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- [Officer Journals](#)
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The 2001-2002 National Officer Journals

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"If we don't change, we don't grow. If we don't grow, we aren't really living." – Gail Sheehy

Konichiwa!

The word "Konichiwa" is Japanese for "good afternoon." Now, I do realize that it might be morning and it might be evening where you are, but this word is just way too cool to leave out. J Well, after a wonderful almost-two-week stay in the land of sushi, bullet trains and great fruit (Japan if you have not already figured it out), I am pumped about sharing some of our experiences and fun with you.



We arrived in Tokyo/Narita airport on the evening of the third. We basically just grabbed some food and crashed. The guys were bad and we each ordered a club sandwich. I mean we were a little reluctant to just dive on in to the food scene, but that was soon to change – and SOON.

The best part of the first evening was having the chance to meet our tour guide, Hiro. Hiro has served as the tour guide for the officer trip for several years and is one of the most sincere, brilliant, hilarious individuals I have ever met. Hiro helped our team focus on experiencing true growth throughout our trip. In combination with two staff members from National FFA, they helped us understand the cultural differences, but also overall similarities that all people have. He taught us about the history of his homeland and put in countless hours to make sure our trip was an experience of a lifetime. He encouraged each of us to study and learn from the culture we were experiencing, but to be ourselves so we could truly apply what we have learned to our lives.

The next morning, we were up and shaking, or at least I was because it was mighty cold. The weather meant little though when we had the chance to go to the Higaki Melon Farm. Goodness gracious, this was the BEST melon I have ever eaten in my life. They were muskmelons, very similar to cantaloupes, but these were special. When the plants are young, they will start off with eight melons, by the time the fruit is ripe, only the best melon on each plant is left to get the maximum amount of nutritional content. I only had three pieces, and I am telling you I could have eaten three whole melons! In addition, we had the chance to visit several other production agriculture facilities.

We spent the first three and a half days in Tokyo. Our trip kicked off quick. BOOM ... and we were off to our first FFJ (Future Farmers of Japan) chapter. FFJ is some pretty cool stuff. They have approximately 120,000 members and are an absolute blast to get to know and learn from. We spent the morning in slippers because that is what you wear indoors. It was pretty funny because apparently, Dane slipped on some girl's slippers and some of the students thought it was pretty funny. But how were we supposed to know? We could not! J We ate lunch with the students and had a wonderful time.



That afternoon, we met with representatives from Toyota and had the chance to ride in a virtual reality car race, where Elio ran our car off three different bridges! J Of course, he used the fact that I was screaming in his ear and tickling him as an excuse, but whatever! J

That night, we went to a terrific restaurant where you could eat a variety of meat kabobs. I must have eaten six chicken and duck kabobs when I decided to step up the bravery factor in my life. I looked for the craziest thing on the menu and found the sparrow kabob to be somewhat exotic. Now, I know that we do have sparrows in the United States, but answer this question: How many times have you seen one on a menu? Well, me neither. Now I assumed a sparrow (I know I should have known this before) was a big bird. I mean, at least the size of a dove, maybe even a bald eagle, I don't know. J Yeah, well it was closer to the size of a hummingbird. When the lady brought the poor little bird out, I could not believe how small it really was. So, I thought it must be a filet, but it was not. After the first bite, which I believe to be the wing, crunching through the first twenty bones almost, I mean almost, evoked a quite nasty response right there at the dinner table. With support and a lot of laughter from my loving teammates I took that wing to the tummy section. Oh yeah! J Of course, while I was chewing the first bite everyone else examined the amoeba-sized bird and found its poor little body was still intact, head and all. Do you know anyone else that has eaten a sparrow?

The next morning was spent at a fresh fish market. We arrived very early and they were just hauling fish, big and small, ordinary and quite funky, all around the place. This market was huge. I mean, multiple football fields here. My girl, Amber, chowed down on some eel liver and we saw several fish like you would not believe. Also, we experienced a fruit and vegetable auction. Now I do not even understand auctions in English, so I was really lost in Japanese. Through the differences, it was amazing to see how that part of their agricultural industry works.

That afternoon, we visited the company that so graciously sponsors our trip to Japan, Mitsui, for some meetings and a reception with their employees. The reception was filled with extremely caring, intelligent people and some sure-enough-good food. There was an entire fish just chillin' on a platter, except that the entire body was prepared raw sushi style. Now, that was a first for me, but once I tried the sushi, I was very impressed. So impressed that I had some more. Plus, I tried tempura and it was magnificent! J In fact, tempura probably would receive the "First Annual Barrett Keene Japanese Food Award." It was that good. Next, we went to do a little singing and dancing with the karaoke machine. Now, you have to understand that the Japanese culture is more reserved than we are here. In addition, in the workplace, the Japanese are very committed, serious, and hardworking. Well, apparently, the karaoke scene is quite different. I have not had that much fun in a really long time. We danced, and I sang so much I almost lost my voice ...

whew! Good times!

The next day, we spent the morning at the U.S. Embassy. We met with several of the staff there to discuss the history, current state, and possible future of Japan, but in particular, the agriculture industry.

That afternoon, we went to another FFJ chapter to meet some more amazing students. It is so heartwarming to know that regardless of the miles, true love still brings the smiles. I hardly know any Japanese and most of the students knew very little English, but we communicated through sincere joy and body language. One really funny thing that happened here was the fact that the students and teachers wanted each person on our team to take this huge wooden mallet/sledgehammer and crush rice inside of a wooden tub, to make some type of food. Well, everything was going great until Robin missed the hole (that was like two feet wide) and shattered the mallet on the side of the tub. I almost fell down laughing! J That girl just cracks me up.

Also, one of our wonderful nights in Tokyo, our team went to the Hard Rock Café. During dinner, we were just laughing and having a good time when the building started shaking. After the fact, we found out that we experienced the outer shock of an earthquake that registered as a 5.2. Now, I don't know a lot about earthquakes, but I was told that it was of decent size. Considering the fact that no one was injured, it was some cool stuff.J

On the eighth, we visited a facility where agricultural products come in from all over the world on barges and are stored in humongous storage bins. That night, we went to Anjo City Agricultural School to meet more FFJ members.

This night was especially exciting because we had the chance to begin our homestays with the families of the FFJ members. After a tour of the school, having the chance to witness one of the FFJ members do a traditional Japanese dance, and singing "God Bless America," our team split up with our families. Elio and I were blessed to be able to stay with the Yamamura family. They were some of the most genuine, caring people I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. Regardless of an evident language barrier, we had a wonderful experience.

