

Synopsis of Riley Pagett Interview August 19, 2011

Riley grew up in Woodward, showed cattle through 4H
During the summer before Freshman year in HS, went to FFA Alumni Camp and fell in love with FFA, set goal to serve as state officer

Went back to Woodward to apply what he'd learned
Did not hold office first year, but very engaged
During Sophomore year, elected Reporter,
VP as Jr, President as Senior

"Every time I zip up my jacket, I think of Woodward. I think of those people who have shaped me and that place that has shaped me ... and prepared me for this (becoming a national officer)."

"For most FFA members, that is where the leadership training happens – at the local level."

During Senior year, he decided to follow up on the goal he'd set at Alumni Camp and run for state office. Ran for NW District VP and won.

"It was an incredible experience. I made some great friends and got to be an advocate for Oklahoma agriculture."

"As a state officer, I developed the courage to run for national office."

"Our state president was Chelsea Clifton. I admired her so much. She was my role model. I looked up to her as a president and as a friend and a person. So I chose to run for state President at the end of my freshman year in college.

"There were four of us running for President, and that was tough, running against your teammates. But you have to know that no matter who's elected, they'll do a great job."

"I was not elected, my teammate, Amy Peel, was elected, and she did a fantastic job."

"Then I had another choice to make. I had been defeated once. Do I sit back? Or do I take those traits that Chelsea had taught us ... and run with them and chose to do something greater or just let them be passive?"

"I chose to utilize them and run for national office. I was Oklahoma's candidate that October, but I was defeated once again. So I came home, telling my friends and family that for two times in my life I'd been defeated for something I wanted so much. It was hard."

But he didn't give up.

"I had decided that I wouldn't run again, even though I did have another year of eligibility left. So I went back to school (OSU), went through my sophomore year of college and loved it."

He got really involved on campus and made a lot of new friends – some of whom weren't even involved in FFA. But in the back of his mind was the possibility that he could still become a national FFA officer.

"I firmly believe that God answers prayers in three ways: yes, no and not yet. He had already said no twice, so it was either no again, not yet, or maybe yes. So I decided to give it another try.

"I was selected as the Oklahoma national officer candidate in early June. I did some work with Travis Jett, who was the last national FFA president from Oklahoma. I worked with Laila Hajii a little bit. She was the Central Region Vice-President two years before me. I really relied on Kelly Barnes who was a state officer in Oklahoma and was a coach for Oklahoma national officer candidates."

He did a lot of work that summer refining his ideas about why he wanted to be elected – and more important, why he wanted to serve.

"I knew why I wanted to be elected, but it wasn't until national convention that I was able to feel that this is why I'm here. There's no other place I should be right now."

After a grueling process of tests, interviews, role-plays and workshops, the new officers are named at the national convention in Indianapolis. Riley knew that he was eligible for one of three offices (Central District Vice-President, National Secretary, or National President) or ... nothing. The Central District VP was announced, and it wasn't Riley. He knew there were only two other offices he could hold. A little later the National Secretary was announced, and it wasn't Riley, but it was another person from the Central District.

"I'm thinking that there are already two people from the Central region on stage. What are the odds that three of the six national officers would be from the same region? Not very good."

"I'm standing there, knowing that there are tons of other candidates equally as qualified and just as great, so I'm thinking there's just no way.

"But then they announced the new president and said, "From the state of Oklahoma, Riley Pagett."

“I don’t think I even heard my name, but when I heard “Oklahoma,” I ran up on stage, greeted the team, and we’ve been a team ever since, and we will be a team until the end of time.”

At that moment, Riley’s one year term of office began. One of the first orders of business is getting to know the other new officers. “It’s so different than on a state level because you don’t know each other at all.” After three days of team building, everyone goes back to his or her home state to finish the college semester – in just three weeks. Taking finals early, doing reports early, etc.

Then it was back to Indianapolis for training, which lasted several months, with breaks for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

A memorable moment from the first few months was meeting with the U.S Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, who challenged the officer team “to bring a new perspective to the next Farm Bill. So this year, our platform is to do just that. To ask youth, state officers and advisors what they think about the farm bill, and how we could implement those things from a non-biased perspective.” The team will present their findings to Secretary Vilsack in January.

“After D.C., our team went to Japan for eleven days. While we were there, we were advocates for American agriculture, but we also got to see a lot of global agriculture. It was eye opening to see how United States agriculture affects global agriculture.” They also visited Toyota and Mitsui in Tokyo.

