A Field of Hope

By: Whitney Danker Thurmond

The breeze flows through the open classroom windows, and that’s a good thing because the African sun is out doing itself today. The Nile River is just a few feet away, and you can almost hear its roar – if the students inside the classroom settle and the insects chirping outside die down at just the right moment.

I hear the scrape of chalk on a blackboard and a “Good morning class,” come from the front of the room. This is her signal it’s time to start class. And it works! All 43 students in Mercy’s class give their attention to her. She’s teaching livestock breeding today.

Uganda is beautiful. It’s unlike any place I’ve ever been.

The clean air. The natural beauty of its rivers and jungles. The wildlife: elephants, giraffes, hippos, monkeys, and warthogs. Yes…I just listed all the characters of the Lion King. That’s what it’s like.

Nature in “perfect harmony.”

And then I take a second look. The breeze comes through the windows because there are none; they are just cut outs in the cinderblock building. The chalk board isn’t a throwback to the 80’s; it’s all the teacher has, and there is no eraser. The students have no textbooks. In fact, the only person with a textbook is Mercy, and it’s outdated.

After class I ask to flip through it, and I immediately notice that agriculture topics I learned about as a 9th grader are missing or some of the facts are simply not right. Mercy is teaching from the one textbook she has access to and the notes she took while in college. I’m impressed, but I’m worried that her students are missing out on ag knowledge that could mean the difference between eating after the next crop season or not.

I notice that the students have no supplies beyond one notebook (that is used for every class) and a pencil. I wonder, “What about a ruler or a calculator? What about a microscope? Worksheets? Handouts? Computers? Printers? Library books?”

The answer to all of these is usually, “No.” Here, the students don’t even have their own desk to use.

We make our way to the school garden and the theme continues. I’m working along-side Rosie and Faith. They hand me a hoe, but it doesn’t look like the type I would use in my garden. I’m almost afraid to use this tool because it looks like it could remove my foot with one wrong slip of my hand. We are weeding a garden, and when I say “garden,” what I mean is ground that looks like it has
never been plowed. This plot of ground is only weeds. I’m not sure we will ever clear this land well enough to plant seeds. I envision my dad spending an hour pushing our mechanical plow over a plot of land twice this size, and I think, “If only I could get that thing on a plane.”

The girls begin to sing, and the hoes hit the dirt in rhythm with their song. They turn to an American friend on the trip and tell him he works like an African woman, which is one of the highest compliments they could give. African women are strong, fierce and work long hours. And I'm witnessing it right before me through Rosie and Faith. No shovels. No rakes. Certainly, no machinery like my dad’s plow or tractor.

Hours later we begin to drop seeds into the mounds we’ve built with our hoes. I notice many of the seeds will never germinate. They are discolored, shriveled or damaged beyond being able to sprout. I wonder what percentage of these plants will ever produce food for these students.

And, immediately, I know why I’m here.

That was four years ago, I was in Uganda with an organization called Field of Hope, a non-profit dedicated to international agriculture development.

Since that time, I’ve been working with a team of agricultural educators to write agricultural lesson plans for Ugandans. Later this year, we will deliver the fourth year of lesson plans to the Ugandan teachers, meaning the teachers now have a lesson plan for every day of class for all four grade levels of high school.

We’ve trained almost 200 ag teachers, and the Ugandan government is supporting the curriculum.

During my most recent trip to Uganda, I again took a hard look. This time, I intently watched faces of the students as they participated in the lessons we wrote. I watched the teachers have more time to spend investing in their student’s lives rather than writing lesson plans. I watched the students working in their well-kept garden. And what I saw was a field of hope.
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DEWEY FFA
Dewey FFA members are living to serve their fellow students by creating the Caring Closet for those in need. The chapter stocks and maintains the closet through donations. Students are referred by school counselors, administrators and teachers. These students may visit the Caring Closet for clothing, hygiene products and non-perishable food items. – Lisa Fox