That night, we had the chance to meet the entire family. The Yamamura family consists of two grandparents, two parents, one son, two daughters, and now, two crazy American boys! J Elio and I gave each family member gifts from the United States and through the help of the English-Japanese dictionaries, got to know each other a little bit. That night, I took a WONDERFUL traditional Japanese bath. These baths are different from ours because you shower and wash your body and hair before you get in the tub. After rinsing all the soap off, you get into a tub that is mighty, mighty hot and just relax. These baths quickly developed as one of my favorite parts of the home. While the home was beautiful, it was frigid. Elio and I both had, no lie, over a foot of blankets on each of our beds.

The next day, Takuya, our awesome host brother, and the rest of the family took us on a tour of their rice, wheat, and fig farm, and the beef cattle operation. Elio and I were blown away at the equipment and the commitment to quality. In addition, we had the chance to go to the coolest city park I have ever seen in my life, a bowling alley where we laughed and gave high fives, just like we would do in America. Finally, we had the chance to attend an historical museum in Anjo City, to learn more about the city and the nation of Japan. That night, we had another splendid traditional Japanese meal and spent some more quality time talking with our family. After a chilly first night, I slept with khaki pants, a t-shirt, a sweater, and a stocking cap. It was a great idea until I woke up and my ears hurt like crazy from being held down all night long! J Ouch!

The next day was spent visiting a reconstructed palace that was absolutely gorgeous, saying goodbye to the wonderful Yamamura family and traveling to Hiroshima.

Monday was a day that I simply will never forget. We woke up in the morning and headed straight over to Peace Memorial Park. We saw an actual building that, miraculously, was left partially standing after the bomb. We toured the Peace Museum that is dedicated to removing all nuclear weapons from the face of the earth. There was a child's tricycle that had been destroyed by the blast. We saw diagrams and pictures of ground zero where the bomb had demolished the city and the lives of its citizens. We read and listened to the reasons why the United States bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was so clear that when one visits this sight of destruction, that nationality and other differences do not matter.

The only thing that that is important is remembering each of the victims of World War 2 and committing to remember why these events happened and applying that gained wisdom to the future.

That night, we rode the train to Kyoto for the last part of our stay in the wonderful country of Japan. Our team went to eat at this really cool restaurant. It had four different sections, including Korean Barbeque (where you cook your own food on a small grill), sushi, tempura, and some tasty noodles. Elio and I partnered up and really got our money's worth. J Then we walked through a really cool outdoor mall and shopped for family and friends.

Tuesday morning and afternoon were spent in two facilities run by a tractor and engine producing company named Yanmar. We were able to see the production lines. Some of the coolest things we saw the entire time in Japan were these little Yanmar robots about the same size of a small golf cart that towed materials around the factories. They were guided by lasers, but even cooler than that they played tunes like "It's A Small World After All."

Wednesday was spent at the Golden Pavilion, a beautiful building that you just have to see to appreciate. Even cooler than the wonderful building and absolutely beautiful garden was the group of students that we had the chance to meet. They asked if it was okay if they surveyed us, and we had a great time just hanging out and getting the chance to meet them. Also, we had the chance to go to a shop with seven floors to finish up our shopping for family and friends.

Our next adventure was at a Shinto Shrine in some of the most picturesque mountains I have ever seen. The shrine was hundreds of years old and it was a blessing to learn about the history and culture of another nation.

Our last night in Japan was spent doing a little team karaoke. We had an absolute blast singing our hearts out to songs by everyone from M.C. Hammer to the Beatles. It was a great time to just kick back and have a little fun.

Our last day in Japan was one of mixed emotions. While we were excited about spending some time with our families, we were genuinely sad to be leaving Japan after a wonderful time. After taking our luggage to the airport, we heading to Panasonic to take our tour of their new technology. It was pretty cool to be able to see microchips that store five hours of music, televisions with a picture that is unbelievably lifelike, and some of the latest technologies in digital cameras.

The next part of our trip was a true blessing. Our humble tour guide, Hiro, took us to his mother's home. He modeled a sharp navy blue traditional Kimono and was even nice enough to write each of us a message in Japanese with a calligraphy pen. He has a true talent and the art was truly beautiful. Hiro's mother and sister-in law were extremely kind and constantly trying to help us feel welcome and enjoy our time together. In addition to a visit with Hiro's family, our trip was special because on the way there, our team was treated to a very precious experience.

The following is my personal journal entry for the day: "We just met the sweetest little girl ever. Masumi was eight years old. She was with another little girl alone on the subway on her way home from school. When the other girl left, Masumi came up and indicated that she wanted to sit beside Amber. We had talked to both of the girls, but when she approached us, we were very surprised. Her English was amazing for a small child and it was easy to see her true joy inside and obvious intelligence. We spent about ten minutes with her and gave her an FFA pen and a 'Winnie the Pooh' card. She was so sweet in accepting the gifts that I just wanted to give her a big hug. She gave us her address and I cannot wait to write her. Her bravery has been my favorite part of the entire trip. When she left, the combination of joy of meeting this amazing person and the sadness of seeing her leave actually made my eyes tear up a little. Thank you for her presence. I love you, God."

After being treated to this wonderful gift to see such a sincere, innocent girl that was unafraid of new people and new experiences, we headed to the airport to leave for the greatest country in the world. Now, we had originally been scheduled to have a six-hour layover in Japan. After finding a cheaper fare, our layover time was bumped up to 13 hours. Then we realized that when we scheduled our trip we had not factored in the thought that we gained a day when we crossed the international time line somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. So we actually had 36 hours in Hawaii. We grabbed a hotel room and

hit the beach. We spent the day getting fried in the sun and starting to rest up a little bit from our jet lag.

The next morning, we got up and traveled to Pearl Harbor to see the Arizona Memorial Museum. We were, without question, blessed to see the Peace Memorial in Hiroshima and the memorial to the soldiers killed in Pearl Harbor. This opened our minds to see both perspectives and to realize that each person, regardless of nationality or reason for war, was still a brother or sister in life. Each person had a mother and a father. Each person went through the same basic experiences in life and had the same basic needs. However, it was wonderful to see the togetherness and sincere love for each other that filled the air in Pearl Harbor. It is hard to believe that those horrible events really happened, but they did. It just tears me up that people can have enough hate to attack another nation. One of the most important realizations is the responsibility we have to each and every soldier and individual that lost his life to love others. The least we can do is to look for the best in each person instead of focusing on any differences we have. In addition, we have the opportunity to learn about the cultures of other people. Then and only then will we be able to truly grow in our lives.

