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ACES 2020 Has Come and Gone

THOMAS STRONG
State Reporter

Throughout the month of February, Pennsylvania hosts our first and largest leadership conference for students. The Agricultural Cooperation Establishes Success conference, better known as ACES, is a conference that is held three separate weekends throughout the month of February. Each weekend is exactly like the rest but allows chapters to choose which weekend works best for them along with preventing overcrowding. This year was a record for the ACES conference. There were over 1,600 members, advisers and guests registered and 99 chapters in attendance.

Although it's the same conference that chapters and members have come to love, this year's ACES conference had a big change. For the first time in the history of the conference, students were put into two different tracks. One for upper classmen, 11th and

12th graders, and one for lower classmen, ninth and 10th. This idea was first proposed at the 2019 State Legislative Leadership Conference. It was there where a chapter introduced a delegate issue that Pennsylvania FFA create a separate conference to be able to prepare the different aged students for different experiences. Instead of making an entirely new conference, we decided to just change our original.

The lower track made up of ninth and 10th graders allowed first- and second-year members to be exposed to some of their first leadership and team building workshops. These workshops are all geared to help these younger members with their future FFA experience. The topics covered were professionalism and etiquette, responsibility and record keeping, conversation skills, Smart goals, and the FFA motto and mission statement. All these workshops provide basic skills that can be built off of in the future as the students grow within

the organization.

For some chapters in the past, ACES had been considered a conference for just younger members, as it mainly focused on those leadership skills year after year, only providing minimal new things each year. This is where we saw a large need for our upper track that was made up of our 11th and 12th graders. The point of this track was that now that the members' time in the blue jacket was coming to a close, what are they going to be able to do with the skills they learned over the years. The topics covered in this track were financial responsibility, five levels of leadership, exploring Pennsylvania agriculture, networking/connections, and FFA and your future. All of these workshops were made to help students decide their future and see where their skills can be used.

Both of these tracks tie into the theme of our conference this year which was Set Sail. The lower track gave the students the skills



Pennsylvania FFA Photo

Vice President Brandon Bixler speaks during opening ceremonies of the conference.

they need to be able to set sail in their new FFA experience. The upper track helps guide students through confusing times as they get ready to set sail into the next

chapter in their lives. We are happy to see a new record year for the conference and hope that we can always prepare our students for whatever their future holds.

Never Be Afraid to Grow

FROM THE OFFICERS STATION

Growth. Just minutes after being elected to serve this amazing organization for one year, my teammates and I were whisked off stage to collect ourselves. It was here that our executive director, Mr. Brammer, told us that our jobs start today, and that this year was going to be full of growth. In that moment I thought that I understood what he was talking about. However, I never imagined just how much growth would take place. These past nine months of service have taught more than I had ever imagined.

Serving Pennsylvania FFA as a state officer has been a goal for six years. This dream began after my first chapter visit in middle school. Fast forward five years and it was time to finally set this dream into reality. Unfortunately, I was not chosen to serve the first time running and began my career as a Penn State student. Months passed by and I just could not shake the passion for this organization and the dream of serving. I decided once again to run for state office, this time being elected to serve alongside six of the most incredible people.

This year our schedules as state officers can only be described with one word, busy. There is always an opportunity for growth around the corner. Between chapter visits, meeting with businesses and industry representatives, and traveling to support our members — the new experiences are endless. Each of these experiences has brought a new tool to add to the tool kit. Each chapter visit



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brings a new lesson, tip or trick that can be employed in my future classroom. Business and industry visits bring networking connections that can lead

to incredible opportunities for my teammates, myself, and the 13,000 members we serve. No matter the day, location or agenda, a new, exciting piece of information is just waiting to be gathered.

When I sit back to reflect on these last nine months, one phrase continuously pops into my mind. "Never be afraid to try something new. If you fail, well at least you tried." This phrase was shared by a gentleman named Marty I had met while traveling abroad in Belize for a class at Penn State. These few words have truly driven my life decisions since then.

I strive to step outside of my comfort zone and encourage fellow members to do the same. We cannot truly grow if we never try anything new. Sure, these new experiences can be scary and nerve racking, but we come out either achieving our goal or learning something new. As young leaders we are aware of the problems in the agricultural industry. I am confident that if we live our lives never being afraid to try new things, we will tackle each one of these issues making tomorrow a better place. Thank you, Pennsylvania FFA, for providing the soil to grow new seeds of opportunities.

Editors note: Killian George is the Pennsylvania FFA Treasurer.



Pennsylvania FFA Photo

On March 10, Pennsylvania FFA state officers sorted through donations.

Drive for Puerto Rico

THOMAS STRONG
State Reporter

There is a line that is stated in the opening ceremonies of events that goes "... the FFA is a national organization which reaches from the state of Alaska to the Virgin Islands and from the state of Maine to Hawaii." When this line is spoken, we are reminded as FFA members that we are 52 associations strong across our entire nation. Recently our Puerto Rico Association has been hit with natural disasters. At the beginning of 2020, Puerto Rico suffered constant earthquakes that devastated the island.

This year, the Pennsylvania FFA realized that there was an opportunity to help a struggling FFA association. So, throughout February at our ACES conference, we asked chapters to bring donations for the people of Puerto Rico. We asked for items such as towels, blankets, tents and toiletry items. We hoped to get enough items to at least make some sort of impact on those who would receive the items. But after collecting from the 99 chapters that attended ACES, we were blown away by the sheer amount of donations that we were brought.

As soon as some chapters heard about our drive, they started a school-wide donation drive. Others collected from each of their members that were signed up

for the conference. Some chapters such as the Elizabethtown FFA chapter even went as far as to make items such as blankets for those in need. Each weekend, the amount of donations grew as members from all across the state looked to help. With conversations through the Puerto Rico FFA we determined that all items would be sent to a school in Ponce on the southern end of the island. From there all of the supplies would be distributed to other schools.

On March 10, the Pennsylvania FFA state officers sorted all the items that were donated into individual boxes that were then packed onto pallets to be sent south. After counting each and every item, we were able to see just how big of an impact our members have made. Some of the items included were nine tents, 128 blankets, 383 baby wipe containers, 598 deodorants, and 934 tubes of toothpaste to go with the 1,981 toothbrushes that were donated. That does not even mention the 4,963 other items that were donated as well.

In the end, five pallets were packaged with over 2,800 pounds of donations all postmarked for Puerto Rico. We are incredibly proud of all of our members and the hard work they did to be able to make this drive a success. We would like to thank everyone who donated to this cause.