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**The 2001-2002 National Officer Journals**

Dane White
2001-2002 National FFA President
 E-mail: dwhite@ffa.org



February 17, 2002

"A friendly demeanor and a warm smile can always bridge the oceans of communication."

Growing, eye-opening, and life-changing are all words that aptly describe my experiences in the Land of the Rising Sun.

Our trip to Japan began upon our arrival at the home of the 2002 Olympics, Salt Lake City. American national pride was at its zenith, and we all swelled with delight at seeing the Stars and Stripes flying high!

After a night in Utah, we departed. With enthusiasm and a small bit of nervousness, we watched as our homeland disappeared behind us, the Pacific Ocean and us and the continent of Asia ever-growing on the horizon. After flying all day, we landed at Narita Airport, met our tour guide and after a quick supper, spent the evening at the Narita Rest House.

The next morning we traveled to Higaki Melon Farm, where we witnessed the specialized nature of Japanese agriculture truly come to life. Next, we went to Tani Fish Farm, Takahashi Engei, and a few other agricultural establishments, each bringing to life a specific niche of agriculture that is very different than what we see here in the US.

That day we also met with the members and administrators of Narita Seiryō High School, which has a very active FFJ (Future Farmers of Japan) chapter. That evening, we checked into our hotel in Tokyo, where we spent the next several days touring sites, visiting sponsors and supporters, and immersing ourselves in Japanese culture. We were able to visit Tsukiji Fish Market, which is among the world's largest! I especially liked the auction of albacore tuna (which are huge) and the excitement I felt when Amber ate an eel liver! The girl never ceases to amaze me with her courage! Some other highlights in Tokyo include visits to Mitsui Corp., Tokyo Engei High School, and the U.S. Embassy!

Following Tokyo, we visited Chita Futo, which is a grain importer from the US and

other countries. The global perspective we gained from such visits is going to be put to good use while interacting and educating members across the country this year!

After that, we traveled to Aichi Prefecture, where we separated for our homestays. I was able to spend my time with a fantastic family! They treated me to an authentic Japanese experience, right down to the food! I truly enjoyed venturing out of my comfort zone to try eel pie, fish cookies, and anchovies! My host family proved one point to me as well: that though our cultures can be so different, the love felt among family and the hospitality shown to guests is universal. The small amount of time with the Suzuki family was well spent, and I know I have created a special link with them that will continue to grow with time. Among some of the most special moments were trips to the Big Lanterns, Nagoya Castle, and watching the opening ceremony of the Olympics together.

Following Aichi, we traveled to Hiroshima, where we spent time at the Peace Garden Memorial Park, as well as other historical sites. Learning about other aspects of warfare was definitely interesting. We also spent time at Miyajima, a floating Shinto shrine, which was beautiful!

Our next stop was at Yanmar Corp., which owns several plants on Lake Biwa, the largest lake in Japan. Learning about the interconnectedness between our two nations was truly fascinating!

Kyoto was up next on our tour. We spent the majority of our time here visiting cultural and historical landmarks, which really delved us into the past world of Japanese traditions, trademarks and lifestyles. One of the coolest places was at Nijo-jo castle, which was the ancient home of emperors and shoguns! Walking on the same floor and viewing the same paintings that they did was quite a feeling!

Our final day was spent in Osaka, first at the home of our tour guide's (Hiro) mother. We were treated to a calligraphy lesson, tea and crackers, and some warm Japanese generosity before we left for Panasonic. At Panasonic, we toured the showroom, which displays some pieces of future technology our world will see.

That evening, we flew out of Osaka-Kansai Airport, bound for Honolulu and our home of the United States of America! After flying overnight, we arrived in Hawaii in the morning, and after checking into our hotel, we immediately hit the beach! Japan was a bit cool for this California guy, so the warmth of Oahu was welcome. Most of the day was spent working on speeches and correspondence out on the sands, and it was among the most relaxing days I have had to date. That evening, Barrett, Elio and I climbed Diamond Head to watch the sunset. It was definitely an experience that will live on in my mind forever.

The next morning, our team toured Pearl Harbor and the USS Arizona Memorial. After being in Hiroshima, we were glad to be able to see the American side of WWII. Following, we drove to the North Shore and spent a bit more time out in the sun. That evening, the Hawaii FFA Association treated us to a banquet. We sure had fun getting to know so many enthusiastic and dedicated FFA members.

That night we spent on a plane again, this time to Salt Lake City. It was great to end our experience in the place where it began, and the stirring I felt inside upon seeing our flag flying proudly in the sky is unmatched. I will always fondly remember and appreciate the experiences our team had in Japan, and I look forward to sharing them this year.

As each day passes and I reflect on our time overseas, it makes me even more appreciative to say that I am an American. We live in the greatest nation on this earth, and our recent travels, though they make me excited about international agriculture, will always make me even more proud that I am a citizen of the United States of America.

February 3, 2002

"Out of every earth day, make a little bit of heaven." – Ella Wheeler Wilcox

What a small piece of heaven this week was! Words aren't quite enough to express the pure joy that I have found in this week's activities.

After the conclusion of the National FFA Board of Trustees meeting, I flew to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania where I met up with Amber and members of the Pennsylvania and National Staff. At that point, I didn't know the excitement, fun, and sense of fulfillment I was to experience in the coming days.

The first morning of action began early, when we met with our cohorts for the week: two amazing Pennsylvania state officers, Paul Hostetter and Sherisa Brammer, in the lobby of our hotel. Following breakfast, we headed out on the road to Philadelphia, where our first real activity of Experience State was to occur. We were met in Philly by three other state officers, Jeremy Ranck, Karrie Kehr, and Lisa Fetscher, who all proved to be very talented and enjoyable as well. Our visit at the enthusiastic W.B. Saul chapter began with two workshops that Amber and I presented about the Million Dollar Sweepstakes that is FFA. We hope the attendees left with a stronger sense of purpose for their years to come in the agricultural magnate school.

Following our visit in Philadelphia, we journeyed to Millerstown, where we were hosted by the Cumberland, Dauphin and Perry Area chapters at a wonderful banquet. Members like those from Manheim, Gettysburg and Greenville made the evening a tremendously successful event. Dr. Meecee Baker coordinated the activity, which was among my favorites of the week! Amber and I presented our workshops, ate some seriously good food, and made some lifelong friends.

The next day began with a trip to Lancaster Mennonite High School and the Hans Herr FFA chapter, Paul and Jeremy's alma mater. Because of the essential role some of our dear Pennsylvania state officer friends played, our presentation on "Agricultural Careers in the 21st Century" was tops! Thanks to Scientific Sherisa, Painter Paul, Jungle Jeremy, and Talk Show Host Amber, the student body at Lancaster Mennonite is now prepared for cross-cultural communication and accepting diversity in any occupation they select! Besides the successful piece of the activity, Amber and I were able to experience some very profound moments of learning and fun!

After saying goodbye to Jeremy in Lancaster, we drove to Penn State, where Dr. Hoover and her Ag Advocates treated us to a wonderful lunch. Following the lunch, we were able to tour some of the facilities at the university, and the highlight was our guided tour of the mushroom area! This part was fascinating, to say the least. The steps involved in mushroom production are unlike any other sector of agriculture. What a special part of our Pennsylvania experience that was!

That evening, we drove to Beaver Springs, where we were guests at a banquet hosted by the West Snyder FFA chapter. Amber and I met state officers Amanda Brown, Isaac Harrington, Lance Bittner, Rebecca Sankey, and Cody Holden, who, along with members like Phaedra Wray and Josie Bailey, made our night extra memorable.

On Thursday, we spent the morning with Mr. Sam Hayes, Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture. We enjoyed some informative tours of the State Capitol and enjoyed our enlightening dialogue with Mr. Hayes.

That afternoon, we visited with members of the Cumberland Valley FFA chapter and we spent some time viewing the new facilities being built for the agriculture program at their school.

That evening, Amber and I attended a scholarship banquet that honored the success of FFA and 4-H members in Pennsylvania. The audience was also treated to one of the many talents of Ms. Haugland, as she auctioned off some chocolate bars that earned close to \$1,000!

Our final day in Pennsylvania was spent at Milton Hershey High School. I was certainly astounded at the incredible support the school has and how many opportunities the students are given to succeed. Plus, being from a state where agriculture education is strictly in public schools, I enjoyed seeing how it worked in a private education institution. Along with the facilities, I was constantly amazed at how polite and friendly both students and staff were at Hershey.

This week was some heaven on earth for me. The lifelong bonds created and close friendships forged will always hold a special place in my life. Thank you, Pennsylvania FFA, for the wonderful experiences and memories! I only hope that the staff, officers and members there were able to grow and gain from the experience what I was able

to.

January 27, 2002

I was able to spend a few days at home with my family, sharing some quality time with my parents, brother, aunts, uncles and cousins. It was also great to be able to catch up on some much needed sleep! J

After the short visit to Eureka, I flew out to Washington, D.C. for the National FFA Board of Directors meeting. We spent a few days preparing for the meeting as well as our Experience State until the official activities commenced. Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday were spent in meetings with the adult board and consultants. It was quite a feeling, knowing that the decisions being made were all going to benefit members of the FFA so greatly. From my first experience on public transportation to an exciting dinner at a Mongolian barbecue, the week held many memorable and thought provoking experiences.

January 20, 2002

The team and I spent this week preparing for the National Leadership Conferences for State Officers (NLCSO) – which will all occur this summer. I know that N.L.C.S.O.'s are activities that I am certainly looking forward to!

At the conclusion of the week, our team was taken out to a Japanese steakhouse and Marble Slab creamery! Mmmm! It was a great evening – and overall, a very productive week!

January 13, 2002

"Our greatest efforts in life are not a result of personal benefit, but of a loving and spontaneous service to others."

There is nothing that could have prepared me for the amazement and appreciation I have felt this week. These incredible 7 days began Sunday when the team and I flew to Kansas City, Missouri.

Monday morning began with a sponsor visit to Farmland Industries. We are so fortunate to have them supporting many of our programs that make a difference in the lives of students. That evening, we drove to Warrensburg, where our first greenhand conference was held. Tuesday morning was the first of the eight conferences. It was time! I know we all enjoyed sharing a little bit about what FFA can do for people through our entertaining skit. I was fortunate enough to play the role of "Cat Man Dane," a freshman in the mythical Loopyville FFA, who has such a deep passion for stuffed felines, but cannot share that with people. Through FFA, Cat Man Dane was able to spread that love and passion to other people, as well as journey through new experiences and develop new passions. Besides our skit, we each presented workshops with a specific leadership theme. Mine was about effective goal setting, and I used the game of soccer as a delivery vehicle. I sure hope that all of the participants learned how to "Go For the Goal!" Following our workshops, one of us presented a keynote address. At Warrensburg, Elio spoke about a journey up a mountain, and all the components to being successful on that ride.

At the conclusion of our first conference, we hopped in a van and drove to the site of our next conference in Paris, Missouri. The Paris conference was also tremendous, and I feel so fortunate to have had the opportunity to serve the members of the Northeast District. Abbie Kammerzell spoke on the order of our lives, and I know that all participants enjoyed reminiscing about their childhoods with her. The Van-Far crew, Paris FFA officers, and every other excited member sure made this conference a special one.

After Paris, we drove to Rolla, where the conference was held on Wednesday. A large conference, it was also wildly successful, and I know that the crowd sure enjoyed hearing Robin Niehaus' address about chance and being the one that decides your fate.

Following Rolla, we flew on a chartered plane to Cape Girardeau, where a few advisors as well as Jennifer from Jackson FFA met us. A motivated and enthusiastic audience greeted us in the Southeast District, and I sure enjoyed getting to meet so many of

their wonderful and special members. The whole gang from New Madrid made my workshop a success, and I know that the words of Barrett Keene will forever stick in the minds of the members who were fortunate enough to listen to his keynote.

That evening, we again hopped on the plane and flew to Springfield. After spending the evening with Jennifer, Serena, Candice, and the wonderful Bellis family, our team sang a few songs in the lobby of our hotel. I bet the staff was a bit surprised to hear "White Christmas" in January! Ha ha!

The Thursday we spent in Springfield was a busy and rewarding one. Three conferences filled our day to the brim, and I know that our entire team fully enjoyed spending the whole day with so many focused and professional FFA members. Our lunch hour was spent at a sponsor's luncheon at the headquarters of the Bass Pro Company. It is always heartening to see the ever-increasing support that communities have for FFA. The crowds that day were also treated to an amazing speech by Amber Haugland. I am confident they know what the "Right Fit" is for them in life. Later in the day, I was able to speak to the members of Area 6. I sure enjoyed helping them discover what ignites the fires within our hearts.