After Pearl Harbor, our team headed to the North Shore for a little time at the beach. The water was a little chilly, and the undertow was pretty serious, but we had an absolute blast. We made a castle in the sand and had a great time doing it. Plus, I beat the snot out of Robin in a sand fight! I even tackled her pretty hard. She has such a fun spirit and caring heart that she just laughed like crazy. J

That night, we were very fortunate to meet about 20 FFA members in Hawaii. We learned some crazy step dances from my boy, James, saw a traditional Hula dance with our friend Heather, and just overall had a ton of fun hanging out and eating some mighty tasty Hawaiian food. J

After a sad departure from a group of wonderful people, our team headed for the airport to chill with our wonderful families. The arrival in Tampa had several surprises when some of my closest friends surprised me with a visit during the one day I spent at home. We woke up Sunday morning and had the chance to go to church. I was very thankful for this opportunity because my church family is a group that really helps me stay connected with the most important parts of my life. In addition, my friends and family came together for some of my mother's tasty, tasty food that I have missed so much! J

Now that I have had some time to reflect back on the past couple of weeks, I find that the quote I used to start this journal entry applies to life, but more specifically to the importance of continually trying to learn in life. Perhaps, the largest source of learning I have been blessed to find are the people we know and come across. Earlier, I talked about Masumi. While Japan is a wonderful country, I was blown away by how reserved the people traditionally are. This eight-year-old girl had the courage to approach an entire group of people that were obviously from a different country with some very different experiences and backgrounds. We were able to learn a little about each other, and more importantly to realize that when a child grows up the joys and challenges are still the same. Children and students are still faced with pressures from society to look and dress a certain way. Every single one of us has the need of being loved and having people in our life that care about us as individuals. Regardless of race or religious affiliation, when someone believes in one of us, we can more easily do the same.

At the same time, I began to ask myself why in the world I did not have the courage to go and talk to Masumi before she had to come talk to me. In that, I realized that every person in my life that I love, each person that has taught me about life, was once a person I did not know. At that time I recommitted myself to taking full advantage of tapping into the greatest learning resource in the world: people.

Each person has something beautiful, special, and unique in their lives that we can learn and grow from. I know that at school or work, it is easy to spend time with the same group of friends every day, but I challenge each of us to talk to at least one new person each day. At the same time, not just talk to people, but to sincerely care about others in an attempt to not only learn about life, but to also be a true and helping friend. When we do this we will truly open the door to life by continually studying which areas need to be improved and learning to appreciate and learn from the unique perspectives and talents of other people.

January 27, 2002

"What lies behind us and before us are small matters compared to what lies within us." – Ralph Waldo Emerson

Goodness gracious, this year is just flying by. I mean, our team is basically finished with the first third of our year of service. It just absolutely amazes me how time flies by so quickly. This realization is one reason we will discuss this brilliant quote by one of America's great writers. Our team is slowly, but surely, completing mission blast off to our year of service. The first couple months were pretty much all training, and while we will each have the opportunity to receive feedback and suggestions from all sorts of individuals, our official training period is almost complete.

This past week has been superb. Fortunately, I was able to kick the week off with a morning to just sleep. J I finally woke up and ate breakfast for lunch. After being on the road for a while, one of my favorite noises not to hear is my alarm clock! After eating breakfast for lunch, my mother and I drove over to Tampa. We had a great time just chatting and even getting a little shopping done. That night, I was able to go see some of my closest family friends and make it back in time for another dinner of my mother's mouth-watering food.

The next morning, I flew to Washington, D.C. to be with our team, do some planning, and most importantly, attend the Board of Directors meeting. After arriving early in D.C., I caught the metro (D.C.'s version of the subway) to Capitol Hill where I met up with a couple friends. In addition, I spent some time walking around the Capitol Building just staring at its beauty and reflecting on how blessed I am to live in the greatest country in the world. I was reminded of the thousands of men and women who have sacrificed, and are currently sacrificing, for the very freedom so many of us (including myself) do not appreciate enough. The building stands as a symbol of power. I encourage every person to visit our capitol. All FFA members have the opportunity to experience excitement, leadership, and the headquarters for our country through the WLC program. As a past participant, I encourage everyone to take advantage of this opportunity.

Wednesday, Abbie and I spent most of the day preparing to go to South Carolina all of next week to visit with FFA members, advisors, and supporters. That night, our team had the pleasure to go out to eat with our National Advisor, Dr. Case, and our National Executive Secretary, Mr Harris. Both of these gentlemen have a tremendous love for the FFA and for young people. They have committed decades (literally) to helping our organization grow. Through their service, they have acquired knowledge of both the history of FFA and a vision for the future. In addition, it was a blast to get to know them with all business aside.

Thursday, we had the chance to go through an orientation about our trip to Japan. We spent most of our day at the Children's Museum in Washington. Whether we were sitting on the living room floor made of tatami mats, or trying to figure out how to flush the Japanese toilets, it was definitely a learning experience. For lunch, we had a combination of eel, seaweed, pork, salmon, and lots of rice. Now, I know the food might sound a little funky, but if a southern guy whose favorite food is his mother's cornbread can tear it up, well, so can you! J As a person who has some difficulty trying new foods, I beg you to be braver than I.

Now I know this might sound a little unrelated, but it's not. The biggest reason I am actually able to try new things is because of FFA. As soon as I found an activity that made me a little nervous, well then that is the activity I would participate in. When I was so nervous that I could not light a candle during a speech because my hands were shaking so bad, I decided right then that I would commit to getting better. If you are shy sometimes, just remember – so is everyone else, including me. When you are dying to run for an office, but you just can't make yourself do it because you are scared to lose, just remember – everyone gets scared. Everyone doubts themselves. However, anyone can allow doubt to keep us doing the same things we have always done. The sign of a true leader is a person that has the courage to stand up to fears, and chomp down on that piece of eel. You know, it was tough, but as soon as I decided to be open-minded and experience life by experiencing new things, I found something I love. I would venture to say, if we all will do this, we would find new things we love constantly.

Now back to the schedule. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday can really be grouped together very easily. All three days, we had the opportunity to participate in the Board of Directors meeting. Our team realized again just how fortunate we were to represent the students that we love. Also, we realized a couple of other things were pretty fabulous. First of all, we realized just how committed, brilliant, and service-oriented our board of directors really is. Secondly, this past weekend reaffirmed the fact that our organization has the

courage to change and grow, not for the sake of simple change, but for the sake of continual improvement. In addition, Robin and I were able to meet up with a friend and attend church together. It was wonderful to worship together and refocus our hearts, and in effect, our thoughts for an exciting week.