The team had some time for fun, too. “We ate a lot of sushi, ate a lot of raw fish, and we spent two nights with host families in central Japan. The host families are parents of students who are members of FFJ – Future Farmers of Japan. It was cool to see what they’re doing and relate it to what we’re doing.”

The Japanese people were very welcoming. “They welcomed us with open arms. We were guests there and they treated us like that. I’ll always remember that. I learned how to make an origami swan. Where else would I learn how to do that?”

“Our team really bonded there. Of course, we had to – we were the only English speaking people around.”

“I would say that my host family and what they did for us, allowing us to come into their home, was the biggest eye-opening experience for me because it taught me to be open minded, and to welcome people with open arms regardless of walk of life or faith or gender. It was good for me.”

After Japan, the team came back home to do some state conventions. Riley attended conventions in eight states, including Hawaii, California and Oklahoma (of course).

When all the state conventions are done, the national officers conduct national leadership conferences for state officers. Then they go back to Washington D.C. to conduct the State Presidents' Conference, which is "the longest national FFA event in history. The State President and one additional delegate from each state come to D.C. to determine the delegate issues that will be discussed at the next national convention." With the delegate issues determined, the national officers go to work planning and preparing for the next convention.

What Riley learned about Riley

"I learned two things: the first one is about national officers, and that is that they don't wash their clothes nearly as much as you think they do, and that sometimes clothes washing takes place in a bathtub or in a bathroom sink." The downside of life on the road.

"Really, what I learned about myself is that I'm far more flexible than I ever thought I could be." No matter how well planned an event might be, things do go wrong, and you have to be ready to adapt. Riley calls this a "blessed challenge."

"It's a challenge, but you're grateful for it because it means you have to be flexible and move on and see how it can be fixed and be a problem solver. It's all about flexibility. I learned that some in college and I learned it some as a state officer, but it became so real as a national officer because people depend on you and people expect you to make it happen. That's our job."

"I'm so thankful for this opportunity for a lot of reasons, and a lot of eye opening experiences, but mainly because it taught me to be flexible with every person I meet. Knowing that something may come up and you have to be ready and it may be up to you. I would say that's the biggest thing I learned about Riley."

Looking forward

Riley said there were many things he'd known before that became more "solidified" during his year as national president. As an example: "Family is a blessing ... also friends. And you should take advantage of every opportunity to tell those people that you love them."

"Be thankful for each day. When you can be thankful for that day and for the opportunities that God has given you, that it becomes a blessing."

"People are incredible. No matter where they come from or what language they speak or what interests they have, it is just so inspiring to be around people and to experience them and to just feel their compassion and to just see what they're passionate about when they talk to you. There's no doubt in my mind that that belief in people and that compassion for people will become a value that I hope to

expand on after national office and that I will really find vitally important as a college student, in a career and in a family.”

Advice to the next generation

“It’s hard to narrow down one thing, but specifically... I would share with them the importance of never giving up and to remember that no matter where we come from, we are going to do big things – to convince ourselves of that and to believe it ourselves. If they can wake up every morning believing that they will do great things, in spite of the cards they have been dealt, then they will.”

Value of FFA

Riley says that one of the best things about FFA is it helps people find a niche. “They become confident in their skills and they find a niche that they couldn’t find before. They couldn’t find it in school or in another organization or in a club or in a sport, but they find it here in FFA.”

“What’s beautiful about FFA is it’s an organization that takes people from all walks of life, and from all types of background, and brings them together in one organization for a common goal.” FFA is “the largest student organization in the world, and we currently have the largest annual national convention in the world.” Every one of those students, even if they don’t attend their date or national convention, has “a place in their local level, at the heart of this organization.”

“The value I see in it is that it gives people that chance to succeed, and it’s teaching students to advocate, not just for themselves, but for agriculture and agricultural education. ... If we give students that seed and we plant that seed, foster it and water it, then hopefully someday they can plant those seeds in other people.”

Riley tells the story of a friend who had been a member of FFA, but went on to pursue a career in nursing. When Riley asked her why she’d spent so much time in FFA when she had no plans work in the field of agriculture, she said, “FFA taught me a lot about agriculture and natural resources and that’s great, but it also taught me to value others, and it taught me to lead, and it taught me to be a person of character and a person of influence.” Those qualities will help her in life no matter what career she pursues.

“I, too, have learned qualities like that, most of all, to be a team player. There’s no guarantee what kind of team you’ll be on in life ... but we all offer something different to the team and that’s great. That’s the beauty of FFA.”

“There are so many skill sets that FFA members rely on, and they build on throughout their FFA career. That’s what’s great about this organization that it keeps building on those skills. It’s not just for high school, it’s not just for college, it’s for life.”