Thursday evening, we flew to Platte City. Friday was spent in the Northwest District, at our final greenhand conference. Across the board, we all felt so good about the impact we left on FFA members in the "Show Me" state that week. Along with the good feelings came a deep respect and appreciation for the opportunity to serve. It was often sobering to think of the unfathomable impact each of us can make this year. Missouri was a great start on that journey.

Friday night, we flew back to Indianapolis, and rested until Saturday, when Barrett, Robin and I took a little road trip. We left that evening to go to Chicago, the Windy City. We spent a wonderful evening out on the streets, taking pictures, seeing the sights, and experiencing the warm feeling that Chicago offers. Sunday, the three of us had an interview with WGN, where the broadcasters so kindly accommodated us on their days off. After leaving, I felt so good, knowing that we were spreading the word of FFA on television and radio. We look forward to seeing the blue and gold corduroy on the US Farm Report in February.

This week truly was an example of service in so many capacities. From sponsors that supply financial resources to members empowering each other, I saw the difference that one person can make. It is up to us to always choose the road of loving and spontaneous service. I know for one, it is a road I am excited to be taking.

January 6, 2002

"Nothing warms the heart like friends and family."

While traveling and training, thoughts of home and its comforts are often put in the back of ones mind in order to focus on service, growth and experiential learning.

This past week reminded me of how great being with my family and friends truly is. After a day of travel on the 23rd, I landed at home in Eureka, California. The refreshing smell of the misty air, the welcoming sound of the ocean's waves, and the familiar sight of herds of cattle grazing in their pastures are all things I treasure about my home. How wonderful it was to be immersed in them again!

Following my arrival in California was Christmas! A special holiday in my heart- I believe that the spirit of the season fosters reflection, appreciation, kindness and love. My holiday at home was among the best ever; for the first time, everyone loved the gifts I gave them! Also, I was fortunate to have all of my cousins, aunts and uncles at our family celebrations. What fun we had!

After spending a few days at home, I drove down to Sacramento to spend some time with my best friends. The first night was spent with my dear friends Jeff, Jake and Molly. There are few things I enjoy more than just hanging out and watching a movie - and we did just that! We also exchanged some amusing gifts, shared some stories and had some serious laughs!

The following night I spent with some of my other best friends: Angela, Tracy, Scott and Megan. Our evening was filled with an entertaining gift exchange, a "suit and tie"

dinner on the town, and some good times with the Playstation II. We also made a special visit to the home of our former advisor and comrade, Mr. Parker, where we laughed at old stories and created new memories. How fulfilling it is to spend time with special friends!

After my special time in Sacramento, I journeyed back up into Redwood Country and spent some quality time with my family again. My brother Derek and I went to a movie, my mom and I made a few trips to the mall, and my dad and I fixed a few things in the garage.

After flying back to Indianapolis on January the 3rd, the team and I worked hard to prepare for a wonderful week in Missouri at their greenhand conferences. We were fortunate to spend some relaxing evenings with staff members, as well as grow closer as a team of servants. We are sure looking forward to Missouri!

December 23, 2001

This week was one of new and exciting experiences. The majority of the time was spent training and preparing with the exception of Thursday.

On Thursday, Robin Niehaus and I were fortunate to spend the morning at Hamilton Heights High School (go Huskies!) presenting the workshops we had been preparing for several weeks. The classes we taught to were filled with bright, receptive, intelligent students who made our day there very worthwhile. Robin and I both learned volumes about effective presentation techniques, and I know I sure look forward to teaching more throughout this year!

Thursday evening our amazing training team took us out to a special dinner. I know our officer team greatly appreciates the time and effort that these outstanding individuals invest in our growth. Our evening with them wrapped up with a creative ornament making project, a game of koosh volleyball, and a squawking parrot.

In a nutshell, it was an excellent week of learning, growth and fun!

December 16, 2001

What a week! Hard work, team fun, and Christmas cheer have all filled my heart these past seven days.

The week has been a busy one, to say the least. From Monday to Friday, we were under the leadership and guidance of our amazing training team. This crew has empowered our team to create a vision, mission, and personal mandalas that will guide us in the upcoming year. "The Flame of Excellence" certainly blazes brightly within each of us. It is our hope that we will be able to help many of you create your own internal fires that fuel your decisions and choices. Wow, the thought of people getting so "fired up" really has me excited!

Team fun: we can't seem to get enough of that!! The wonderful Miss Amber Haugland treated all of us to a little bit of "North Country" excitement this past Tuesday. Amber and her father are bona fide auctioneers – and guess what?! She took us to an ultra-fun auction! However, I don't think any one of us could have planned on the adventures once we got inside the auction house! Barrett hasn't really been to many auctions, and five minutes after our arrival he was in the bidding for a lovely dining set! Little did he realize, he kept lifting his hat and accidentally signaling the ringman. Fortunately for Mr. Keene, someone outbid him! I'm not sure exactly what he would've done with a full dining set here in Indianapolis, but knowing him, he would've made it work! After some other dining sets, the auction workers brought out a piano. Well, no one was about to buy the piano without hearing it first. The auctioneer called out for a piano player in the packed audience, and who did he get ... Robin Niehaus! That girl is incredible. She sat at the piano without any music and played a beautiful song. Then, not to be outdone, Barrett jumped back up to the front and they did a duet. Expecting something quite elegant, I had to laugh when I heard the familiar sounds of "Heart and Soul." Oh how we enjoyed our time at the auction house!

Christmas cheer has been exuding from my pores this week! I absolutely love this season! After spending some lovely holiday evenings with several members of

national staff and their families, it was time for the much-anticipated FFA center Christmas party on Friday. After dressing up in our suits and ties, (the girls were in dresses), we headed over to the center. The night began with a social hour, followed by an excellent dinner. For the six of us, the biggest part came next. Our team created a gift for the members of national staff, but it wasn't something you could take home in your pocket – only in your heart. Elio, Barrett, Robin, Amber, Abbie and I sang a medley of our favorite Christmas songs: White Christmas, Joy to the World, Angels We Have Heard on High, and Jingle Bells. The medley was our gift to the staff – and we hope they liked it! I know we sure put some time and love into it. After our song and some special presentations, it was BOOGIE TIME! Tonight was true evidence that we LOVE to dance. Elio wowed the crowd with his swing expertise, Amber, Abbie and Robin serenaded the group with a few karaoke tunes, and Barrett and I did the craziest dance moves that we could possibly think of! Let's just say that the "Mixer" and the "Flail" will be hitting dance scenes across the country quite soon!

This Saturday was our first day off, and I'm not sure we really knew what to do! After sleeping in and doing some shopping, it seems like our day was gone!

Overall, it was a great week – and I look forward to our last week in Indianapolis being equally educational and enjoyable!

December 9, 2001

"Home Is Where the Heart Is"

This quote couldn't be any closer to the truth right now. Though I think every day of my real home, family and friends back in California, the national FFA center has become more than just a workplace to the team and me. It is a place that I am proud to say we belong.

The staff here is the reason I feel so at home. From incredible talent to selfless devotion, every noble virtue is found in the hearts of the members of "The Center." It is my hope that when I am a member of the working world, I am able to be as effective, passionate, and welcoming as the staff here.

Since the day my team and I stepped through those glass doors, we have been received with open arms and loving hearts. The amazing welcome with which we were greeted has made this past week absolutely exceptional for me!

Sunday through Saturday was a period of intellectual stimulation, relationship building and good times! From learning about the inner workings of the Marketing and Communications Services team, to playing with some excited children at Chuck E. Cheese's® on Barrett's "night of passion" it was a week that made me feel like Indiana is a place I belong!

A few highlights include:

- A reception with the Whiteland FFA Chapter. What fun! Elio and I were so fortunate to have Whiteland FFA welcome us to Indiana with a fun-filled reception. Also joining us were members and advisors from Columbus, Indian Creek, and Franklin FFA chapters. From eating some homemade "butterfly cake" to playing a wild game of Taboo™, it was sure a night I won't forget! The eagerness of those FFA members have reminded me of why I am so excited to serve this year! Thank you!!
- A visit with Stan Howell, Vice President of North America, Dow AgroSciences. Amber and I were able to meet with Mr. Howell, who is a great supporter of the national FFA organization. After learning more about the operations of Dow, we were able to share with him some key messages of the FFA and thank him for his continued support. It was certainly an incredible opportunity to learn more about the world of agribusiness. I certainly look forward to more business and industry activities!
- Virtues Training. The wonderful Mrs. Debbie Dodson flew all the way out from Chico, California, to present an amazing day of virtue-oriented leadership. I know the six of us learned an incredible amount about the role of virtue this year! We also enjoyed getting to know a little more about one another in the process. Mrs. Dodson enabled us to share a piece of our hearts.

This week, my heart has been in working hard, having fun, bonding with my

teammates, and making Indy home. It has been a great 7 days!

December 2, 2001

Wow! What an adventure this past month has been! After the exciting election of our team at convention, life has been a pleasant whirlwind of activity.

After running on stage and embracing my new officers Barrett, Abbie, Elio, Robin and Amber, I took a moment to reflect and give thanks for the incredible blessing that I had been given. My excitement and eagerness to serve this year is beyond description!!

Following our election, we were rushed backstage for some media interviews, and after a social and meeting with our parents and some national staff, I was able to go out to dinner with my parents, my brother Derek, and my State Officer team (Megan, Tracy, Scott, Kevin and Angela), along with a few other special guests. What fun it was to spend time with the people who mean the most to me! Besides retelling and laughing at some old stories, the "restrengthening" of our truly special bond is something I will always feel grateful for.

The next week held an exciting agenda, filled with training, fun, and "The Crest of Leadership." For all of us visual learners out there, putting together a wall-sized puzzle that was full of inspirational tips, team motivations, and missions that will guide us sure was a great time! We also were able to partake in some "extracurricular" activities- one night we were guests at the wonderful "Derby Dinner Playhouse," and another we spent watching a good ol' movie. Good times, good times!!

After returning home from Louisville, I was able to spend a few nights at home until I was off on the road again!!

The weekend of my return saw an early morning flight WAY down south to the other end of California, to spend some time with the members of my home state as well as 6 of my best friends. I have been so truly graced to have spent the last 6 months with some of the most amazing, talented, and heartfelt servants I have ever known: the California State FFA Officers. Spending time with these exceptional people was always a true joy, and they ALWAYS reminded me of why I wanted to be a National Officer. Watching them touch members and aiding in their growth was so fulfilling, not to mention the wonderful memories we've created! The Golden State is so very lucky to have Gabe Ponce', Jeff Alves, Luke Browning, Molly Fagundes, Becky Roland and Jake Wenger. After finishing up "So Cal" (the Southern California Leadership Conference), we were able to take a weekend off and chill on the sunny beaches of San Diego. This weekend was a time that I will cherish in my heart forever. These true friends have really made a lasting imprint on my life.

Following my adventures down south, I was able to head down to Lemoore, CA for the San Joaquin Regional Rally Day! Seeing hundreds of pumped-up FFA members, hangin' with my friends Christine, Bonnie, Monica, Jordan, Nick, and Anne Marie, watching the regional officers in action, and playing some "educational" games made for a fun-filled day in the "Heart of Agriculture." The enthusiasm of those FFA members sure got me excited!!

Whew! The next few weeks were an exciting time!! Press conferences, interviews, City Council meetings, receptions and FFA meetings filled my schedule to the brim – but I wouldn't have it any other way. I was also fortunate enough to spend some special time with my parents, brother, aunts, uncles and cousins before I left back to come to Indianapolis.

I flew out of the Eureka Airport on the morning of November 25th. It sure was foggy when I left! After connecting to new flights in Sacramento and Chicago, I finally made it to Indy. After eating dinner with my super cool, national staff mentor, Becky Meyer, I headed to the hotel and caught up with my teammates. I sure had missed those crazy cats! :)

This last week has been one of incredible learning and growth (oh, and fun too!!). Intense sessions on media training, character leadership and key messages have provided LOTS for our brains to take in. We've also experienced some exceptional nights of learning – but this time it has been about our teammates. We've been

fortunate enough to learn about Elio's love of the outdoors and nature, and Robin's devotion to music and making people smile (which she does quite well!). Along the way, we've become QUITE the Christmas carolers! Singing in nursing homes, apartment complexes, our van, the ice cream shop and the sandwich place have all been some fun times and chances for us to share our love of music with other people. "Joy to the World" is our special favorite.

This next week will be filled with even more training and learning opportunities, as well as chances for us to learn more about each other and ways that we can effectively serve FFA members. I'm definitely looking forward to it and to keeping you all updated. Take care and God bless!!

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Dane White
2001-2002 National FFA President
 E-mail: dwhite@ffa.org

**May 5, 2002**

I spent this week at a number of different places. The week began in Detroit, where Abbie and I made several visits to numerous sponsors and partners of FFA. My eyes were certainly opened to how essential the support of industry is to our organization. Without their generous donations, many of our programs and activities wouldn't have the funding they need.