The quote at the top of the page is a tremendous statement that, while sometimes hard to remember, is so true. It is so easy to do two things. First, considering that we have all made mistakes, we look back at those times with regret. Sometimes, we even allow the past to eat away at our lives. When this happens, our self-confidence, relationships with others and our faith all suffer. The other step we take, is that we worry so much about what is going to happen in the future, that we cannot fully live today. We focus so much on our future that we fail to notice our family. We worry so much about receiving an award, that we forget to give our friendship to those in need.

I challenge you, that regardless of how crazy your life is, and regardless of the storms in your life, take time to think about who you are. Before we can move forward and improve our lives, we must first know where we stand. When I was in the tenth grade, I did an activity at a conference that has stuck with me, even until today. Get an index card, or a piece of paper. On one side, write everything good about yourself that you can possibly think of. Don't worry what others will think, just write. After you have finished, turn the paper over and write down everything in your life that you need to improve. Keep this paper in a special place and look at it from time to time. While each of us has things in our lives that need to be improved, each one of us has something beautiful, special, and completely unique. Love yourself for who you are and have the courage to step out of your comfort zone to improve the areas in your life that can be better. Only you truly know what lies inside. The question is, how wonderful do you want it to be?

January 20, 2002

"You must be the change you wish to see in the world." – Ghandi

This week was a serious time for growth and great fun. We spent five days with a wonderful group of people who really helped us improve and grow both our ability and resources in the workshops we will be blessed to do throughout this year. Some of the steps that we took were researching in several books new and exciting activities and tools to use during the development and presentation of these workshops. We spent time discussing being clear and concise, learning how to ask questions in a way that will allow students to teach others and themselves about the content, instead of just spouting off what we might think about the topic. This is so important because I guarantee any group of people, especially FFA members, will know more than I do alone.

One of the best parts of the week was watching our teammates practice running through several different types of activities. You know, sometimes this could almost be a little difficult because we were presenting information that we really were not all that familiar with to a group of people that are pretty much experts. One thing I realized during our fun last week was that when we want to see others grow in life, sometimes we have to grow ourselves. I had to realize that I did not have all the answers, but the moment I allowed my teammates and the adults that wanted to help, do just that ... well, good things started to happen. Keep this thought in mind.

In addition, our team had the opportunity to eat some pretty wonderful food with some pretty great people. First, we had the chance to eat with Jason and Amy Givan in their home. Jason works for the FFA Foundation and he and his wife Amy both wowed us with their talents on the piano and their hilarious sense of humor. Also, on Friday night, our team had a little warm-up meal for our upcoming trip to Japan. We went to a Japanese restaurant and ate some wonderful food. One thing I am definitely NOT feeling all that confident about is my TOTAL lack of ability to eat with chopsticks. This is something I might want to improve before I start flinging sushi on members of my host family in Japan.

Saturday afternoon I arrived at the airport in Tampa. There, not only did I find my two wonderful, loving parents, I found a cloudless sky and a temperature of 83 degrees. We got in the truck and my parents had a big bowl of fresh-picked Plant City strawberries. Goodness gracious, this was just a beautiful afternoon. That night, I drove up to Gainesville, where the University of Florida is located (Go Gators!) to meet up with most of my former state officer team. That night we had a huge feast of alligator tail, chicken, hamburgers, and some greasy, but sure-enough-tasty French fries. Later that night, we met up with some more of our FFA friends and caught up on everything that has been going on in our lives.

The next morning, I was pumped to be able to attend the church where I worshipped for my entire first year of college. The weekend was just a wonderful time to see old friends and visit the town and the University that I love so much. That afternoon, most of my family came to my home in Plant City to consume some of my beautiful mother's scrumptious Southern cooking. That night, my family went to church and was blessed with the love and fellowship of a wonderful church family.

Now, for the past eight weeks, I have used my journal to discuss the "Crest of Leadership." While I would love to continue this activity, we have run into a little problem. There are no more pieces of the crest to talk about. Something I would like to do briefly at the end of each journal in the future is to share with you something inspirational that I have learned from each week. Earlier this week, I received an email from the FFA advisor at Columbus FFA in Iowa. Now, in a couple months, I have the opportunity to spend some time with the Columbus FFA members. At the bottom of the email, I noticed this quote: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." – Ghandi

What kind of change would you like to see in the world? Maybe you are sick and tired of racism. Maybe you would just love to see a world where students had the courage to stand in the face of pressure and do what is right. Perhaps you are tired of a world that is dominated with violence and hate. Possibly you hate the fact that people judge others simply because of the clothes they wear or the car they drive. Whatever it is, the first step we have to take in making that change in the world is to make that change in our lives. If the fact that some sad students in your school are pathetic enough to pick on other people upsets you, make the commitment to constantly build people up through SINCERE kindness. It doesn't matter who you are, each one of us has had people talk about us behind our backs. If you have felt the effect of this, then have the courage to let others know that it just is not right.

Make the decision to lead by example in not gossiping about others, or begin taking a couple hours each week to tutor younger students. Before we can change the world, we must first change ourselves.

January 13, 2002

"Learning For Life"

OH YEAH!!!! Okay, so these two words are usually a pretty good written expression of excitement, BUT they just really aren't doing their job with me. After two months of wrapping up everything with our classes and going through some wonderful team training, our team was excited as a little boy on a snowy day Florida. You are probably wondering what in the world has me so excited. You are probably thinking, "Hum, did Barrett just get a new miniature pony?" The answer is NO. You might be wondering if I just won the Showcase Showdown on the Price is Right game show. The answer is NO. That was actually Chris Vitelli, a former National Officer and my best friend from back home in Plant City.

Okay, I am going to tell you what has me so excited. Last week, our team had the wonderful opportunity to spend almost all day, everyday with some brilliant first-year FFA members from all over the state of Missouri. In five days, our team worked with the tremendous Area Officers to put on eight different greenhand conferences for approximately 3,600 students. The conferences were kicked off with the "Gabbin' with Gail" talk show. The show was titled "Locked Up In Loopeyville." Each person on our team played a different role with Abbie being our host and Elio serving as the Loopeyville FFA Advisor. "Mr. Chickarelli" had some loopy students that needed some help. My character was "Bust A Move Barrett." Now it is quite obvious from this title that I did enjoy cutting a rug. I loved it so much, well, I just could not stop. Dane (AKA Cat Man Dane) had an obsession with this ugly, stuffed fake cat that he carried around with him everywhere he went. Dane was absolutely hilarious. "Scared Scout Robin" had somewhat of a difficulty being the best Brownie she could be because well, instead of selling her cookies she would get nervous and begin eating them. I don't really see just a whole lot of people wanting a half-eaten Thin Mint®. Finally, "Amber Auctionson" would just bust out in the speedy auctioneering lingo every time she would go to speak. She is actually an auctioneer in real life, so when she hammed the role up a bit, she was absolutely hilarious. The skit did, in fact, have a plot and ended when Mr. Chickarelli revealed his true identity. Instead of just a regular guy, he was really SuperFFAman.

