support contributes to success for Washburn FFA members. MPG donated everything to the FFA, and all of their profits will be used for their trip to the National FFA Convention this fall. Hopefully we'll see Chris there in the National Band, too! Blake, Richard, and I had a great time picking on each other, and Derek, Heidi, and Jeremy took me "tooling" around Presque Isle. We went to Tim Horton's, a Canadian chain for a coffee shop, and I learned that my new friends had an incredible desire to act with integrity and maintain that reputation.

I had the opportunity to go to dinner with a former Maine FFA Foundation President and Brandon, an FFA member from Easton. They were very kind to take me out for Maine lobster, and after some lessons on how to eat it, I really enjoyed this regional treat!

I awoke Sunday morning to meet several members of the Easton FFA Chapter for breakfast, church, and a fun day to see Aroostook County. The entire day was very special, from FFA member Ryan singing a solo in church to meeting the families of my new friends. We had some "wicked" fun from the start, when we met at Mr. Marquis's house for lunch. He cooked homemade biscuits and chili – made from moose meat! It was absolutely delicious! After lunch, we started our day of touring at Jeff's farmstead, where I saw potato houses and learned about the history of potato farming from his grandpa. We then headed over to Kyle's, where we saw 23 Belgian horses, including a colt that was less than one day old! The work horses were so majestic, and I was thrilled with the opportunity to be so close to them!

We headed down to the brook to look for fiddleheads, but the right mix of rain and beavers had ruined the chance for these unique ferns. It was still fun to tromp through the mud, woods, and rocks. And the rolling hills and woodsy landscape in Maine were absolutely breathtaking! We stopped at Jeff's house to meet his parents, and then made our way to Nathan's house. His family runs a business selling coal to heat homes, and they also have a trucking business. I honked the air horn and rode in a semi truck for the first time, and even though it was just around the parking lot, it was a lot of fun! We visited another farm with more diverse livestock and several antique tractors and trucks, and then we visited the Canada line! I was in two countries at once!

Our trek through the countryside continued toward another large potato farm, but we made stops on the way to pay a visit to Bessy, an old truck Mr. Marquis has restored. The potato farm we then visited was HUGE! Farmer Jerry showed me how they control the humidity and temperature in their storage units, and I then saw a stack of potatoes that totaled 4 million pounds! That's a lot of potatoes, and I even stood on top of that mountain! Easton FFA members are working hard to restore a gravesite of an honored

soldier, and we stopped to visit the site before making our way to see equipment Jeff's family uses to farm. It was truly interesting to learn about the machinery used to plant and harvest potatoes, and we also saw some local industries, including McCain's, who processes those potatoes into french fries!

Before we called it a day, I even got to drive a tractor! I experienced another first as I drove a Ford (New Holland) tractor. Thanks, Jeff, for bringing a huge smile to this farmgirl-wannabe!

The entire day was just great, and I felt like I had a new extended family, whether I was talking with Eric and George, learning about Colby's incredible work ethic, or getting into tickle fights with Kyle and Josh. I found that Nathan, Jeff, and I share a love for Steven Curtis Chapman's music, and Brandon and Willie were always willing to lend a helping hand. Even though AJ and Josh had to leave early, they were wonderful to talk with. All the guys were very thoughtful and excited to share part of their lives with me. I will never forget their generosity, and I really look forward to spending time with them at their chapter banquet this week along with other FFA chapters in Maine. The day was best summed up when Kyle told me I was kind of like a big sister. I think I just found some of the coolest brothers I could ever ask for!

[Entries from 11/25/01 to 02/17/02](#)

[Entries from 02/24/02 to 05/12/02](#)

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