Abbie and I got to attend a Detroit Tigers game- what fun that was! After enjoying Detroit and parting ways with Ms. Kammerzell, I headed south to Indianapolis for the Sponsors Board Meeting, where I met up with Miss North Dakota herself. Amber and I spoke at the evening dinner of the board, and truly valued the time we got to spend with such influential and hardworking people.

Friday morning I flew out to New Jersey for their 2nd annual Alumni Golf Tournament! What a hoot that was! To give you a bit of background, I was somewhat nervous for this event- seeing as how I'd never golfed before then. Well, my fears were alleviated AND I had a complete blast in the meantime. The wonderful FFA members and staff in New Jersey welcomed me with open arms, and in fact, many of them had never golfed before either! That evening, I got to spend some quality time with their state officer team: Mike, Erin, Sara, Liz, Chris, Brian and John, as well as some local FFA members who joined us for supper. I had a great time getting to know those spirited and enthusiastic officers - I know that New Jersey had an incredible year with them.

Saturday morning was the big event! After getting a few lessons from an extremely helpful and kind national staff member who was on site, I was ready to hit the course! Fortunately for my team, which also included Jen and Alex, two members from New Jersey, the game was played as a "best ball scramble" (or, at least I think that is what it's called!) so we didn't hold up TOO much traffic out on those fairways! It was a beautiful, warm day and I really liked being able to spend some time outdoors with some ultra fun people. Though I was at times a bit disappointed by my lack of golf prowess, I had a great time hitting that ball around! That evening, New Jersey FFA held a banquet, and I was fortunate to get to speak to all that attended! As I look back on my golf adventure, I realize that the weekend was much more than a tournament- it was about great people, good times, and supporting the organization. Thank you for the wonderful time, New Jersey FFA!

Sunday morning I flew from Philadelphia to Knoxville, Tennessee for the Tennessee State FFA Convention in Gatlinburg. To my surprise, Gatlinburg is also near Pigeon

Forge, which is the home of Dollywood©! I had to chuckle at that.

Unfortunately, I only got to spend two nights in Tennessee, but I had a great time while I was there. The sights were beautiful, their members were laid back and easygoing - overall, it was a good time had by all!

April 28, 2002

"Never judge a book by its cover."

This week, I found that there is more to Georgia than palatial mansions, sweet tea, and red clay. The Peach State can also be characterized by soulful pride, heartfelt warmth and genuine friendliness.

I flew into Athens on April 25th and was met by Carol Spruill, a great friend and past national officer. After taking great care of my needs and giving me a tour of the UGA campus, Carol took me to my hotel, where I checked in and got settled and prepped up for my four days at the convention. That evening began with the opening session of the convention- and was I wowed when I entered the Classic Center. The professionalism of the program was impressive and the ease at which I was made to feel is unlike any other conference I've been to. The state officers did a great job with ceremonies and their retiring addresses. I was amazed that though many are only seniors in high school, their ability to speak and present is quite good. They also introduced me to some wonderful little treats that I'd never seen, namely: honey buns, Mello Yello™ and fudge rounds. What a cool group they were!

I also got to see deep into the heart of Georgia. Their unequivocal pride in the University of Georgia Bulldogs is unlike any other state I've ever been in. At any mention of the team, the crowd of 2,500 would erupt!

Throughout my time in Georgia, I met some pretty wonderful people. I enjoyed spending time with people like Bo, Alex, Beth, Constance, Chelsea and Ben, and I had a great time hanging out with old friends like Abby, AJ and Matt.

During the convention, I could really get a feel for how different the South really is, but I never doubted the heart that everyone in that auditorium had. Georgia FFA - thank you for showing me how truly wonderful your part of the nation is. The beauty of your state and the warmth of your people will always be remembered in my heart!

April 21, 2002

There are so many quotes that would apply to the time I spent in Fresno at the California State Leadership Conference. A few I particularly liked:

"Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born." – Anais Nin

"A friend is a gift you give yourself." – Baltasar Gracian

Whew! Can we say Christmas came in the New World? The gifts that have permeated my very existence and shaped a new space in my heart have really become obvious to me this week. Besides the fact that I was able to spend time with all 11 of my best friends, I strengthened old acquaintances and forged new relationships that I know will last longer than a lifetime, all while witnessing the phenomenal members of the truly Golden State shine like never before.

In large part, this Convention was a success for some primary and fundamental reasons. The tireless labors of the California state staff and the selfless devotion of the state officer team. I know I've written about them in my journals before, and most anyone I've met this year has heard me speak ceaselessly of them, but to give proper credit to some of the biggest gifts I have been blessed to have in my life, I need to elucidate a little bit more. In my opinion, Luke, Jake, Molly, Gabe, Becky and Jeff are some of the best officers California has ever seen, and I saw that excellence proven so many times this week. I could see it ring as loud as a bell at every convention session; heartfelt professionalism enabled those in attendance to see the officer's dedication to a quality program. I could see it in the sparkly eyes of Brittany, from Firebaugh, when she spoke of their time hanging out at a conference. I could see it in each and every retiring address; I know I at least have six new ways to change my life from hearing their messages. Even the registration numbers showed me what a tremendous difference this team made in California FFA. During their recognition, our extraordinarily talented and devoted advisor, Mr. Charles Parker, shared with everyone that this team has reached the coveted level four in John Maxwell's leadership system. To reach level four means that you have truly changed what you intended to - you have "grown the organization" irreversibly. As a giant fan and close friend of these officers, my eyes welled with tears of pride at hearing this. Their

commitment and focus was on making things better for members, and they accomplished it. No greater praise can be given. But, I'm going to try!

To give you a bit of background, national officer candidates in California spend a great deal of their time in the summer and fall traveling with the state officer team, and I was no exception. For several months I was with them a great deal, and I was fortunate to get to watch them change lives, shape chapters, and build our association's future. Some of my greatest recent memories are times with them - like the times when I would sit quietly and watch them make a difference in the life of an FFA member. The pure love and devotion they have to helping others succeed is beyond my very comprehension. Times like when we'd complete a two-day conference and we'd pile in the van and head back up the road I would fall asleep on one of their shoulders, maybe drooling a bit but otherwise blissfully resting. The sleepovers in hotel rooms and campouts in sleeping bags will be forever cherished, and the heart-to-heart talks have helped me grow more than they know. For anyone who has interacted with them, I know that you've had similar experiences. Your mind was challenged, your heart was touched, and your life was changed. A new world was opened in your heart after meeting these phenomenal people.

Throughout the week, we all got the chance to hear the message of each individual officer, and I know that though I coached many of them, when they were all delivered, I felt called to action - called to change the way I lived in so many ways.

Gabe Ponce, State Sentinel, began the retiring addresses with his speech, which was entitled, "Me and My Shadow." Gabe helped us all realize that we must rely on each other for strength, and in times of personal weakness, we must turn from the mirror and instead view that more accurate reflection of our true selves: our shadows. Gabe is a role model for me in so many ways: his easygoing demeanor, helpful spirit, and genuine honesty make him so special, and I am proud to call Gabe one of my best friends. California is lucky to have had him.

Luke Browning, State Reporter, is someone whom I have known for years and am proud to call an honorary brother. His speech was one that I didn't help coach, and I loved listening to his passion shine through as he taught the audience about "Life." And what a teacher he is - Luke successfully dared us to live our lives without comparing ourselves to others, to find our foundations, and I know that everyone was gripped by Luke's personal stories of challenging times and how to rise above with integrity and faith - two things that Luke is solid role model in.

Jeff Alves, aka JeFFA, State Treasurer, appealed to everyone in the audience with his speech, "The Next Mile." As he spoke, I could feel the flame of conviction burn in his words, and I fully believe that his message of acceptance, not judging people, and loving others for who they are has changed the thinking of everyone who listened. Jeff has more heart than anyone I know, and his compassion, empathy, caring nature, and natural love of everyone he meets makes me unbelievably proud to call him a best friend. Jeff has truly changed me as a person and leader.

Becky Roland, State Secretary, is one of the most wonderful people I know. She is the team's sweetheart - but she has talent, strength and class to match. Her retiring address, "Some Days You Gotta Dance" challenged us all to live each day as if it may be our last, to appreciate the people in our lives and to dance - to enjoy the precious time we've been given. Becky has a pure heart, and the difference she has made in people can be easily seen. She is multi-talented, and her ability to sing, dance, speak, and change lives never ceases to amaze me. I'm more than excited to spend more time with her in the future.

Molly Fagundes, State Vice President, is one of my most treasured and dear friends, and her speech, "Believe" was so powerful. It was about perseverance, never giving up on dreams, and being there for each other to succeed. To most, Molly is the epitome of professionalism, organization, and caring, but those that know her will always remember how she touched their hearts with her thoughtfulness, incredible kindness, and commitment to the well-being and happiness of others. Molly believes so strongly in others, she can't help but empower them to succeed and achieve their dreams.

Jake Wenger, State President, was the final speaker of the convention. His powerful address, "What Do I Live For?" left the audience with chills and a clear vision of what life is really all about- people and joy. Jake is one of my best friends, and he has taught me so much about leadership. From his example, I've seen that one can be a picture of composure and perfection as well as wacky and crazy. His strength and determination has carried many of us at points, and I look forward to the day when he transfers schools to live with Jeff and me. I know he has much more to teach the world.

These officers are servants at heart, their commitment to agriculture is extraordinary, and their legacy will continue to change the face of the California Future Farmers of America and the National FFA Organization.

Besides chilling with the recently retired officers, I got to spend quality time with my state officer team, Megan, Angela, Tracy, and Scott, and every time we're together, I am reminded of how incredibly blessed I am to have such amazing friends. The times I share with them are unsurpassed. California Family for life! I also saw some college friends, like my dear friend Mandi and my pals Sammy, Tim, Julie, Doug and Jonnalee.

During the convention, I also got to see some familiar faces and even make some new friends! It would be a novel to write about them all, but spending time with old chums like Tommy Bottoms, Nicole Rencher, Natalie Phipps, and everyone from my home area of Humboldt County all made the convention so special. It was so refreshing to see a familiar face and know that a friend was waiting around every corner. What a special gift that was.

The world that opened in my heart was the new relationships. I didn't think the convention could have been any better before, but after making these new friends, I realize that I had even more fulfillment in store! People like Landon from Tulare, Pamela from Fremont School for the Deaf, and Jay from Nevada Union all made the convention extra special. I look forward to learning of their successes in the future.

For most of the week, I didn't want to sleep - for fear that the incredible experience at my home convention would end too early. At no point was I impatiently anticipating it's conclusion - living in the moment and immersing myself in the excitement was what my days consisted of.

After arriving on Wednesday, Barrett and I went out to dinner with the officers and Mr. Parker, and feeling adventurous, we decided to try frog legs. Hmmmm ... they weren't bad - but definitely won't be my next menu selection, that's for sure!

Thursday morning began with some career development events - Mr. Keene and I moseyed over to the convention center where hundreds of members were excitedly anticipating the next round or celebrating a good one. After the awards ceremony recognizing the winners, we concluded the evening at the State Executive Meeting - and those are always a kick. Exec consists of the current state officers, a past state officer, the six regional presidents, and state staff. This one is special, in part because the new presidents always come and get an eyeful of what is supposed to happen at these functions, but also because the atmosphere is always filled with enthusiasm and that "convention buzz."

Friday morning began with the Parli-Pro contest, and in the evening was the much-anticipated president's dinner, hosted by the President of California State University, Fresno.

Saturday began with the non-leadership career development events at Fresno State, and in the evening was the first general convention session! And oh what a session that was! The state officers prepared a mind-blowing program, and this year, enthusiasm and energy were through the roof. The session began with the officer's theme presentation, which was highlighted by the officer's rappelling in from the ceiling as a part of the kick off. When they came in from the ceiling of the arena on those ropes, I thought the audience was going to lose it! After teaching us that we must all work together to unlock the potential and "Ignite the Fire," the evening proceeded with the introduction of all 62 state officer candidates, remarks from visiting state officers, and the motivational keynote by my close friend and teammate, Barrett Keene. He sure did get that audience thinking with his incredible message of loving, serving, and giving with all your heart. Following the session was the "Saturday Night Bash," an ultra-fun party for all convention participants. At the bash are dozens of interactive games, (i.e. Sumo suits, crazy trikes, human slingshots, mechanical bulls, etc.) as well as a DJ and refreshments. As usual, the bash was a smash hit!

Sunday morning began with a powerful Patriotic Observance presented by the officers, and the program proceeded to include awards, recognitions, remarks and Gabe's retiring address. That afternoon, Barrett and I broke up to present individual workshops at Fresno State for non-delegates, and with the exception of some slight challenges, they went marvelously. Sunday evening was a big session for me. I've always maintained high expectations for myself, but to speak at your home always pushes them up a notch. The reception I received from the 4,000 participants in the audience was overwhelming - I never would've dreamt I would've been welcomed back so warmly. It is my most honest hope that after my 20 minutes were up, people would know what it means to live like peacocks and prairie dogs. That evening finished up with Luke's retiring address.