Now I know this skit may sound pretty silly, but we had an absolute blast working together and just plain being crazy. After the skit, the groups of members, which would range from about 200 to 700, would be split up into six groups. Each group went with one

person on our team and participated in a workshop. My workshop was about the Lion King and how Simba had character. I had a blast as the students taught each other about the importance of knowing the difference between right and wrong and always trying to do what was right. The students taught me about caring, having integrity, and always striving for excellence. Finally, the groups would come back together and one person on our team would give a keynote address. It was a true blessing to hear my teammates as they spoke from their heart and helped each of us learn about life and about having a true passion for helping people.

Whether we were eating at the headquarters of Bass Pro Shops or just learning from some of the most amazing students I have ever met in simple conversation, last week was a blast. Now do you see why I am just so pumped? I hope you do. There are students all across our country that are changing this world forever. Students from all sorts of backgrounds, races, and cities are learning about life and leadership through the world's most important and exciting industry, agriculture.

In addition, this past weekend, Dane, Robin and I drove a couple hours over to Chicago. Robin interned last summer with some amazing people that do the U.S. Farm Report for WGN Radio. A wonderful man named Max Armstrong asked if some members from our team could come up and answer some questions. Well, obviously, we jumped at the opportunity to spread the word about the organization and students we love so much. On Saturday night, we drove over and spent the night walking around downtown Chicago, trying to stay warm, and eating some thick, but sure enough tasty Chicago style pizza. We woke up early on Sunday morning and talked about how blessed we are to be serving the people, industry, and organization that we love so much. We reflected on our opportunity to help people simply by sharing our love with other people. That afternoon, we went to the beautiful WGN studios and were interviewed by Mr. Armstrong. After a wonderful lunch, we headed back to our new home, the Fairfield Inn. J

You know, throughout the past seven weeks, this journal has taken us through the first seven "Crests of Leadership." We have talked about balancing all of life's responsibilities. We have discussed the opportunity we have each day by helping people simply by being a friend. Last week, we talked about living above the line that society sets for us and never settling for good, when we can be giving life our best. After almost two months, we have reached the eighth and final piece of the crest. It is Learning for Life.

Over seven years ago, I sat in the bleachers in the Municipal Auditorium and set the goal of becoming a National FFA Officer. As I watched reflections, I thought about how amazing it would be to stand on the stage and know that I was a leader. I decided right then and there that I would work hard, dedicate my energy and time to one day becoming a "leader." If only I could get elected to National Office. WOW! Then, not only could I be up on stage in front of thousands of people, have my own business cards and be in New Horizons, but I could finally do something to help other people.

Well, in the past seven years I have been blessed with people and experiences that have taught me that life is NOT all about being in the spotlight. Thankfully, I have also learned the leadership does not come from a position, title, or letters on a jacket. Over the past couple of years, and especially this past week, I have learned that leadership does not come from not having letters on a jacket either. I honestly thought that if only I could wear a National Officer jacket with just the emblem on the back, that I would have succeeded in becoming a leader. Well, FFA members, leadership comes from within. Leadership comes from making a commitment that everyday we want to be a true friend and servant to other people.

The Missouri FFA members reminded me that it does not matter if you are a National Officer or a first year member, each and every one of us can be a leader. All it takes is deciding that life is not about winning. Life is about helping other people grow. The Missouri FFA members taught me about leadership by being willing to admit that they are not perfect. I learned about leadership by watching students help others learn. Ninth grade FFA members taught me about leadership because they had decided to stand strong in the face of the pressures that we, as young people, are faced with each and every day.

Another way FFA members all across this country have taught me about leadership is by committing themselves to always improving and getting better. By attending leadership conferences and camps, conventions, and competing in Career Development Events, FFA members challenge themselves everyday to grow and improve. With a world that is moving so fast, if a person is standing still, they are really moving backwards. I challenge you to challenge yourself to become a better person everyday.

Maybe you realize that sometimes you can be a little selfish. Maybe, you are having a tough time because when you decide to do something, you just cannot make yourself try because you doubt you could ever accomplish it. Maybe you have made mistakes in the past and you realize that there is an area in your life that you need to clean up. Whatever it may be, each of us has areas of our lives that need to be improved. Either we can stay right where we are, or we can commit to being a leader everyday by being a true friend and servant and by constantly working to grow and improve.

I hope you have a wonderful week and grab a hold of the opportunity we have through trying new things and watching those around us to begin "Learning For Life."

January 6, 2002

"Fuel The Fire"

Without question, this is my favorite part of the year. I have truly been blessed with amazing family and friends. This season allows us to truly focus on what really is important in our lives. We turn our attention solely to our faith and giving our love and friendship to those we hold dear. While being a young person today is so exciting, being a young person today is not easy. Our lives are filled with activities, deadlines, tests, meetings, and difficult times in our home and in our friendships. So many times, people expect us to have our lives all figured out, sometimes before we can even drive. We are faced with peer pressure in the areas of alcohol, drugs, tobacco, and premarital sex. On top of all of this, society views our generation as people that care more about Jerry Springer than our faith, and more about our hairstyle than helping our fellow man.

Well ... each of knows, that is NOT the case. Today's young people are talented, dedicated, caring individuals that are changing the world every day. We are setting goals, learning leadership skills, and serving our communities with caring hearts.

