



Growth, community in FFA

Students reflect on what they learn through the program

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

When Hermiston High School sophomore Kylie Temple started high school, she considered herself a “city girl at heart” who had never had much to do with anything agricultural.

After hearing about the opportunities for traveling, scholarships and networking provided by FFA (formerly known as Future Farmers of America), she decided to give it a try, however.

“I’ve learned it’s so much more since then,” she said.

Temple was one of five local FFA students who sat down for an interview together on Wednesday, March 10, to share their experience as they prepare for a virtual-only state convention this week.

She said after the camaraderie of her first year of FFA, it was difficult to have that experience end abruptly last spring, just before the state convention.

“All of us, the chapter was just really close, so we were just really used to going on road trips together and touring an onion factory or whatever, and we went from that to not seeing each other at all,” she said.

Since then, she said, they’ve done “a little bit of everything” to keep the chapter going, most often over video chat. They have already competed over video in some statewide competitions and will have a local socially-distanced “watch party” for the state convention rather than traveling to participate in person.

“You have to make sure your personality shines through the screen,” Temple said of competing in subjects virtually this year. “It’s definitely been an adjustment, but being a generation that has been involved in technology, I think we’ve made that adaptation.”

The country girl

Cidney Estes, also an HHS sophomore, also hesitated about joining FFA at first, but for opposite reasons of the “city girl” Temple. Estes grew up in an agricultural family, riding horses and raising animals, and thought she didn’t need to add even more of that sort of thing to her life.

She started hanging out in the FFA room, however, and the people she met



Shandie Britt/Contributed Photo

FFA student Elizabeth Doherty, left, Blue Mountain District reporter, and Alexis Leathers, Blue Mountain District president, are pictured in the agricultural sciences classroom at Hermiston High School.

“FFA BROUGHT OUT A SIDE OF ME THAT I NEVER KNEW I HAD, AND NOW IT’S WHO I AM.”

— Anna Guerrero, Hermiston High School senior

there “flipped the switch.”

“I did so much (for FFA) my freshman year, I’d be in here until 8 at night,” she said.

One area she said FFA has really helped her improve is in public speaking. Estes said when she started out, she would stand

stiffly and stare straight ahead, delivering her speech in a monotone. But advisor Shandie Britt and others taught her to be more conversational, walk around and use hand gestures.

She and the other girls laughed over the memory of how embarrassed she was to

use hand gestures to demonstrate parts of her speech about artificial insemination of cows.

“I was so nervous, but I ended up winning state last year so I guess it worked,” she said.

‘An irreplaceable experience’

Alexis Leathers, an HHS junior, admitted she joined FFA only because her mom pushed her into it.

“It honestly didn’t spark any interest, because when I thought of agriculture, I just thought of fields and crops and that’s it,” she said. “But it’s so much more to it than that. There are so many components and opportunities in things like technology.”

She ended up embracing the program whole-heartedly, and in 2019 won state for food science in what she called an “irreplaceable experience.”

One thing Leathers said she has enjoyed is how much support past and present FFA members give each other. When she got pigs to show during her freshman year, for example, she didn’t know anything about raising pigs, but got plenty of pointers.

“I didn’t know what I was doing,” she said. “I called (a friend) and said, ‘I can’t even get them in the trailer.’”

She said the biggest thing she has learned from FFA so far is that anyone can show leadership and be an example to others.

“You don’t need a title to affect somebody,” she said.

Finding a calling

Anna Guerrero, a senior, said before she came to the high school she didn’t know anything about agriculture, but took an ag biology class and was persuaded by Leah Smith, the FFA advisor at the time, to get involved. She loved it.

“This was my safe place,” she said, gesturing to the ag sciences classroom.

Through FFA she had opportunities to go into younger classrooms and teach students about agriculture, and it sparked a love of teaching that she plans to pursue after graduation this year. She said if it weren’t for FFA being a part of her high school experience, she probably wouldn’t know yet what she wanted to do, and she wouldn’t have gained as much confidence as she did over the past four years.

“FFA brought out a side of me that I never knew I had, and now it’s who I am,” she said.

Making lifelong friends

Abigail Conner, a sophomore, said she got involved in FFA because she remembers her brother participating. Now she wants to pursue a career in agriculture.

“People think it’s just showing animals,

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Rally pushes for school five days a week

By BRYCE DOLE
STAFF WRITER

Garrett Robinson stood with his brother and a friend beside the fields bordering Hermiston High School, each holding signs calling for an end to a monotonous year with one message in common — “five full days.”

The three boys were part of a group of more than two dozen people who gathered for a rally at the high school on Saturday, March 13, calling for changes in state coronavirus guidelines that are preventing students from fully returning to in-person classes. The rally marked the one-year anniversary of students’ last day of classes before schools across Oregon were shut down in 2020.

“We’re not learning as much. We’re going to be pretty much behind next year,” said Robinson, who will get to return to the classroom at Armand Larive Middle School part time on Monday, March 22.

Robinson enjoys school. He likes science, spending time with teachers, having fun with friends

and “becoming smarter so you don’t fail when you get older.” But finding help during online-school has been challenging, he said, and he misses sports and his friends.

“We’ve been doing the same thing over and over,” Grant Olsen, a student at Hermiston High School, said. “Nothing’s different. We wake up, do the same thing over and over. Very little sports. Very little friends. Nothing really exciting.”

Oregon Department of Education rules currently require school children and employees to stay 6 feet apart while in a school, with at least 36 square feet of space for each student in a classroom. That means a classroom can only have about 10 to 12 students at a time, roughly half the size of a normal classroom.

Shane Robinson, Garrett’s father, who helped organize the rally, said he’s concerned those rules will keep students from the classrooms through the coming months.

“If that’s going to carry through to the fall, they’re not going to see a full day of school on a consistent basis,” he said. “You can’t do it. Not with the spacing we have.



Bryce Dole/Hermiston Herald

A group of parents, teachers and students hold signs along West Highland Avenue in Hermiston on Saturday, March 13, 2021, during a rally in favor of a full return to in-person schooling.

Unless you’re going to magically rebuild schools overnight, it just isn’t going to happen.”

The rally took place a day after a top public health official

announced in a press conference on Friday, March 12, that the state was considering reducing required distancing in schools from 6 feet to 3 feet, which would allow stu-

dents to get more hours of in-person instruction.

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