Monday was a jam-packed day, and among many things, it included Jeff and Becky's retiring addresses, a workshop conducted by both Barrett and myself, and a few tears, knowing it was the last night of such a special convention. The sessions were spectacular, and it was so satisfying to see so many members that I've watched grow be recognized for excellence. At points, I would sit and sigh, happily knowing that the work of many people went into their successes. That night ended with the convention dance, "Jungle Madness." Barrett and I were both very "Tarzan-esque", but after seeing that most costumes didn't extend beyond a leopard print hair tie, we changed into regular clothes and proceeded to dance the evening away.

Tuesday held the final session of the convention, and I know that many of us were more than a bit sad to know that the time in Fresno was coming to a close. After hearing the words of both Jake and Molly and watching the team be recognized for a year second to none, it was time for the big moment. Amid the tense glances and frantic hand squeezings, the new California FFA officers were announced. Heartfelt congratulations to Bryan, Anne Marie, Amber, Mark, Audrey and Tyler. I know that California FFA will be in great hands in the year to come.

I stayed Tuesday night with the newest members of the Has Been Club, and that was one of the happiest nights of my recent life. On Wednesday I drove up to Grass Valley to stay with relatives, and on Thursday I flew off to Georgia.

On my long plane flights, I reflected on what an amazing week I had just been a part of. A new world was opened in my heart to the amazing members of California FFA, and the gifts of friendship, the old soulmates I will always treasure, made this period of my life one of the most fulfilling, satisfying, satisfying and humbling ever. God bless the remarkable people of California FFA.

April 14, 2002

Our week began with some NLCSO training in Indiana - and then I was VERY relieved and excited to hit the road (or the skies!) and head to my second convention of the year ... Wyoming!

I arrived in Cheyenne and was met by Tim Cassidy, their state sentinel, and with a few adventures mixed in, we drove to our hotel and I went to sleep!!

The next day was my twenty-first birthday! What a kick it was to spend it in another state! My best friends all sent me gifts at the hotel, left me messages and mailed cards. It was so cool to know that though they were hundreds of miles away, my friends and family were all thinking of me on my birthday!

Also, the convention began that day and the Wyoming FFA Association made me get on stage so they could sing me "Happy Birthday!" What a special feeling!

My keynote and workshops went well, but it came as a great surprise to me that prairie dogs are very despised creatures! It was a quick awakening to learn that on stage during my speech! Luckily, Wyoming members are gracious enough that it didn't make me feel badly, but I sure learned a lot that day!

One highlight was getting to spend an evening with the family of Casey Smith, retiring state parliamentarian. They were sure a joy to be around and really brought me back home!

I enjoyed meeting members like Kelsey from Lander, Jessica from Cheyenne, Laura from Pine Bluffs, Kyle from Cody and Brad from Galendo. People like them are what make my time in states worthwhile!

I also really loved hanging out with their past state officers and their current team. It was apparent how dedicated Jacque, Brooke, Casey, Codey, Tim, Jeremy, DJ, Morgan and Kristi were to the success of Wyoming FFA.

Thank you Wyoming for a wonderful experience in the Cowboy State!!

April 7, 2002

"I've learned that it's not what you have in your life but who you have in your life that counts." – H. Jackson Brown

There has been no time in my life where this concept was more strongly illustrated. I was fortunate to spend the week in the beautiful Cornhusker State of Nebraska at their state convention, and nothing could have ever prepared me for the adventures that awaited me - the people I would meet, the friends I would make, and the

incredible relationships that would make my heart overflow with love and joy.

I flew Tuesday from Indianapolis to Lincoln and I couldn't wait to step off the plane and get going! In fact, at one point I was so excited I grabbed the arm of the woman sitting next to me on the plane and exclaimed: "I'M GOING TO NEBRASKA!" After eyeing me with some concern, she reassured me that, yes, this was true. I also think I saw her shift slightly away from me in her chair. What foreshadowing that moment of excitement was!

I arrived at the convention headquarters at the Cornhusker Hotel that afternoon and met some pretty incredible officers that would prove to be both exceptional leaders and wonderful friends throughout the week.

Wednesday was the real start of the convention - and I must say, I was pumped. Being the first state convention of the year I was attending, I was so excited and enthused to meet and get to know the wonderful members of this state. After mingling for a bit, we all headed in to the opening session where we were entertained by the state officers and their opening, as well as the hypnotist. At several points I wasn't sure if I'd be able to control my laughter - especially when Amy chastised the audience for "making a mess in her pool" and when Vicki unplugged the microphone due to her insistence that the hypnotist was being inappropriate. The things we do under hypnosis just cracks me up! That night was one of some seriously GOOD laughs!

Thursday morning began the real sessions of the conference. My day began with a legislative breakfast in which the Governor of Nebraska, Mr. Johanns, spoke. Following, I spoke at the legislative orientation at the capitol building to students preparing to shadow their senators for the day. Did you know that Nebraska is the only state with a unicameral system? That means that there is only one elected house that constitutes the legislative branch of their government, and that sure does provide for some interesting discussions. Senator Phil Erdman, a former state FFA president in Nebraska, and the youngest person ever to be elected to their legislature, provided lunch that day. He is a great supporter of agriculture education and the FFA - Nebraska is certainly lucky to have him!

After those activities, I raced back over to the Grand Ballroom to watch the session. I was able to watch both Andy's and Amy's retiring addresses - and I know my life as well as thousands of others were changed by them. It was also great to see so many FFA members recognized for their accomplishments- they certainly deserve it! J

In between sessions I was fortunate to meet so many wonderful members- like Tara from Nemaha Valley, Sara from Fullerton, and Jason from Waverly. I also made some great friends in the crews from Elgin, Seward and Freeman. After getting to know so many incredible and amazing people - I can say with all certainty that Nebraska members are among the friendliest and most welcoming I have ever met.

That afternoon I gave my first workshop, which was attended by 150 excited FFA members - I sure hope they all learned how to "Just Goal For It!"

That evening was the first session in Pershing Auditorium, and it was amazing how excited those members can get when given the chance! Two phenomenal leaders treated us all to a superb keynote address, and more FFA members were recognized for their accomplishments - this time in proficiency awards. The diversity of SAE programs across the state amazes me!

Friday, the final day of the convention, was definitely one I'll never forget. The morning began with a 15 minute address to over 600 8th graders who were preparing for a Quiz Bowl and travels across the globe in Pershing Auditorium. In the afternoon, I gave my keynote address, "The Call of the Wild." I sure hope all participants enjoyed it and are thinking about ways to implement the concepts I spoke of into their lives. I gave my workshop one more time, and I spent a large portion of my free time getting to know so many outstanding members.

That evening was one of the most powerful sessions I have ever born witness to. Among the highlights was the awarding of the 418 State Degree. I love seeing people rewarded for their hard work and dedication. Also, the 2001-2002 state officers retired and the new team was elected. As the new team was being announced, I felt the adrenaline rush through my veins - I was so thrilled for the students who were elected! I know Nebraska FFA is in great hands for the year to come.

When the session closed, we took a few pictures, gave a few hugs, and headed over to the East Union for the Convention Dance. Let me tell you, I saw and learned more than I could've imagined. Being from the West Coast, I figured I would've been pretty on top of the latest dance moves and hip trends, but oh no, I was wrong. That evening, for the first time, I saw the Alligator Dance, and oh what a dance it is! Though everyone enjoyed it immensely, the portions where you roll on the floor do not appeal to the clean freak in me - especially when having clean clothes is already a challenge! One of the coolest things about the Alligator Dance was that it helped me remember that though we are one nation founded upon the same principles and fighting for the same paradigms, each portion of the USA is different and unique - which I love. I cannot wait to take the Alligator Dance, and so many other things, back to California with me.

Saturday morning I departed early from Lincoln amidst a few tears and a tinge of sadness. I remember Friday night, I was behind stage at a session and I stopped and thought to myself. As I watched the state officers take off their jackets for the last time, the thoughts racing through my brain were, "What have I ever done to have been so blessed? Why do I get to spend time with these extraordinary people? My life has certainly been graced by them."

The members of Nebraska FFA and their seven officers that I was able to spend 5 days with are the reason I used the particular quote at the beginning of this journal entry. Never before have I been so far from home and felt so comfortable where I was - these people truly gave me a special gift. I learned and grew because of them, and my heart, which constantly yearns for deep and meaningful relationships, overflowed with happiness and fulfillment because of the people I spent time with.

Andy Osten touched my heart by showing me that a person truly makes a difference when they keep their eyes on their faith and their mind and actions in loving service.

Amy Rasmussen proved to be one of the kindest hearted and most sincere I people I have ever met. Her deep concern for the well being of others inspires me.

Jonie Garwood was a perfect role model for members to follow when it comes to heartfelt enthusiasm, and her smile touched the lives of everyone.

Vicki Wray is someone I look up to for her natural ability, poise and perspective. The twinkle in her eyes is unmatched by anyone I know.

Lucas Haag demonstrated grace under pressure and strength under adversity, all while never losing sight of what was really important: helping people.

Jon Sellenrick showed members the power of reaching even higher to reach goals and dreams. He has shaped lives with that particular message.

Austin Schweitzer was a great example of passion and confidence. He was always there to liven up a session as well.

Nebraska FFA definitely experienced one of the best years in their history with this group. Though I have told them many times how blessed I am to know them, those seven officers will never know how much they have touched my heart.

The new Nebraska officers have gargantuan shoes to fill, but thanks to the hard work of the wonderful Robyn Yule and her committee, I have faith that they will be filled. I look forward to hearing of their successes.

If anyone from Nebraska is reading this, THANK YOU. Thank you for motivating me to continually strive to make a greater difference. Thank you for welcoming me with open arms and warm hearts. Thank you for reminding me why I love being a servant of people. You have certainly reminded me that the quality of our lives isn't measured by possessions and material things, but by powerful, impactful and meaningful relationships. God bless you all.

March 31, 2002

On Sunday afternoon I hopped the plane headed for McClave, Colorado. After a little drive on the snowy freeway, I reached my destination. Monday morning I headed to the high school where I had a chapter visit and a community night. What a fun adventure it was in McClave! Whether it was hanging out with Dallas and Angela at their house, cruising some backroads with John, chilling out with Luke, or blindfolding Rachel for chubby bunnies, I had an absolutely smashing time in McClave.

That day, I presented goal-setting workshops to the classes, and that evening I presented a program for Community FFA Night. With some activities mixed in, I explained the specific areas of leadership that FFA builds in its student members. Hopefully the audience learned more about our organization and had a great time in the process! The next morning I flew out bound for home!

I had the privilege to spend 4 days at home this month - and those were 4 absolutely WONDERFUL days. My mom and I went to a movie, my dad and I hit the grocery store and talked about my car, Derek and I played frisbee and baseball with a friend at the park, I spent a quick Easter morning with my favorite aunts, uncles and cousins - I couldn't have asked for more! The more time I get to spend with my family, the more I realize how fortunate I am to have such special people in my lives that devote themselves so selflessly to the happiness of others! My family is definitely my role models when it comes to love and service! J

March 24, 2002

"The work of an individual still remains the spark that moves mankind forward." - Igor Sikorsky

This week I have seen how the amazing work of a single person can have such a dramatic effect on humanity. The team and I had the fortune to spend a good portion of the week with such people.

Monday, we visited organizations that are philanthropic in nature and are partnering with us to create a better future for our students.

Tuesday, we were able to job shadow at the United States Department of Agriculture and I have had no clearer examples of the authority one person can have over the future of our nation. Robin, Barrett, Amber, Elio, Abbie and I were extremely honored to have met with our Secretary of Agriculture, Ms. Ann Veneman. Secretary Veneman was an incredible resource for us to draw from in a wide array of agricultural areas - specifically, her knowledge in the area of international trade was very impressive. Also, she is a Californian - which ranks her pretty high in my book! J I also shadowed Deputy Secretary Moseley - a former FFA member whom I found to be very warm, virtuous and knowledgeable. The time I spent with him will enable me to be a more effective officer this year due to the incredible amounts of information I received and the perspective I gained on our industry.

Wednesday we spent with 3rd graders. What a hoot and a half that was! Robin and I paired together for our teaching lessons - hopefully, the students that attended are now better informed about the agriculture industry - at least they knew where their lunch came from after that! J It is my hope that when these young kids grow up they will be able to be agriculturally literate, and therefore a strength to our industry!

That evening, I flew to Sacramento where I spent the weekend with some of my closest and dearest friends. These are certainly people whose sparks have continually moved me forward. Being with them reminded me how important love and support is for the success of this year.