The vision statement of our national officer team is "The Flame of Excellence." Now, for the past four days, I have been in the northeastern part of New Mexico. Some of my dearest friends, the Carter family were gracious enough to invite me to stay with them over New Years. Being from Florida and spending most of my Christmas' in shorts, the past four days have been some more kind of cold. We have been just hanging out and sitting by the fire. Now we all know that a fire will never continue to burn if there are not some logs in the fireplace. Our team realizes that we have a passion of being a true friend and servant of our fellow FFA members, but our "fire" will never burn as brightly if we do not maintain the logs. Our team decided that the fuel for our fire would be our Faith, Agriculture, Family, and Friends. I challenge you to sit down and think about the three or four most important parts of your life and then decide how you are going to focus on each on of these. If one of your logs is your family, you might want to spend quality time just talking with your brother or sister. Another option would be to write your parents or guardians notes to thank them for everything they do for you. While it is easy to focus on our hair, the clothes we wear, or the stack of bills in you pocket, these things will bring nothing of benefit to your life. However, when we stop worrying about everything we have to get done and take a relaxing break to focus on the important parts of our lives, our life, and the perceptions of our generation will surely improve.

Over the past week, I have surely seen this in my life. On Christmas Eve, my wonderful family and I went over to the home of some family friends. The Valdez family hosted our get together and we had a blast. I cannot think of another time when I have consumed as much food. The night was filled with lots of tasty Cuban food and dancing to Spanish songs that I did not fully understand. J

The Holiday Season is such a beautiful time of year. People all over the world are celebrating in their respective faiths and in their homes. In my home, Christmas Day is a most wonderful day. First of all, it is a true pleasure to honor the birth of my biggest role model, Jesus of Nazareth. In addition, Christmas Day is important to my family because it is also my little sister, Jaime's, birthday. That afternoon, I was fortunate enough to spend some time with my lovely Grandmother and two of my cousins that I love so much, Jordan and Sara Beth Newsome. I am proud to say that both are wonderful people and Jordan is even a chapter officer in his FFA chapter, Tomlin Middle School.

The day after Christmas was filled with spending time with my family and packing to go out to New Mexico. For the past four days I have been fueling my fire by just taking a little time to hang out and have fun with some of my dearest friends. In fact, tomorrow, we are going snow skiing in the mountains of New Mexico. I will venture to say it will be a

challenging, but exciting trip. The word hilarious is probably the best description of this Florida boy who has only seen snow three times in his life. In the face of this challenge, I say, "Bring it on!" because my logs are in place and my fire of life is ready to burn.

December 30, 2001

"Live Above The Line"

Oh yeah, this past week has been an absolute blast! J As a Florida Boy, being in the chilly Northeastern part of New Mexico is quite a different experience. While I have had a wonderful time here, there is no question that this trip could not be complete without a trip to the ski slopes. J Now I was fortunate enough to be able to go skiing in New Mexico last New Year's Eve for a couple hours, so I was not a complete rookie, but I am definitely not an expert. Okay, so I am not any good either. This trip was without question much more enjoyable, especially since I was able to ski for more than 30 feet at a time. Much of the day was spent trying to stand up in the fresh powder after completely wiping out, but I enjoyed each moment of the day. I brought in the New Year praying and spending quality time with some of my closest friends.

New Year's Day was spent watching football and preparing to head back to Indianapolis for another exciting week of preparation and training. On the second, I flew to Indianapolis just in time to be able to watch the fourth quarter of the Orange Bowl. My Florida Gators beat the opposing team by almost thirty points, so I did feel exceedingly happy. J The majority of the time during this week was spent on developing our speeches, workshops, and skit for the Missouri Greenhand Conferences. Our team had an absolute blast developing our skit together and came up with some pretty crazy characters like "Cat Man Dane" and "Scared Scout Robin."

In addition, we were able to eat dinner in the homes of two National FFA staff members. The Saldaña's and the Schescke's were gracious enough to let us come over for a night of food, fun, and relaxation. At the Saldañas, we ate some wonderful Mexican food and then just hung out by the fire telling stories and drinking hot chocolate. The Schescke's supplied us with what seemed like an unlimited supply of pizza and then we kicked back and watched one of our favorite movies, "Shrek." Finally, on Sunday, we flew to Kansas City where we began to dive head first into the next ten months of serving and hopefully helping others. Elio, Dane, and I flew together and we had a wonderful time talking to complete strangers and even joking around that we were going to start a Boy Band ... which is obviously NOT the case!

You are probably wondering why in the world I titled this entry "Live Above The Line" when I have not said one thing related to that topic. Well, last Thursday our team met with several members of the National FFA staff to discuss possibly updating the National Officer Commitment Form. While the form has worked for years, any document, situation or even person can be continually improved.

Each National Officer Candidate has to read and sign this form during the application process. When a person signs this form, they are committing to live each day in such a manner that would positively represent our organization in everything they say and do. This commitment form obviously includes abstaining from alcohol, tobacco products, and all other illegal substances. Also, the form includes items dealing with being committed to the FFA and even making sure we send out all correspondences in a timely manner.

It does not matter if a person is a National Officer or not, we all understand the line between what is right and what is wrong. However, sometimes, we allow society to write our own personal "Commitment Form," when, in reality, the version society produces is much less than we one that when we are completely honest, we will develop for ourselves.

I believe Society's Commitment Form would look something like the following:

- Stand up for what you believe in, as long as it is popular.
- Make sure that your hairstyle AND clothes look just like the ones that dominate the latest fashion magazines.
- Do whatever it takes to be able to sit in "the popular section" at lunch.
- Live each day for yourself (because the feelings of others just really don't matter that much).
- Don't worry about setting goals or working hard. You are just a teenager. What

can you do anyway?

Anyone can sign their name away to the form that others develop. I challenge you to right now, develop your own "Commitment Form." Write down the things you want to stand for everyday. Make a list of the things you will and will not do to "Live Above The Line" that society sets for us everyday. This list does not have to be a ten-page essay. Physically sign this list and place it somewhere you can see it. While anyone can live on the line those around us set, all it takes is a firm decision and a true commitment to follow the right path and set an example for others to follow. It does not matter if you are 13 or 83, each person has others that look up to you. As a leader and as a role model this is an opportunity that each of us have to not only improve your life, but to help those around you in everything you say and do.

I wish you the best along your journey.

December 23, 2001

"Step Up To The Chalkboard"

Wow, this has been an exciting week! The entire month has been a wonderful time of learning and growth with our team. We have learned what seems to be an immense amount of information and theory about some wonderful topics. This past week has been an opportunity to learn how to express who we are, our love for people and the knowledge we have gained through workshops. Monday through Friday, we worked with a terrific team of trainers to develop, improve, and actually present a workshop. Amber and I had the chance to have a great time presenting workshops at Hamilton Southeastern Junior High School. The students amazed me with their enthusiasm and desire to learn.

