

FFA a Bright Spot During Dark of Pandemic

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HARRISBURG, Pa. — Through the ever-lengthening gloom of COVID-19, FFA is offering students an outlet to spend time with friends, learn about agriculture, and just be themselves.

Consider ninth-grader Oliver Kelley.

Oliver admits he isn't the most enthusiastic student at Canton High School — except when he's in his ag class at the end of the day.

That ag class and the FFA club have been great opportunities to make friends during his first year of high school.

"That's kind of what I live by," Oliver said. "You need to be friendly to everybody, and FFA's just a great experience to meet people and get you set up for further on in life."

Oliver was one of roughly 5,000 students, teachers and parents who attended the state FFA's Mid-Winter Convention on Jan. 10 at the Pennsylvania Farm Show.

After being held virtually last year, the convention looked much the same as in pre-pandemic times, with lots of seats filled in the New Holland Arena



Allison Zimmerman, the state star in agricultural placement, holds the certificate for her Keystone degree.

and a sea of blue jackets across the packed-earth floor.

Over his first few months in FFA, Oliver has focused on public speaking projects. He has developed an onstage

presentation and has been practicing the FFA Creed. He was already familiar with the text because his older sisters had participated in creed recitation as well.

Public speaking suits Oliver's personality.

"I've just always been kind of a talkative guy," he said.

Talking and socializing might be just the thing for Pennsylvania's youths going through their third school year snarled by COVID-19 concerns.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and other children's health organizations have said that the pandemic is contributing to rising rates of depression, anxiety and loneliness in young people.

FFA may offer something of an antidote to those stressors.

Jessica Herr, Pennsylvania's national FFA officer candidate, said the organization connected her with friends and mentors who could help if she is uncertain about something.

"I really get to rely on that community that I formed while I was in FFA," said Herr, a student at Penn State Berks.

The state FFA officers are keen to develop those connections with members. This school year they have completed about 90 visits to FFA chapters, all in person.

That's a big change from earlier in the pandemic, when classes couldn't always receive visitors or interact with state officers face to face.

"I think the kids are super grateful to see state officers because the past almost two years has not been normal for them," said Nina Coolidge, the state FFA secretary.

Coolidge knows something about these disruptions, having graduated from Wellsboro Area High School in 2020, part of the senior class whose school year was cut short.

Before becoming a state officer, Coolidge completed her freshman year with Penn State. All of the classes were virtual, which prevented the in-person interaction with professors that she would have liked.

Coolidge was certainly pleased, then, to have Mid-Winter Convention back the way she remembered it. She said FFA can enrich members' lives by bringing them together.

"It gives them that creative outlet where they don't have to be perfect and they can try anything they would like to," she said.

Planning events like Mid-Winter Convention has been a bit tricky during the pandemic. But whether in person or by videoconference, the state officers' goal is to connect with students.

"Just something to keep their spark initiated so it doesn't go out," said Trevor Maxwell, the state FFA reporter.

He's been impressed with how chipper students are during chapter



Pennsylvania FFA state officers do hand motions during the Mid-Winter Convention. From left, Abigail O'Neill, Trevor Maxwell and Nina Coolidge.



Kristen Frew of Laurel FFA receives the certificate for her Keystone degree backstage.

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visits, even in the first class of the morning.

Sure, the members are excited to meet the state officers — "they treat us like celebrities, even though we're just fresh out of high school," Maxwell said — but the enthusiasm might also reflect how the students feel about FFA.

"They want to learn. They're asking questions. They're really engaging, and you can tell they want to be there," Maxwell said.

During the convention, Pennsylvania FFA provided jackets to 432 first-year members; conferred the state's highest FFA award, the Keystone degree, on 368 members; and handed out a number of awards.

The four state star recipients honored at the convention will represent Pennsylvania in a competition at The Big E in Massachusetts this fall.

This year's state stars are: agricultural business, Andrew Snook, Mifflinburg FFA; agricultural placement, Allison Zimmerman, Grassland FFA; agricultural production, Courtney Martin, Headwaters FFA; and



Jessica Herr, Pennsylvania's national FFA officer candidate, addresses the Mid-Winter Convention.

agricultural science, Spencer Watts, Greenwood FFA.

The organization also recognized five new chapters: Chambersburg Area Middle School, Moshannon Valley, Mon Valley, Athens Middle School and Millville.

INDEX

Section A

- Now Is the Time A4
- Opinion A8
- The Word Lives A10
- Dairy Week in Review A12
- Farm Calendar A14
- Pa. Farm Bureau A18
- Markets A20
- Weather A31

Section B

- Home on the Range B2
- On Being a Farm Wife B3
- You Ask, You Answer B4

- Family Living Focus B5
- Cook's Question B8
- Rural Ramblings B9
- Kid's Korner B10
- Mailbox Markets B11
- Public Auction Register B16
- Antiques Center B19
- Antiques Detective B20

Section C

- Classifieds C1

Section D

- Classifieds D1

Section E

- Eastern Dairy Reporter

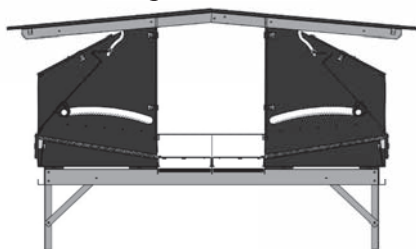
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