FFA members, I encourage you to let that spark inside you become a raging inferno that can change our world. Identify those things that you are passionate about, feed that flame, and move humankind forward.

March 17, 2002

After our retreat in Michigan, we parted ways once again. Amber and I took the FFA

van and hit the road - bound once again for Chicago. We spent the week downtown, in the western suburbs, and in southern Wisconsin.

The hilarity of some of our antics aside, Amber and I had a wonderful time because we realized the goals we had set for ourselves: continually grow in ability and skill, leave our sponsors and prospects with a positive impression of the FFA, foster an interest for a relationship among prospects, increase the strength of existing partnerships, and learn more about those who make so many programs possible for our fellow members. Mission accomplished! J

After our week was over, I got on my plane to Washington, D.C. knowing we had done our jobs well!

March 10, 2002

"What sunshine is to flowers, laughter is to the soul."

Oh, how we laughed this week! I know I've said this a lot in previous entries, but I am thoroughly amazed at how wonderful my teammates and our coaches/advisors are!

After Chicago, Amber and I made a road trip up to Cassopolis, Michigan, where we met up with the rest of our teammates at the Edward Lowe Foundation! Upon our arrival in Michigan, I never would've known what we were in for. Our homes that week were boxcars, we played in the snow, we took an ecology tour, met the director of agriculture in Michigan, and had fun, fun, fun, oh, and did I say ... fun?

As a kid, my favorite books, far and away, were *The Boxcar Children*. I was thrilled to be staying in restored boxcars - these bad boys actually came from the tracks, and their interiors were restored with hardwoods that came directly from the Lowe property. They were so comfortable! We also had an incredible staff to work with - these folks were true examples of service, and I know we were sad to leave them!

The team and I also had the fortune to spend some time with Doug Kueker, who provided lots of insight on our upcoming activities! We were so blessed to have Doug join us. I know that we are all much more prepared for the upcoming months!

In addition to our preparations for State Conventions, we also received the curriculum for this summer's National Leadership Conferences for State Officers. We were able to run through, tailor and refine the lesson plans to ensure their maximum effectiveness. I am so excited about NLCSO - something I am definitely anticipating wholeheartedly!

In addition to all the training and preparation, the retreat was great to maximize team time. From here on out, we have little time together as a complete team, so our week together in Michigan was so purposeful in the facet of team bonding.

As the opening quote implies, laughter did my heart well. I can't imagine a day going by without laughing my head off at something. I find it is so easy to take oneself so seriously, and I can't help but ask, "Why?" Who are we but servants of our fellow humans? The sincerest of all snorts, chuckles and belly laughs can help us remember that no one on the face of this earth is better than another person. We are all equal. That realization is always strengthened when you get to WHY you are laughing. In many moments of uproarious laughter, our team solidified our position as humble servants. I don't think I'll ever forget the genuine laughs of my teammates: Robin's frantic squeal when she watches impressions, Abbie's frenzied laughs at her own creative mishaps, Elio's body-shaking howls at my random outbursts, Barrett's wild chortles at his silly musings, and Amber's hysterical laughs at our little pranks. These sounds will never fade from my memory - they are true representatives of who this team is.

Overall, the team retreat was one of the best times we've all had a group. I wore the same track pants for 5 straight days, we drank lots of hot chocolate, warmed up to a cozy wood fire, watched *"The Goonies,"* and created memories and experiences that I will treasure forever. The uncontrollable laughter and moments of utter joy were truly sunshine to my heart.

March 3, 2002

A weekend of learning, growth and fun met us in Delaware this weekend. We spent the weekend with the Chairman of our Foundation Sponsors Board, Jim Borel, and his family, learning how to be effective message bearers of the FFA on our Business and Industry Tours. Spending time with a family was what my heart needed - it brought me back home just a little bit. We also were treated to an Elton John and Billy Joel concert, which was an experience I know none of us will ever forget. I was amazed at how many songs of theirs we knew, even though they aren't of our generation!

After our weekend in Wilmington, we split up into pairs and Amber Haugland and I were off to Chicago for our first week of B and I. We had a jam-packed week, and we were fortunate to meet with some of FFA's biggest supporters. I certainly learned a lot about American agribusiness after this week!

February 24, 2002

After my day at home in California, I flew to Washington, D.C. to celebrate FFA week! The week began with some special visits to FFA chapters in the state of Maryland. Urbana, Linganore, Walkersville, and Fredrick County Vo-Tech were all so welcoming, friendly, and enthused about their role in FFA and what they are doing to spread the message of our organization this week!

That evening, I made a trip "across the bridge" to Queen Anne's County. After meeting up with ultra-fun state officers Ashley, Carrie, Katie, Donielle, and Melissa, and traveling with state advisor Dave Eaves, we finally made it to our destination. What was so fun about tonight was that I was a "surprise." The members didn't know that I'd be in attendance, so I had my jacket off and I was able to mingle with students and have them treat me as a regular person! I loved it! Then, I was called to the stage as the guest speaker of the evening, and my true identity was revealed! I sure hope the speech I gave made an impact on the members and supporters of this truly special chapter!

The next day I spent making visits to numerous associations, including America's Promise, the Council of Math Teachers, National Biology Teachers Association, and National Association of Secondary School Principals. Hopefully the connections and relationships created at these meetings will serve members well in the future. That evening I had a bit of time to catch up on work, which was very welcome!

My final day in D.C. was spent doing more visits. I began at a meeting with the director of the Career and Technical Educators Association. I was able to gain a larger scope of career education in the U.S. after today! Following, I met with a fledgling organization called Freedom's Answer whose aim is to increase votership among 18-25 year olds. It was exciting to think of the role we can all play in securing and maintaining our freedom in this country.

That afternoon I caught a train to Delaware, which began our experiences with business and industry. Overall, this week was a smashing event, and I hope that the FFA message has resonated clearly in the minds and hearts of our counterparts in education and business!

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The 2001-2002 National Officer Journals

Dane White

2001-2002 National FFA President

E-mail: dwhite@ffa.org



Where I'll be this week:

75th National FFA Convention

October 20

Convention and on...

As I wrap up my final thoughts for the year- I can't help but feel a raging torrent of emotions and think a number of thoughts.

First, a huge thank you to everyone who has played a role in the success of this year. None of this would have been possible without such strong support from my family, friends, state staff, national staff and members I've met along the way.

Secondly, this year of success for FFA is only one in many more to come. Our team has devoted everything we have to serving, growing, and providing leadership to the 461,060 FFA members throughout our nation-and in a few more weeks, a new team will be elected that will take our organization to the next level.

Finally, never forget your individual power to control your own destiny. FFA is a resource and tool for your growth and will be a catalyst for personal excellence, but simply putting on the jacket isn't enough. You must each commit to being the best person that you can possibly be. If I have or can continue to aid you in this quest, I can hope for nothing greater.

FFA members, I wish you nothing but the fulfillment of your hopes and dreams.

If I may be of continued service, I can be contacted at my personal e-mail address: danewhite81@yahoo.com

May God continue to bless you all.

Dane

September 29, 2002

"Don't cry because it's over- smile because it happened."

Wow-my last journal entry ever. I think I might have to repeat that quote to myself a lot because I can't quite believe it. Though more often than not, my journals were more than a month behind due to their clear lack of priority- in reflection I see that they were a wonderful manifestation of thoughts and feelings from what has been the most extraordinary year of my life.

The last real FFA event before National Convention was a week that I spent in Wisconsin. Prior to attending, I was a little uncertain as to what the week would hold, and a little apprehensive of taking away a week of work on Convention.

Now that the week is over, I can say that it was definitely the most beneficial of the entire year, and ranks as among my most cherished memories of this term in office.

I arrived on Sunday night to Madison, where I was picked up by Sarah James, a sister of one of Wisconsin's state officers. After a long journey through the beautiful Wisconsin countryside, we arrived at our destination in Darlington at the James farm.

I arrived and was greeted to a sight of the state officers shooting trap. After my experiences in Missouri a few weeks prior, I couldn't help but laugh at what I thought I was in for. Another week of shooting guns-heaven help me.

In reality, everyone laughed because here was someone dressed in "preppy" (as I was told) clothes being greeted by some "gun-toting yokels", (as I jokingly called them). We laughed because the initial appearances were far from what was really the truth- and I knew within my first moments that I was in for a wonderful week in the "Badger State."

That night, we went and shot pigeons, parakeets, o...wait...pheasants, that's it! Being somewhat afraid and rather disgusted by birds, I had to laugh when I was asked to hold the dead ones by the legs for the remainder of the hunt. What a hoot that was!

That night, we stayed with the James', who were great hosts-and the next morning we all got up and headed for our first visits of the week. We met up with Mrs. Zimmerman, Wisconsin FFA Executive Director, at the Gollon Fish and Bait Farm- where we learned all about the game fish industry. It was quite a visit, and I know I for one learned quite a bit.

Next was a quick visit to the Dodgeville FFA Chapter, where we had the chance to mix and mingle with some really neat ag students and FFA members!

Following that, we visited a honey farm-which was so great. I learned more than I ever thought possible about this industry!

Our final stop for the evening was at Darlington High School, where we had the first Sectional Leadership Workshop of the week! At home in California, we have activities called COLC's (Chapter Officer Leadership Conferences) which are relatively similar, so I was feeling prepared and excited for the chance to work one on one with some motivated FFA members!

Jeanna James, host officer of the event, did a great job with her welcome, as did the final keynote speaker of the evening. Oh wait! Just kidding! That was me! I had the chance to deliver a keynote address, as well as present a workshop (Welcome to the tribe! IAC!) and wrap up the state officer theme presentation.

Speaking of the state officer presentation, I sure did enjoy it each time I got to watch! They are all very talented actors, that's for sure!! The name was "Quest for Success", and they taught all involved what that was about. It is about working together and having the right attitude! With those things, we can go anywhere!

That night was again spent at the James house, and the following morning we went to Knight Manufacturing, a place where they make vertical feed mixers and other dairy equipment items, and Roth Kase, a cheese plant that really showcased the strength of agriculture and the dairy industry in Wisconsin.

As a point of reference, the state officers and I had a running joke as to where the real "America's Dairyland" was. Being from the #1 dairy state in the nation, I held strong for most of the week in my belief that it was us. Being from a more traditional dairy state, and a bastion of production in the Midwest, the Wisconsinites provided another strong argument.

That night we visited Monticello High School, where we presented yet another Area Leadership Workshop. I enjoyed meeting Becky Marshall, the Wisconsin National Officer candidate, who was there to observe and help out.

That night wrapped up with a mean game of battleball, which is a particularly murderous version of dodgeball, and I stayed with Peggy Dierickx, state officer, and family. I really enjoyed getting to know Peggy on a personal level, and I had fun getting to know her family as well.

The next morning we headed off to the World Dairy Expo in Madison. The mother ship had called me home! Being so passionate about the dairy industry, I was more than excited to attend this event. Anyone who has a strong association to the industry is in attendance, and I loved seeing many people from my home area in Madison! What a complete highlight this was!

That evening we spent the night at the home of the awesome Wisconsin State Sentinel, Ron Henningfeld. This guy is the greatest! (and in my opinion, sentinel is the best office- I was state sentinel as well!) This evening, we got to shoot pool, play foosball, and eat dinner with some great members from the East Troy FFA and their advisor, Mr. Holle! What a fun night this was. It provided more laughs than we initially counted on, that's for sure.

The next day we began our tours with some lost driving, (we ended up being okay) and we made our first stop off at Dean Foods, which is a dairy processing plant in the area. They are known for the "milk chugs" that can be found in gas stations and grocery stores, as well as producing a number of other fine products.

Next we visited a plant where they manufacture artificial insemination equipment- primarily for turkeys! The thought of turkeys being inseminated artificially really made me chuckle. I enjoyed seeing many aspects of the industry at work in this plant.

That night was our final SLW. We definitely ended with a bang at East Troy High School- Ron did an incredible job with his welcome, and the rest of the evening's events went off flawlessly!

Friday I spent at the Wisconsin FFA Foundation meeting, where I had the chance to spend time with influential people in Wisconsin Ag Ed. I also provided some input that may help them in the future.

Though I was sad to leave the friends that I had made this week, I knew it wouldn't be long until I saw them again at convention.

I met many FFA members this week that I won't forget- Kristin, Sherry, Kristy, Aaron, Ginger, Kevin, Colin, "M", and Kelsey, (among others), will all hold a special place in my memories of the year.

The State Officers are all people that I am now proud to call my friends. They each possess very special traits and I wouldn't feel right if I didn't honor them appropriately.

Ron- Genuineness; Amber- Enthusiasm; Nicole- Easygoing; Laura- Kindness; Amanda- Intelligence; Larissa- Wit; Chris- Perspective; Matt- Professionalism; Jeanna- Joy; Peggy- Commitment and Brooke- Lightheartedness

Each of them touched my heart in more ways than they can imagine, as did Mrs.