In addition to the training and development of workshops, we were able to hang together as a team a lot. Our team went over to my mentor's house (Mr. Tony Small) to celebrate Christmas together. We have been extremely fortunate to get to know the wonderful staff that work to serve our students. It is an extra blessing when we get to know their families as well. In addition, we were fortunate to attend an Indiana Pacers basketball game. Growing up as a sports fanatic and a definite basketball fan I absolutely loved it.

On Thursday night, Dane had his "night of passion." He took us to see the movie "The Majestic." The movie was filmed about 15 minutes away from his hometown, so it was really neat to see the landscape and beaches where he lives. After the movie we went to our manager's house to watch movies and eat spaghetti. I love each of the movies we watched, but I think I might have found my new favorite movie of all. "It's A Wonderful Life" is an older movie, but it has just an amazing message and story.

This time in the year is always exciting. The thoughts of seeing family and friends that we don't usually see, in combination with the obvious excitement of the holiday season just help create an amazing atmosphere. This week's journal is focusing on Stepping Up To The Chalkboard. When I think of this statement, I think of realizing that we have all the chance in the world to do great things in life and actually taking the step to do something about it.

Each day, we live in a country where we are blessed with the chance to be free. We have the chance to worship the way we choose. We have the privilege of expressing ourselves however we choose. Also, we have the opportunity to be a true friend to other people. We never know exactly what is happening in the life of any given person we see. Through our sincere kindness and desire to help people, we can have a positive impact on the lives of others, simply by being a friend.

In addition, at the beginning of this entry, I talked about our team writing workshops and speeches. Well, throughout the training one of the main objectives was to take everything we currently knew and combine that with new information and methods. To be completely honest, trying new things is not the easiest thing for anyone to do, especially me. I challenge each of us to Step Up to the Chalkboard in our individual lives. It is easy to sit back and say, "Gosh, I hate getting so nervous when I have to talk in front of people. I wish that was not the case." When in reality, all we have to do is commit ourselves to getting involved in the FFA – whether is it holding an office and doing Opening Ceremonies, participating in Parliamentary Procedure, or competing in a speaking contest. I truly believe that our generation is a talented and caring generation that is sick of prejudices, hate, and cruelty. Each of us has opportunities constantly to take a stand against this type of behavior. Whether it is just committing to looking for the best in each

person, or having the courage to not be a part of a conversation when other people are being torn down. As a leader, we can make a difference. Anyone can sit back and do nothing, but each of us has the potential to do amazing things in life. So let's pick up our chalk and start writing.

December 16, 2001

"Balancing Act"

Well, hello FFA friends!

Everything is going fabulous in my life. Our team absolutely loves the chance to get to know each other better and really learn how to be a better friend and leader. This past week, there has been a lot of focus on establishing a path to "make a positive difference" this year. I chose to focus on the "Balancing Act" piece of the crest this week. Since our arrival in Indianapolis, we have truly learned that life is a balancing act. This includes balancing work, sleep, and relaxation. It involves strengthening relationships with family and friends even though you might feel at times as though you "just don't have time."

The beginning of this week's balancing act started off with some challenging, exciting training about public speaking. We did exercises like stretches and even whispering the first paragraph of our speeches several times to make us speak from our diaphragm. The training was unlike anything I have done before, but we really learned a lot and started writing our speeches for the Missouri Greenhand Conferences we will be attending in January. Plus, that night we went out to eat with Ms. Tammy Meyer from the FFA Foundation. We went to a restaurant downtown and I was utterly impressed with downtown Indianapolis.

On Tuesday, we each had individual coaching sessions on our speeches with our manager. That afternoon, we had the opportunity to help decorate the national FFA center for Christmas. In fact, the picture that pops up on the homepage is a picture of all the staff, after we finished decorating a beautiful tree. That night, Amber took us to an auction and out for a big, juicy steak for her "night of passion." Each member of our team has one "night of passion," where we take the rest of our team to do something we are passionate about. Amber took us to an auction because her family owns their own auction company. That's right, Amber Haugland can talk just as fast and furious as anyone I have ever seen. She is good! Also, she took us to eat some steak ... well, because she was hungry. J

The rest of the week was a blast, but an absolute blur. On Thursday, we were fortunate enough to be able to volunteer at a food bank helping those in need. Even though we only spent a couple of hours helping out, the fact that we were helping people is a beautiful feeling. This activity also helped us realize just how easy it is to help someone. Whether it is volunteering with the Special Olympics, mowing your elderly neighbor's yard, or just leaving your family members little notes to let them know that you love them – helping people is not just limited to doing the big things. In fact, I would challenge you, as I challenge myself, to do some amazing things with something very small. Look in your heart, your true feelings towards other people, your motivations for doing things in life and ask the question, "How can I improve my heart?" Then through everyday interactions with people, begin to look for the good in people. Begin to give compliments instead of cut-downs, and you will be truly helping people.

We spent most of our days developing our mission statement and vision for the next year. Our Mission Statement is:

We dedicate our year of service to instilling a passion for excellence in all people by sharing our hearts and leading by example as a role model, advocate* and friend.

*Advocate for Agriculture, a term coined by the 2001-2002 national officer team.

The excitement level of our team is amazing. We are so pumped because we have absolutely no doubt that we are blessed to serve the best group of young people in the nation. We serve the most important industry in the world. Computers sure are nice, the construction industry builds some amazing structures, but without our food and our natural resources, well ... we just would not be here. We are excited because we are a part of an organization that we believe in with our whole hearts. We believe in you.

Our nights from Wednesday on have been even more fun. We spent Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday night eating dinner with several members of national FFA staff in

their homes. As a team, we love doing this because we truly get to know some of the people that serve our members every day. The Stagg, Staller, and Doerfert families were wonderful hosts and great examples to follow. Friday night, we had the treat of attending a Christmas party with all of the national FFA staff. The night was filled with great food, karaoke singers, and of course, my favorite – dancing and more dancing. We danced to everything from Jennifer Lopez to James Brown and had a blast doing it. The staff members are fabulous and we have enjoyed every moment spent with them.

This weekend we've had a little time to do some Christmas shopping, as well as catch up on everything we need to do to meet deadlines and serve our fellow members. This brings me to the "Balancing Act." As part of our training, we have the opportunity to read different leadership books and then report back to the rest of our team. The book I read was Steven Covey's Seven Habits for Highly Effective Teens. This is a book that if you haven't read, I strongly recommend that you do so. One of the areas of life it talked about was time-management. Some of his main principles were finishing assignments way before they are due and also taking a little time to relax and enjoy life. By doing these two things, we can balance getting everything we need to get done and still have fun in life.