OKMULGEE FFA
Okmulgee FFA has been “Doing to Learn” through our ag facility’s chicken coop. Last year, all ag-ed students helped design and construct the coop and run. They also incubated eggs, cared for the chicks and maintained the coop throughout the summer. Members learn real-life animal science concepts while caring for and watching the 13 hens in action. Several members have expressed interest in starting their own poultry SAE as a result of our chapter chicken coop. Eggs from the hens are donated to our high school’s student food pantry and to chapter members who express a need for fresh eggs at home for their families. – Tim Taylor

FAIRVIEW FFA
Agriculture is a big part of most rural communities in Oklahoma. Every year during FFA week, the Fairview FFA chapter holds a “Thank A Farmer” breakfast. On Wednesday, February 26th the Fairview FFA chapter officers fed farmers Blue & Gold sausage along with pancakes from MIO (Made in Oklahoma) products. This activity started as an opportunity to give back to farmers who give so much to us. As FFA members we realize that today’s farmers raise more commodities on less land. This event lets our producers know they are appreciated and provides a place for fellowship and networking among those whose interests lie heavily in agriculture. – Shane Curry

STILWELL FFA
It was Monday evening and the day was winding down. I had just finished chores when my phone buzzed. I checked the message and a student had sent me a link to something on Etsy. The link opened to a blue jacket. After taking a closer look, I realized that this was definitely an FFA jacket, and in fact, it was a Stilwell FFA Jacket! I sat there puzzled as to how this jacket could have made its way to New York City. I wondered also about the person behind the jacket, the new owner, and how it made its way onto an e-commerce site. So, I did what any ag teacher would do when faced with a question, I set out to find an answer. I messaged the individual who had posted the jacket for sale. I asked if they had any history on the jacket and how long they had owned it. I explained that I was the ag teacher of the chapter where the jacket originated. I also asked if they would consider donating the jacket to our chapter so we could display it as memorabilia for our members to enjoy. I will admit, I did not expect the reply I received. I actually did not truly expect a reply at all. But when I opened my email Tuesday morning I had received a reply, and I was delighted. Not only had the current owner of the jacket agreed to donate it back to our chapter, they also shared a very personal story about how their father had grown up a farmer in the Midwest, and they had purchased this jacket at thrift shop in his memory. The seller went on to compliment the FFA organization for its effort in educating students about agriculture and how far too many people do not know where their food is coming from. They also commended the FFA for keeping up the good work. This story is very encouraging to me to know that despite all the negative criticism and news media coverage of the Urban vs. Rural, that there is common ground between these two very different societies that is not being covered or discussed. Common ground proved itself to me through a size 32 FFA jacket that somehow made its way from rural Stilwell, Oklahoma to New York City, and is now heading back home with a message of appreciation and hope. – Josh Gilstrap

EMAIL STORIES@OKFFA.ORG

Short Shots

FAIRVIEW FFA

STILWELL FFA

DEWEY FFA

OKMULGEE FFA
Do you know what to do if your equipment contacts a power line?

Your split-second response could mean life or death.

To learn this life-saving information, visit our website or listen to our Power for Your Life podcast on Apple Podcasts, Google Play Music, Google Podcasts, iHeartRadio or SoundCloud.
Grant Baldwin is an engaging communicator and a leading expert at helping students prepare for life after high school. He is author of the book and curriculum “Reality Check” and is a popular youth motivational speaker. He has given hundreds of presentations and has spoken to more than 250,000 people in 42 states.

FFA members, it’s about time for a reality check!

Jaun Bendana
Impact Tomorrow vs Impact Today

Lyle Logemann
The Time is Now!

Wiley Bailey
Play Your Part
Capt. Charles Plumb graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, in 1964. From there, he made his mark helping to develop the Navy Fighter Weapons School, more commonly known today as Top Gun. On his 75th mission, just five days before the end of his tour, Plumb was shot down over Hanoi and taken prisoner; he survived the next 2,103 days as a prisoner of war. Come prepared to hear a testament to the true strength of the human spirit.

Singer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Parker McCollum bridges the gap between Texas’ homegrown music and Nashville’s country industry headquarters.

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