Zimmerman. She does a phenomenal job with those officers, and I loved getting to know her on a close working and personal level.

By the end of the week, I couldn't help but concede the title of "America's Dairyland" to my friends in Wisconsin. It seemed the least I could do to repay them for a week that touched my heart, brought me back to what counts, and sent me off to convention with joy in my soul.

Wisconsin, thank you for an incredible week! I love you all!

September 1

Wow-I can't believe that in two months we will be done-complete has been! Yikes! What a scary thought- back to the real world!

Well, I guess there are two more months ahead-filled with opportunities to grow and change other's lives. Let's make the most of it!

I spent the last week of August with my family- enjoying the California sun and working hard to finish my assigned tasks! Writing a retiring address is no easy feat! Ha ha!

On the 3, I flew to St. Louis, Missouri where I met up with Abbie and Jim Bishop, Foundation Regional Director (and my mentor!). Wow, that was a very poorly structured sentence! Pardon me!

That began a week of relationship development, growth, and SERIOUS laughs! Oh wow- if I'd have known that this week I'd laugh so hard, I would've prepared my abs for the workout they'd receive! Ha ha!

The first night, we met up with Erica Coble and Crystal Matthews, Past State Officers from Missouri. The first laugh of the day came when I re-introduced myself to Erica- after having met her in January. (She cut her hair- so that's my explanation!) How I could've forgotten such an incredibly kind and talented person is beyond my grasp. After spending another two days with her, I am certain I'll never forget the wonderful Erica Coble again. That night we all went to the Macaroni Grill- where Miss Crystal provided some more entertainment for the group. Jim, being a naturally inquisitive person, asked Crystal the meaning behind her e-mail address which starts out as: bananapig. Well, as we all found out- there is great meaning behind that name. Crystal used to have a particular love of bananas- and in fact, she used to eat 10-15 per day! That's more than I eat in the average month! What a hoot! I really enjoyed getting to hear Crystal's stories.

The next day we went on our first visit of the week, to Monsanto Corporation. We were very well received at the company, and I know that I definitely enjoyed the time we got to spend with such influential leaders in agriculture.

One highlight was a social for former FFA members, and I had the fortune to address the group- what fun it was! I reminded them all that though maybe their jackets may not fit anymore- hopefully the skills and memories still do!

The Missouri girls accompanied us on these visits at Monsanto, and they both did an outstanding job! I was very proud of the work they did in representing the state level of FFA. Wonderful job, Crystal and Erica.

That night, Abbie, Jim and I went to a St. Louis Cardinals game, and we had fun rehashing events of the day. Though I am a Giants fan, I enjoyed watching the Cards pull it off in the end!

The rest of the week was filled with more entertainment, from "Mel" the waitress to the other "waiters" and "hosts", I had some serious gut busting roars occurring this week. Abbie and Jim are two extremely funny people- and they both egg on my wisecracker side. Needless to say, the week was filled with joyous laughs.

I also loved the rest of the visits- from places like Brighton to Purina Mills. It was all

very informative and valuable! Thanks to those who created such an extraordinary experience this week!

September 6 we were off to Abbie's house! After our final visits were over this week, I hopped on a plane and headed to the Palouse of Eastern Washington! After a late night arrival, Abbie and I drove from Spokane to her home in Colfax- crashed and slept a very long and content night.

The next morning, I ate a scrumptious breakfast prepared by her mom, Barb, and I watched a movie with family members Chuck and Sam. After that, it was county fair time!

This year, I wasn't able to attend my home fair in Humboldt County, so going to Abbie's was a real treat! It's a small country fair-full of welcoming people and good times. I helped Sam with his cattle, (which brought back LOTS of old memories!) and cruised the fairgrounds. I met many FFA members along the way, and even saw a few Washington State Officers as well.

That afternoon, Sam took me cruising through the countryside. Wow, is the Palouse a BEAUTIFUL area. The rolling hills of wheat and the contrastingly deep valleys of alfalfa had me in constant awe; what a beautiful area to grow up!

The major stop that afternoon was to their family's Scottish Highland Cattle. For those unfamiliar, Scottish Highlands are very shaggy cattle (beautiful creatures nonetheless) with huge horns! For a guy used to Holsteins and Jerseys, those large horns pointing my direction were pretty unfamiliar sights! We fed them donuts, and they came right up to us. That was a blast.

The next day, Chuck and Abbie took me to Pullman, where the WSU campus is located. That was so fun- I loved getting to see all the places that Abbie talks about and meeting so many of her friends! I also got to eat some grubbin Mongolian Barbecue and see the WSU grizzly research areas (I was about four feet from a grizzly- it was awesome!). That night, we went back to the County Fair and went to the Rodeo and FFA dance- that was a kick. It'd been a very long time since I'd been to a rodeo- so that was a nice refreshing taste of the past as well!

The next day, we drove up to Spokane to fly back out to our respective destinations. After a quick tour of Spokane that included the World's Fair grounds, we headed off to the airport and I hit the plane to St. Louis!

I truly loved my time at Abbie's house. Her family is GREAT and I always felt totally at home there. A BIG thanks to Tim, Barb, Chuck, Sam and oh yeah...Abbie, for an incredible weekend!

September 9

Back to Missouri!! This time, I came to Missouri for the Area IV Leadership Conference and School Visits. Having been to the Paris Greenhand Conference, I remembered a few chapters and officers that I would see again this week!

The week started out with Adam Leake, an area officer, picking me up at my hotel and cruising me on up the road to our first visit, Silex. Silex was without a doubt the SMALLEST school I'd ever been to. It was tiny! However, they were great people who were very much in tune with one another- I loved every minute of it!

After Silex, we went to Troy High School where I spent several hours. I spoke with a number of different classes- and got hang out with cool people like Nicole, Megan, Julie, Bryce, and Ryan. They were a blast!

That afternoon, I was definitely in for a new experience. Trap shooting? Personally, I'd only ever done trap shooting on the screen at our local pizza parlor. Well, today that would all change; I'd grab my first shotgun, aim it towards the sky and let it fly! Woo hoo! What a rush the thought was! Okay, for many guys my age, shooting guns is nothing new- but we just didn't grow up with that. Instead, we'd ride 4-wheelers, go fishing, camping, or ride dirtbikes. I always knew how to shoot a gun, but I'd never ever used a shotgun prior to today. Well, after a quick orientation to what trap shooting was all about and how it's scored- I was armed and dangerous! I yelled,

"PULL!" and some orange little disc came flying out of a small bunker in the ground. Well, I pulled the trigger and shot away- hitting 5 out of 25! Again, maybe not much for those steeped in this culture, but for some greenhorn from the coast, this was the equivalent of a gold medal! Wahooody!

That night, I celebrated my new sense of worldliness at the Harrell's home. Mr. Harrell is an agriculture teacher at Troy, his son Tom is an area FFA officer, Anna is an FFA member from the neighboring town of Clopton, and Mrs. Harrell is a Home Economics teacher at Clopton High.

They were a wonderful group of hosts-dinner was excellent, ice cream was unbeatable, my bed was warm and cozy, and the game of pool was a relaxing cap to the evening. Before I went to bed; however, the younger Harrell's showed me one cool feature of their house: the glow in the dark carpet! It was so awesome- you could write your name with a flashlight and then it would glow when you turned the lights off. Though it would've been somewhat unnerving had I been up in the night and thought the ground was radioactive-I definitely won't forget the Harrells or their beautiful home and cool carpet!

Wednesday morning, I woke up and started the morning at Clopton High School. What a great bunch of people they were. I loved this visit. Without a doubt, they were some of the most responsive people and enthusiastic groups of the year. Missy and Patrick were of great assistance in my activities, and all in all, I just loved this group.

Following Clopton, I was picked up by Marin and Ashley, two area officers, and we drove up for a brief visit at Mark Twain High School. They were a small but united group of FFA members and I enjoyed them.

After Mark Twain, we drove to Philadelphia, where I had the chance to speak to a group of seventh and eighth graders. Also in the class was Janet, a chapter officer who obviously has a lot going for her. This was quite the group- and they definitely made me appreciate the middle school ages. It cracked me up how most students would try to restrain their laughter at my jokes-simply because I was an adult-aged person, but after a while they just couldn't hold it in any more and they would bust up with laughter!

After Philadelphia, I went to Palmyra for a quick layover until the Area Leadership Conference. At the Leadership Conference, I met a few other area officers and got to hang out with some of the awesome members I'd met previously in the week. One funny moment was when I confused Jake from Troy with his cousin Bryce. They look amazingly alike-and I had to laugh when I got called on my mistake in the middle of my workshop. Ha ha! I had many quick rotations, and before I knew it, we were done!

That night I drove home with Nick and Brian, two more area officers, and their advisor from Centralia. We stopped at Dairy Queen, where I got to hang out with dynamic members like Maggie, and then we reached our destination: Nick's house! Let me tell you about my night: Nick Curtis is one of the coolest FFA members I met this week. He is very much like my brother Derek- quiet, but won't hesitate to laugh and smile-sincere and genuine, hardworking, just all in all, a great guy. Nick's family is awesome, too! His mom, dad, and I stayed up somewhat late talking and laughing, telling stories and relating experiences. Definitely one of the coolest family's I've ever stayed with.

The next morning, after a delicious breakfast, we headed out to Centralia High School, where I spent a bit of time, until we headed out to Community R-VI. This was a blast of a visit-much of the school was there-along with the middle school kids from the parochial school. They were a hoot and I loved the time I got to spend with them.

That night, Mr. Hanson, the advisor, and his wife, the wonderful Mrs. Hanson, hosted the FFA chapter for a barbecue. The food was excellent, the company was superb-it was a wonderful night. I got to hang out with FFA members like Wes, Keith, Christina, Erin, Mark, Ambry, Stormy, Leanne and Craig. They were great!

The next day, I visited Wellsville, VanFar and Montgomery City- they were all great! Can't complain one bit!

That night, I chose to stay again at Mr. Hanson's house in Laddonia. I spent quite a bit of time talking with Mr. and Mrs. Hanson, but I also spent quite a bit of time

hanging out with Nicki Diemeke, area secretary. She was the greatest! From our drive to Mexico to the bike ride through EVERY street in town, I loved getting to know Nicki and experience her sincere, warm, and genuine heart. She cracked me up with laughter, and I appreciate that she was kind enough to spend her Friday evening riding bikes with me down gravel roads when she couldn't even touch the ground! At any rate, Nicki is an incredible person and I feel blessed to call her a friend.

Saturday morning, I got up early and we headed to the airport in St. Louis. Goodbye Missouri-thanks for the great memories!

This next week was spent training in Indianapolis- getting ready for National Convention is quite a feat!!

Some highlights from this week include: the final dinner put on by staff, the tornadoes and the last touching moments spent in the National FFA Center.

As a celebration of our time spent together, the staff members at FFA threw one final celebration. It was filled with laughter, storytelling, games, and good times in general. Though it was a bit emotionally difficult for many on my team, it is definitely because of the wonderful experience and the valued relationships we have with many of them.

On Thursday of this week, we headed out to the countryside to videotape some pieces for convention. As we were out and about, the weather turned very suddenly and it grew to become the biggest storm that I had ever gone through. Rain was coming down in sheets, straight winds were bending corn to almost three feet, and the sky was black. Come to find out, as we were hard at work, taping away, tornadoes were ravaging the whole Indianapolis area. After we left the taping and drove back to town, we saw some of the serious devastation they caused. Houses were torn apart, businesses were ripped in two, insulation covered everything, and construction projects were smashed to bits. Being an earthquake boy from the coast, I am used to natural disasters, but I have never seen anything like what I saw today. The sheer destruction was amazing. Luckily, we don't have too many of those on the coast, so I doubt I'll ever see one again, but I do feel a little bit more "worldly" after my first tornado.

Our last days at "The Center" were both emotionally charged and mentally draining. We spent long hours completing tasks and fulfilling duties, but with each passing hour, we knew that our time there was coming to a close. As we left FFA for the last time, many of us had tears in our eyes, knowing we would never be back as National Officers.

Following this week in Indy, I went back home to California for a week of personal work- memorization and rest included.

August 11

This week I spent six days working hard on convention. No, not seven. In fact, on Tuesday, by invitation, I flew to President Bush's Economic Security Forum in Waco, Texas! I was very blessed to have been invited, and I loved getting to bring the FFA voice to the table. I also met Vice President Cheney as well as seven members of the President's Cabinet. A highlight was getting to spend some more time with President Bush. He amazed me by remembering me and mentioning specific facts about me. Out of the 200 plus people there, I was blown away! For more on this story, you can go to the news section of ffa.org and check it out.

That night I flew back to Indy to complete an exciting week of planning. One of the nights, Robin, Elio and I headed out to the Indiana State Fair. I was able to chill with the Indiana State Officers, as well as my friends Tyler and Amanda! Since I wasn't able to attend the state fair back in California, I sure relished my time there.

