

"Learning to Do. Doing to Learn. Earning to Live. Living to Serve."

FFA continues to grow and change

BY APRIL TOLER
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MT. VERNON — Since 1923, the National FFA Organization has been a staple in schools across America.

Locally, the organization has succeeded in attracting students and keeping them involved in the community since 1929 and as the times change, so has the FFA.

"The representation of kids looking at agriculture careers, that's the biggest change we've had," said Mt. Vernon Township High School agriculture teacher and FFA sponsor John Kabat. "Things keep evolving with what FFA is all about."

According to the FFA's Web site, in 1917, the Smith-Hughes Vocational Education Act established the first vocational agriculture courses.

In 1926, Henry Groseclose, a former agricultural instructor, organized the Future Farmers of Virginia for boys in agriculture classes and soon, similar organizations begin to pop up throughout the country.

That same year, the American Royal Livestock Show invited vocational agriculture students to participate in National Livestock Judging Contests in Kansas City, Mo.; a judging tradition, now called Career Development Events, that still lives on in the organization today.

The first Future Farmers of America convention was held in 1928 and the organization continued to grow. Currently there are approximately 500,000 members and 7,358 chapters in both the U.S., Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

As the organization continued to grow throughout the United States, the chapter itself has remained a staple of the MVTHS campus.

In the early 1920s, the high school began an agriculture program with C.L. Anderson as one of the first agriculture teachers.

Following the growing trend of agriculture classes and interest, MVTHS formed its own FFA chapter in 1929.

"The Mt. Vernon FFA chapter was one of the few chapters in Illinois to be chartered the first year that FFA was made available to Mt. Vernon High School," according to Kabat.

Throughout the years the school has continued to keep agriculture and the FFA an important part of the campus.

Each year, Kabat said approximately 180 students sign up to be a member of FFA, an organization he said they soon learn is a lot of work.

Throughout the year, the group tackles a number of projects including presenting projects like crop, dairy, forestry and others for judging, keep a log of those projects, attending state and national conferences, preparing for a future career and volunteering.

One of the events, the Career Development Events include public speaking, writing and essay competitions, livestock genetic evaluation, food science, land use evaluation, agribusiness management and math computations, and others.

"There is so much stuff [to do]," said MVTHS junior and FFA member David Clifton.

"It's probably number one," said Mallery Adams, a freshman at MVTHS. "The FFA is one of the most active clubs at MVTHS, there are always things going on."

Students participating in those projects and competi-



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FFA PROCLAMATION — Members of the Mt. Vernon Township High School FFA group meet with city Mayor Mary Jane Chesley to watch her sign the National FFA Week Proclamation. The document designates the week of Feb. 16 through Feb. 23 at FFA Week. Pictured back row, LEFT TO RIGHT, Bryson Owens, Mallery Adams, Lacy Pranja, and MVTHS agriculture teacher John Kabat. Front row, David Clifton, Mt. Vernon Mayor Mary Jane Chesley, and Raina Jones.

tions have been successful throughout the years.

According to Kabat, out of the 318 FFA chapters in Illinois, the group has ranked in the top 11 at the State FFA Convention for the past 20 years.

While the group keeps the students busy — busier than most of the clubs offered at the school according to some of the FFA members — it all has a purpose.

"[In FFA] you learn a lot of good skills," Adams said.

Some of those skills, Kabat said, focus on finding a career path after graduating college, including mock interviews, research and applying for scholarships to college and trade schools.

Unlike other activities such as athletics, Kabat said the FFA provides skills that could help anyone's future.

That sentiment is stated in the official FFA creed, written in 1930 by E.M. Tiffany stating partly, "I believe in the future of agriculture ... I believe that to live and work on a good farm, or to be engaged in other agricultural pursuits, is pleasant as well as challenging ..."

Unlike the FFA of the past, a number of students in today's world become involved in agriculture and FFA, Kabat said, not just to become a farmer, but to explore a number of job opportunities in the field of agriculture.

Some of those jobs include agriculture business, communications, economics, education, engineering, mechanics and environmental and natural resources just to name a few. A number of popular jobs today, Kabat said, are in business, horticulture and mechanics.

According to the FFA's Web site, agriculture is the nation's largest employer with more than 22 million people working in some phase ranging from growing food and fiber to selling it in the marketplace.

Among some of the FFA members at MVTHS, job interests included horticulture, agriculture business and wildlife biology.

But those career ideas were not on the forefront of these students' minds when they joined FFA. In fact, most said they did not know what to expect when joining.

"I had no idea what FFA was," Clifton said. "I thought it was just something to do, but it has been very helpful."

"There are currently more than 300 careers the kids can go into," Kabat said. "And according to the new census, 68.6 percent of new jobs will be agriculture related jobs. Most of the kids don't know, they think [if they go into agriculture] they will be farmers."

Kabat said more and more agriculture students are also attending college, breaking away from farming and entering agricultural jobs.

According to Kabat, more than 90 percent of his agriculture students go on to attend junior college or a university.

Not only have the projects, conventions and job learning skills been helpful, some of the members said, but so has the places they have gone and the people they have met.

"I've met a lot of people through FFA that pertain to my career," said FFA member Bryson Owens.

MVTHS FFA member Raina Jones agreed.

"You do get to go to more places than you do as a regular, high school student," she said. "Like Washington, D.C. I would have never went there without the FFA."

Those connections throughout the country can prove fruitful in the future, Kabat said, especially with more than 400,000 current members and thousands of past members throughout the nation.

"We've got so many friends and so many connections," Kabat said. "FFA is so well known."

Along with potential job opportunities and connections, Kabat said he also gears his FFA members toward developing a strong sense of volunteerism.

Each year, he said, his chapter members participate in approximately 50 volunteer activities.

"I want students to like who they are, when you do that, you will help other people," he said. "I want them to see community service as a part of their life."

With so much work and activities, some may ask why teenagers would so willingly participate in the organization.

Kabat gives all the credit to the students and their determination to work as hard as they can to achieve their goals.

"How many other kids do what these kids do?" he said.

Although the students recognize their own success, they give a lot of credit to Kabat for keeping students interested and in keeping the FFA a strong, successful group on campus.

"He pushes us a lot, by making us realize what we are doing will benefit us in the future," Jones said of Kabat.

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FFA FLAG — Members of the Mt. Vernon Township High School take down the American flag on the campus during FFA Week. Throughout the week, the group participated in a number of events including bowling, tractor day and a cookout.