During the week, our team went to lunch over at Dow AgroSciences- and I know we all had a great time visiting with our friends and neighbors.

Our team also went out and watched "Mr. Deeds", which is quickly becoming one of my favorite movies! What a blast that was! I love spending time with those crazy cats.

After our week of planning, we drove down to Georgetown, Kentucky for a business and industry tour with Toyota. We started the day off by touring one of their manufacturing plants- which was AWESOME! I loved seeing a coil of steel made into a car! That was rad! Then, we made a presentation to a luncheon filled with people from the area Chamber of Commerce, Toyota officials, local FFA members and others important folks. I love presenting with my team-so we just had a grand time!

Later that day we had a meeting with the officials from another branch of Toyota and that was a resounding success. That evening we spent doing a little bit of community service! We went to the Holly Hill Girl's Home, and we ate pizza, got to hang out, and did a couple of fun games with many of the girls in that home. I loved getting to know many of them.

One person that I can give great thanks to is Helen Donaldson. She was responsible for coordinating many of our efforts- and I truly enjoyed getting to know such an amazing woman.

Also, Doug Kueker, past national vice president, had a hand in coordinating us, and deserves heart-felt thanks as well. I always enjoy the times we get to spend with Doug. Simply put, he is just a tremendously good person.

After our adventures in Kentucky, I flew home to California for a week of personal planning and rest!

August 1

Today, after a long van ride from Indy, we arrived in Logan, Ohio, for our retreat! A much anticipated event, the retreat was absolutely one of the most perfect weeks in recent memory! We were cut off from the world-no e-mail, no phone-I loved it! I spent many days watching favorite movies, chilling in the hot tub, scaring the girls, sleeping in, and oh...yeah...planning! We got ourselves into the right mind frame for national convention- which is fast approaching! Also, I would run every day-which is a luxury I wasn't afforded much this year. I definitely loved getting to run in my shorts in the hot summer sun-but there were no shoulders on the road-which did make it somewhat dangerous! I also loved the long talks with my teammates, the runs to Wal-Mart and the bare naked truth.

The week capped off with a five mile canoe trip down a lazy river. Though it was definitely different than the whitewater streams that I am used to-, I sure had a great time. My mischievous wild side also came out on this canoe trip-and I made it my singular goal to tip the canoe with Amber and Robin in it. Amber is deathly afraid of snakes, and she was absolutely convinced that the river was full of them. Well, that was perfect! Abbie and I got very close to the girls in a somewhat deep spot of water- and yep...I got them. Amber was mortified at first, but when it was all done we howled with laughter and she thanked me for making her take the plunge. After a week of relaxation and fun, we said our goodbyes to our beloved Old Man Cave Chalets in Logan and headed back to Indianapolis to get ready for a week of Convention planning!

July 8-13

The first part of the week I spent at home in Eureka- with Amber! After the NLCSO in Chico was over, Amber journeyed up the scenic California coast and spent time with me in good old Humboldt County. After exploring Historic Eureka, we drove up to my family's summerhouse in the mountains-where we spent time with my parents, brother, aunts, uncles and cousins. Being from North Dakota, Amber certainly wasn't used to mountain peaks and swift rivers-so I definitely got her indoctrinated into my world!

Growing up, Derek, our friends and I would spend all of our summers in Trinity Village (where our summer house is located) and we would play the days away down at the river or in the pool in the hot summer sun. Well, Amber got a taste of my childhood when we jumped off of 40-foot rocks in to the river or swam down whitewater rapids. We also sped around on my dirt bikes and had a dunking contest in our pool!

After spending two enjoyable days together, I drove to the airport and wished Amber the best as she flew off to Arizona for their State Leadership Camp.

I stayed home in Eureka, getting caught up on work, until the 11, when I flew to Indianapolis for the Board of Directors Meeting.

The board meeting was incredibly successful and I know sound decisions were made that will impact FFA members for many years to come.

Following the board meeting, the team and I flew to Washington, D.C. to prepare for State Presidents' Conference. We spent many days typing, printing, memorizing and rummaging through bins of bargain clothing.

One of the highlights of the preparation was going to a musical. Prior to this one, I had never been to a musical before, and we got to see AIDA in the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. What a show that was! It was historical in nature, and it involved war and fighting and a little bit of...oh yeah...romance. I know that my entire team was spellbound throughout the performance, and, being formerly somewhat skeptical about musicals, I can now say that it rocked and I would love to see another!

We also saw a Baltimore Orioles game-, which was great fun! I love the game of baseball and, though it wasn't QUITE the Giants, I am always up for a good game.

Finally, after over a week of preparation, State Presidents' Conference arrived! Woo hoo!

I was State Sentinel back in California, which didn't allow me to attend this event as a participant, but as a facilitator-it was incredible! The people were definitely the key to the success of this event! I LOVED, LOVED, LOVED, getting to know the state officers-and believe me, if I could, I would mention each of them and the multitude of things I admire about each. I loved the special one on one moments with people like Brian, Shaline, Beth and Andy, the bus rides with Bryan, Angie and Tracy, eating dinner with Elias, Christian, Anne Marie, Tasha and Marie, touring the monuments with Bo and Katie, the simple chats with Marlene and Lindsey, kidding around with Lindsay, Holly, and Matt, and the lunches spent with Christy, Tory, and Stefan. Each participant at SPC helped solidify my passion for FFA and what it does for people. I love them all.

Among the many events at SPC was our opening session-put on by my team and I-and oh my, was it quite the activity. For some reason, I have this penchant for creating odd skit characters for everyone-and this skit was no exception. Elio was Carlclennel E. Ness, an obsessive clean freak, Amber was Olga E. Herr, an exchange student with armpit hair, Abbie was Ernesta the Bingo Freak, Barrett was Sport E. Guy, a tackle freak, Robin was Disgruntled Nurse Verda, and my characters ranged from the Silver Fox, to Jim E. Piranha and finally Delusional Bum Genie. It was a blast and a half. We did our own dance to Ice, Ice, Baby, had a drawing to meet THE Vanilla Ice and even had a "beat down wrestling session" occur.

I'm not sure the state officers knew exactly what to think of it- but we had fun nonetheless!

The capstone of the week for many of us was the chance to meet President Bush. We had a press conference with solely he and us on Thursday, and I was the person responsible for introducing him formally. That morning, I was more nervous than I have quite possibly EVER been, and that entire day I was on pins and needles. For heavens sake, I was introducing the leader of the free world! After arriving at the White House and clearing security, we were allowed backstage where we met President Bush. After a few pictures, my teammates left and he and I were left to converse for a few moments in an office room. After a short period of time, he and I walked out of the door that you see on TV with the President's Seal on it, and I gave my two minute formal introduction. As I completed it and read the final words, "Ladies and gentlemen, please help me welcome the President of the United States of America, George W. Bush", I couldn't help but get a bit choked up internally, knowing that I was so blessed to have met and spent time with such an incredible leader.

Well, for the rest of the week I was on cloud nine, knowing that I hadn't choked in my introductions and had represented FFA to the best of my ability!

On Friday night of SPC, everyone dressed up in their fancy clothes and boarded the "Spirit of the Potomac" and went on the annual dinner cruise. It was, without a doubt,

one of the most purely joyful nights of the entire year. People were doing some serious karaoke, we were grooving upstairs and downstairs, our parents were involved-it was an overall blast! I was sad to have the night end, but glad because we had such a great time.

The final day of SPC was spent in an array of places, but a great portion of it was spent out at a park in Virginia for the annual carnival, which celebrates an excellent week of hard work and accomplishment! From getting muddy sponges in the face to having one rager of a relay race, I know that everyone involved had a great afternoon. One highlight of this day was our parents. They had the crazy idea to dress themselves up with fake tattoos, fake hair (multicolored no less), earrings, nose rings, bandanas and other likewise decorations. At first, I was horrified to see my dad with a mullet, but I couldn't help laughing with the rest of them! I know that my parents sure enjoyed getting to know my team's families as well as the participants of SPC. That night was the closing session of SPC. The closing of the conference, though it was a celebration of an excellent week, brought a slight tear to my eye, because I knew our time together was drawing to a close. I couldn't help smiling, knowing that these state officers were better equipped for success because of this conference. The relationships we formed I hope will last a lifetime. I love those guys and gals.

After SPC, my folks and I flew home and I spent the next two days resting up until we went off to our retreat.

July 7, 2002

"Time stands still at that glorious moment when you realize you've found a new friend."

Time has stood still for me often in this past month. I began my first NLCSO on June 14th up in Cody, Wyoming. What a treat that was. Elio and I hopped into our rental car and drove up the mountain to Yellowstone National Park. That place was awesome! From the bubbling hot mud springs to the herds of elk, it was definitely a place I'll never forget. One highlight was when Elio and I saw our first wild buffalo. Not realizing how incredibly dangerous it was, we both hopped out and came within five yards of the beast for a picture. Only when we were back in to the car did we see the paper warning against doing exactly what we had just done. Whoops! I guess we're both lucky that we weren't gored to pieces. Ha ha! That wouldn't have been a pretty sight for all those other tourists, that's for sure.

We also saw Old Faithful erupt- though we weren't at its base at the time. We were coming down off the hill and we saw a huge stream of water shoot up into the air. After arriving at the parking area, the mass exodus told us that we had just witnessed one of nature's biggest attractions, though it was from afar.

After preparing for a little while longer, we made the trip up the hill to the camp where our first NLCSO would be held! Wow- let me tell you, it was BEAUTIFUL. The camp is set high in a mountain range and has spectacular views from its perch on the side of a knoll. A bit rustic, we made like real campers for four days, which was a hoot and a half! Walking to the shower at 5:30 on a cold Wyoming morning was something I sure didn't expect- but I can't help laughing about it now!

Elio and I had the joy of being accompanied by Andrea Lohr, our coach, mentor and friend, who helped us out all week. Whether it was driving the 45 minutes back to Cody for a nickel copy run, laughing our heads off, or simply being there for advice, a hug or a smile, Andrea was invaluable for our success this week! The lady is just awesome!

Most of the incredible new friends that I made were the officers at the NLCSO- but not everyone. The Stratmans, our hosts, were wonderful people who made us feel so incredibly welcome! The good food was also a major plus! Thanks to them for making the NLCSO possible!

The State Officers present were unlike any others I've worked with. The atmosphere for the four days was relaxed, fun, friendly, and very upbeat. The three states that attended, Wyoming, Montana, and North Dakota, were just plain awesome!

From Wyoming- Brandi, Alicia, Toby, Emily, Angela, Troy, Andrea and Trevor just absolutely did my heart well. I was able to hang with this crew a lot, and I loved

being able to see them grow, as well as partake in some playtime. I spent the afternoon of the ropes course with them- and I just loved watching them work together to overcome problems, and even get in a wrestling match or two. For all you guys out there- watch out for Andrea Driskill. The girl is just plain tough!

The Montana bunch was a very heartfelt crew- and I love the personal connections I made with them. Travis, Marie, Mary, Lacey, Maryanne, Sharla, Rock and Jodie knew how to make me smile with contentment. The guys are very tolerant of all the "girly things" on their team, and the girls know how to get those guys all fired up. What a fun and enthusiastic bunch they were.

Noah, Christy, Kevin, Kayla, Heather, Elizabeth and Nathan represented North Dakota. They sure knew how to laugh- and I liked watching them grow through hands-on exercises and personal best appraisals.

When the conference wrapped up at the end of the week, I knew this whole gang was set to create some serious wonder. I couldn't help but be a bit sad, knowing that it'd be a while until I saw them again- but I had to make time pause for just one moment- to thank my stars that I had been blessed to make some wonderful friends in this bunch. I couldn't have asked to start off my NLCSOs this way.

After Wyoming, I flew to Indiana for a brief time at their State FFA Convention. I brought quick greetings on behalf of National FFA- hung out with their old SOs a bit, and even attended a luncheon with their new crew!

After Indiana, I flew to Sacramento, Calif., for a weekend of lake fun in the mountain sun. I was able to hang out with some of my best friends - Angela, Jeff, Becky, Luke, and Tim - as well as spend some quality time with my second family, the Brownings. I spent much time relaxing in the lake, as well as waterskiing like mad and jumping off some rope swings! It was a nice breather before I headed off again to my second NLCSO in Michigan.

Frankenmuth, Mich., was the site of my second NLCSO. What sets that portion of the world apart is its distinction as the home of the world's largest Christmas store (it's eight acres of Nativity scenes and snowmen) and the fact that the entire town is German themed. We ate lots of chicken, spent some time at the outlet malls, and even did a bit of German dancing before the conference actually started.

This conference was a blast- it had five states and LOTS of officers- making it a fun and enthusiastic atmosphere. One thing that stands out to me was the time when the Tennessee officers were doing their reflections and polka music started blaring in the background- what a hoot! I worked to restrain my laughter!

The heart-to-hearts with many of the teams made this conference a memorable one. I'll never forget the van ride with Tennessee, the lunches with Indiana, the quick smiles and brief chats with Illinois, hanging with Kentucky on the boat, or the break times with Michigan. All in all, new friends were made and officers were empowered left and right. What a feeling of fulfillment that followed my departure from this conference!

I left Michigan on the 29th, headed for Albuquerque, N.M., for the final NLCSO. As I arrived, I reflected on how blessed I am to work with Elio, and how fortunate the two of us are to have this chance to make a difference. We often talk of "reaching all members," but how do we really do it? Right here. The officers that we empower will be better servants for their home members- further building the chapters and growing the organization as a whole.

What a way to end these conferences, here with the Four Corners states. If I had to give some words that could best define this group, I would choose: focused, professional, and driven to make a difference. Wow- what a compliment too. Those are such admirable traits and I am so pumped to have had the chance to work with officers of this caliber.

Each and every one of them touched my heart in a different way- and even the State Staff in attendance played a huge part in making the time here so special.

The New Mexico bunch was such a fun-loving and enthusiastic group. I'll never forget

"Story Time," the constructive chats, and all of the wacky energizers. Kolbyn, Stuart, Chase, Savannah, Shaline, Nicci, Roxanne and Elisa were all just so awesome. I have the utmost belief that they are going to change the face of the Land of Enchantment.

Arizona should be proud of Holly, Stephani, Brian, Ginny, Jamie, Lauren, Patrick, Jess, Ray, Mike and Kris. Their commitment to excellence and their high standards of conduct set a precedent for all members to follow. I always felt the "FOCUS!" from this crew!

Colorado was well represented by Marci, Jake, Katie Lynn, Kaki, Heather, Catherine, Robby, Ryan, Kyle and Brandon. They knew how to cut loose when it was appropriate- and there's no way that the fun times and deep talks in the parking lot will ever fade from my memory.

The Beehive State of Utah brought six bright officers to the conference. Camille, Tanya, Leslie, Tamra, Stan and Kara were all very focused on the learning, and yet they could always make me laugh. I'll always cherish the cookie eating in the van and the talks about pronunciation.

I wish I could send a big group message to this entire NLCSO to tell them how much they have made a difference in my life- and how much faith I have that they will do that for so many members back home.

Elio and I were lucky enough to spend five days with this bunch- and man, they were some phenomenal days- among the best of this entire year.

We were fortunate to have one dinner at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center- where a storyteller and a humorous and motivational keynote address entertained us. I particularly enjoyed learning more about Indian History and spending time with officers walking through the exhibits. Also, big thanks for my new Indian Rug and my very rugged GI Joe!

On the 4th of July, the whole group rode the Sandia Mountain Tram (the world's longest) to a mountain peak (elevation of more than 11,000 feet). It was incredible to see the contrast between the dry desert floor and the lush mountain range. I spent some time just hanging out and conversing with officers- and I especially enjoyed the "bugs" that happened to fly in many people's ears! Ha ha! (Okay, it was actually me with a piece of grass- and most of my victims were either sleeping or daydreaming!) Ha ha! I also went on a peaceful hike, took some incredible photos, and just spent quality time with my new friends. My heart was bursting with joy this entire time as I got to hang with these teams.

After our tram ride, we headed down the hill to an area where we could watch fireworks. Among the games, walks, and the Sugar Ray concert, I had some great one on one heart to hearts- how fulfilling it was to learn more about these officers. The evening capped off with a spectacular fireworks show that coordinated with patriotic music. As I leaned up against a vehicle, singing to the "Star Spangled Banner", I couldn't help but shed a tear or two of pride and humility. I've always considered myself a pretty patriotic person, but how often do we stop to think of how blessed we are to live in the greatest nation on earth? I know I don't do it enough. As I sat in the van with the Colo., crew- we all reflected on how proud we are to be Americans and sang "God Bless the USA." It was grand- I loved it!

The closing of the final NLCSO was one of the most emotionally turbulent moments of the year. I was so satisfied knowing that these officers had incredible tools in their backpacks, I was SO proud of the hard work they had done, and I was more than a bit melancholy because I knew I had such incredible friends that I had to part with. At least there is the wonder of e-mail!

The theme for the year was "Creating the Wonder." I know that we, as a group, have completed one stage of creating that wonder. We have equipped officers with incredible skills and resources- now it's up to them to go to stage two- to positively change lives.

I wrapped up NLCSOs and headed back to Eureka- with good feelings in my heart and warm thoughts in my head.

May 26, 2002

After spending some nice days at home with my family, I flew off to the Little Apple of Manhattan, Kansas for the Kansas State FFA Convention!!

I arrived late that evening and was picked up by Lance Zimmerman, their State Sentinel, who showed me around campus and entertained me with his jokes and sincere laughs. What a great guy. I checked in to my hotel room where I stayed with Barrett, and we had a blast catching up on the past month.

During the convention, I was able to spend some time with some really wonderful people. Members everywhere were just awesome. Specifically, the Winfield FFA chapter gained a special place in my heart. Alex, Adrienne, Peggy, Ashley and the rest of the crew were just so incredibly kind, sincere and friendly-you couldn't help but feel the genuine love flowing from all of them. Mr. Epler, their advisor, also treated Barrett and I to a fun dinner with his chapter- what a highlight that was.

Kelly and Donnell Brown were among the keynote speakers at the convention. I was fortunate to get to know them at last year's California State Convention- and what a blessing it was to catch up! Their messages were so powerful- and I know they definitely changed lives that evening.

Watching the members of Kansas FFA succeed was such an incredible feeling- and the culmination of the conference was the election of officers. Their system is similar to the one at home, and watching the new officers get installed provided a definite thrill.

Their recently retired officers- Grant, Lance, Keith, Mike, Tara and Lindsey all did an outstanding job. Kansas should be very proud of them.

As I departed Kansas for San Diego, it was somewhat bittersweet. I had such a great time with everyone there that I was a bit sad for it all to be over- but I know that they have a stellar year in store.

June 3, 2002

I spent this weekend with my close friend and her family in San Diego. Becky Roland is a past California State Officer, and definitely one of the coolest gals around in my books! We mostly just spent quality time hanging out- but we did have some really cool experiences before I left.

Becky's family has a small ranch in the El Cajon Valley east of San Diego, and we spent a bit of time hauling feed around, playing with their donkey and draft horse, and checking on sheep and other animals. It was nice to get back to agriculture- even if it was just for four days. Ha ha.

Also, they had backstage passes to Sea World- so we spent a day doing some ultra fun things. Feeding dolphins, beluga whales (they're the white ones), and manatees were among the high points of the day. Oooh, gosh- AND I got a kiss from a walrus! What a hoot- it was the weirdest sensation! Those things are gargantuan too. Yikes- would hate to have one of those bad boys roll over on me. Oh, and I got to call polar bears also. It was through this extremely long tube to feed them grapes through- and I was a bit embarrassed to be the only person in this room screaming "BEAR!" at the top of my lungs.

Before I left, we took a night trip to the top of Mt. Helix- which overlooks San Diego and is capped in a cross. The evening was a bit chilly so we didn't spend long there, but the view was magnificent and it was a perfect way to cap off an awesome weekend.

June 9, 2002

On June 4th I flew to Colorado for their state convention, held in Kersey. I was picked up by the Valley FFA Chapter (my hosts) and was able to get to know Stacy, Stephanie, Olivia and Mr. Bissier on the trip up.

Colorado was just flat awesome. There's no other way to put it. I truly enjoyed chillin'

with new homies like the crews from Douglas County, Valley and Hoene- the members in that state are among the most outgoing and enthusiastic I've ever met. I feel so blessed to have spent time with them there.

One of the major highlights was spending time with Dustyn, Angela, Sam, Lenay, Rachel, JD and the rest of the gang from McClave. Whether we were watching contests or hanging out in sessions, I will always cherish the special friendship I have with them. Thanks to you guys for always making me feel so special!

I also was able to attend a Past State Officer function- which was so cool. I saw many of the people who were officers there the same year I was in California. We attended NLCSO together and it was so great to catch up!

One added bonus of this convention was getting to know Leslie Small and Chris Vitelli- two past National Officers who happened to be presenting workshops together. It was so great to have someone there who could always relate and who could laugh about similar experiences. It was definitely a great surprise to have them there!

All in all- the convention was a smashing event. The State Officers Megan, Brian, Stacy, Tyler, Tyson, Tanya, Darcie, Charise, Justin all did an outstanding job, and the members that attended should be very proud to be a part of the Colorado FFA!

I left the hotel at 4a.m. to catch my flight in Denver. I was taken to the airport by Ms. Coonrad and Ms. Jerger, two local agriculture teachers and definitely two of my favorite people that I have met this year! The hour and a half flew by because we laughed and laughed our heads off the entire way. Thanks to them for the early morning and the great exit from Colorado.

I flew home, back to Eureka for a few days of relaxation. To tell you a little bit about my family- they are awesome. They are such role models for me and I'm just not sure I've given them all the credit they deserve. My dad, Dean, is someone who always stands up for what he believes. He works ceaselessly to ensure that the desires and needs of his family are satisfied. I only hope that my children can have what Derek and I do. My mom, Pam, is one of my closest friends. She exudes selflessness and service, and is also one of the most hilarious and fun people I know. I am so blessed by her. My brother Derek, who is 19, is my best bud- and it's actually pretty funny- because we look SO much alike- but we are night and day. He is very much like my dad in so many ways- quiet, incredibly hard working, but witty and smart as well. Though both of us are good boys by all standards, he is definitely the wild child of the two of us. For instance, this weekend we rode 4-wheelers at the beach. I stayed on the somewhat predictable end of things- and I look over and Derek is flying over a dune and has rolled his quad. There's a perfect example. But, no matter what differences we have- I love that kid to pieces. He always reminds me that I am only a 21-year-old- not a full-blown adult quite yet!

We are also very, very, close to my aunts and uncles and cousins. This weekend, I was able to go to my family's summer home in the mountains with my family, along with my awesome Aunt Linda and my Cousin Katie (who I am totally close with)- and that was a total blast! We soaked up some summer rays, watched some movies at night, played cards, and I laughed until my stomach hurt. If there is one thing my family never lacks at our gatherings- it's laughter and joy.

My brother Derek also plays adult league softball, and he had a game that I was able to watch while I was home. At the game we were pleasantly surprised by my cousin Marci and her son Riley, who is six. Marci is the eldest of my first cousins, and has always been the leader of our younger generation. Riley is one of the cutest and most likeable little kids EVER- and I can't help but watch him with adoration and hope that my future children are as wonderful as he is.

This week I also got all prepped up for my first NLCSO- which I flew out for on June 13th.

May 19, 2002

This week was spent in College Station, Texas, with my team for NLCSO training. Wow - I can't believe those are already on the horizon. When I ran for national office, I knew that NLCSOs (National Leadership Conferences for State Officers) were activities that I would relish - and now they're knocking on my door!

We spent a good amount of time training with a professional teacher trainer, which completely enhanced our ability to teach students. The rest of the time, Elio and I were partnered up in the classroom - teaching our curriculum to students at Texas A&M. They were incredibly kind and gracious, enabling us to work through the kinks and figure out a number of different issues. We were also treated to the War Hymn and an Aggie Yell, which made me think of how cool it is that people can attend a university so steeped in tradition and history. Our team was also treated to a view of Kyle Field (where their football team plays) and to a walking tour of many sights on campus.

Another highlight of the week was the time that I got to spend with Elio. After rooming together for a week, we definitely learned more about each other and got to really bond as close friends. I can say without any reservation that I am pumped to be his partner for NLCSOs this year.

On Wednesday I flew from Texas to Burlington, Vermont for their state FFA convention. "FFA...Daring to Dream!" was their theme - and what a cool theme that is! After being met at the airport by Jill and Rebecca, two of their state officers, we made the quick trek over to Colchester, the site of the convention.

Now, being from California, I am used to a convention of 4,000 or so, and Vermont was a definite change of pace for me. There were approximately 110 members in attendance, and all I can say is WOW. What small conventions lack in size they definitely make up for in atmosphere and sense of family. No matter who you were in Vermont, you knew pretty much everyone - which made the convention feel similar to a family reunion of sorts! I loved getting to know FFA members like Adam from Vergennes, Amber from North Country, and Alan from Mississquoi Valley. Folks like them remind me of why I love meeting people!

At the conclusion of the convention, I left with wonderful thoughts about small conferences and New England states. Thank you, Vermont, for bringing me back to the heart of the matter!

I flew out of Vermont on Saturday, and I hurtled through the skies until I reached my destination of Sacramento, California! Whew - there is really no place like the Golden State!

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