Also, I believe that it is important to find balance in every area of our lives. One area that is extremely important is balancing maintaining relationships with friends and having the courage to stand up for what is right. One important thought to consider is that NO true friend would want you to do something that would compromise your values and even damage your body and mind. I encourage you to be a true friend to people. Express your love by being there for people in both good and bad times. However, possibly the best way to be a true friend is to be an example. As an FFA member, as a leader, you have the opportunity to be a true friend by helping others live a life that will produce true joy and not just moments of false happiness.

Each of my five teammates teaches me daily about life and love. You have the opportunity to help yourself and ultimately those around you to be successful in the "Balancing Act" of life. All it takes is a loving heart and a committed mind.

December 9, 2001

"Pay It Forward"

As a person who loves change and creativity, I love to come up with new phrases and wacky quotes. Sometimes however, the quotes that have proven effective over time just cannot be beat. "Time flies when you're having fun" is without question a beautiful representation of the speed of this past week. We have been training in Indianapolis now for two weeks and while we are learning and growing each day, the wonderful staff and my adventurous teammates keep every minute fun.

On Monday, our team finished up the last couple of sessions from a conference called BLAST Off (Building Leadership And Strong Teams of State Officers). Yes, I do realize that we are not state officers, but we were blessed to be able to experience a preview of what next year's state officers will have the opportunity to experience. It was a great chance to get to know each other better, experience some fabulous leadership activities and learning, and really review who we are as individuals.

Tuesday morning was perhaps the most unique, interesting, fun morning in quite a while. We arrived at the center bright and early to receive some training on stress management and wellness (health). After talking about healthy foods, the importance of getting enough sleep, and taking a little time to relax, we embarked on a new journey. Yoga! Now growing up in a predominately rural community, yoga is not something I am extremely familiar with. After laughing at some of the crazy activities and breathing exercises on the videotape, I actually enjoyed at least attempting to learn this very different, but very relaxing activity. That night, our team went over to my mentor's house for some wonderful food. We decorated Christmas stockings, and had a great time laughing and joking with the Small family.

Wednesday was a great opportunity to spend some time shadowing different "teams" at the national FFA center. Basically, teams are decided by the role each person plays at the national FFA center. I was absolutely blessed to work with the Customer and Distribution Services Team in the morning and the Alumni and Administration team in the afternoon. It is amazing to see the true dedication of our national FFA staff. From the programs and website we love, to the stylish clothes we so proudly wear, we develop and grow because of the dedication they put into their work, their passion, everyday.

The following night, Amber and I had the chance to do something we had been immensely excited about. We attended a reception with the Danville FFA chapter and for members from the North Putnam FFA Chapter. We were blown away by how kind and fun each of the members were. Plus, they had Christmas M&M's™ and I love M&M's™. J Friday was a great day! In the morning, we had a meeting with the Chief Operation Officer, Mr. Bernie Staller, to discuss some of the new and exciting ideas, goals, and programs that are helping the FFA grow and improve. Friday afternoon was spent working with Foundation representatives on developing partnerships with Business and Industry.

The weekend was kicked off with an amazing lady, Mrs. Debbie Dodson. She trained us on the 52 universal virtues that make up a whole person. It was so evident through her training and looking back at my life, the people that truly do follow the "Golden Rule" are the people that are filled with true joy. Today has been a wonderful time to be able to attend Church and give honor and glory to the source of everything good in my life.

The words "Pay It Forward" are written at the top of this page. So many times, I hear students that are wanting to run for an office, or even the tremendous individuals that want to touch lives through the organization they love. Agriculture teachers say "I want to give back." I think that is fine and dandy. In fact, I applaud any person who is willing to turn back and give the love and support others gave them. However, I challenge myself, and I challenge you, to instead of paying back – pay your love, your faith, your abilities, and your friendship forward. We should all love just for the sake of helping another person. Maybe we can help another person carry something at school, spend time with your younger siblings, or cousins and really be a role model for them. One idea would be to volunteer to help out at a nursing home, or just simply write our teachers, parents, and friends little notes to let them know that we love them. What is so beautiful is that when we give, without the hope of anything in return, we give with a pure heart. When this happens, we help people more effectively than ever before. So pray for those in need, work to be a better role model for others to learn from, or dedicate yourself to be a better friend ... right now. You have the potential to help more people than you would ever realize. Let's get started.

December 2, 2001

"This Is It"

The words at the top of this entry are a pretty good summary of the excitement and joy in my heart as I write these words. It is hard to believe that God and my fellow FFA members have chosen to allow me to serve you this year in this capacity. I promise I will give every ounce of hope, heart, joy, belief and love to be the best servant and friend I can be. I promise to always give my best in every way to help this organization grow and develop. The reason I make this commitment is you, FFA members. You deserve the best from each person on our team. We truly believe that if you have a desire to help other people and an unrelenting faith in yourself that you can do amazing things in life. We have no doubt that through your friendship and giving the best you have to others, you will make a positive impact on our world.

After the election, thankfully, I was able to take some time and eat a big, juicy steak with my parents, Ronnie Simmons and his family, the delegates from Florida FFA and the members from my home chapter, Plant City FFA. The next day, our team started going through some extremely exciting training. We spent the next four days in Louisville just spending time together and working with national staff to establish some direction in how we really wanted to serve. Since convention, I have focused on finishing up my classes at the University of Florida and getting ready to serve our organization in the upcoming year. Also, I feel fortunate to be able to spend quality time with my family and friends. Through this, I have developed an even greater appreciation for how blessed I am in life. In addition, I had the chance to go to a Gator football game and even fly out to Texas to spend time with some of my friends out at Texas A&M (Gig 'em!)

Since November 25th, our team has been blessed with the chance to spend an immense amount of time together. We are having a blast just getting to know each other through the training we are so fortunate to receive. I have learned about Amber's true passion for the agriculture industry. I have been blessed by Robin's soft, kind heart. Elio has shared his love for the environment. Abbie has amazed me with her ability to share her thoughts in a way that really touches my heart. Dane has continually taught me about life through his ability to recognize the strengths of other people. We have had the opportunity to learn about the passions of our teammates through activities that each of us set up for the rest of the team. One night, we went out to Mr. Jim Armbruster's house (a national FFA staff member) and had a campfire, roasted marshmallows and even played

basketball. Also, on another night, we went Christmas caroling at a nursing home and at the homes of some of the FFA staff. I realized that while singing isn't a talent of mine, it is something our team loves to do together. Today, I had the chance to go to church and spend some quality time in my faith.

The title of this journal entry, "This Is It," is one of the eight "Crests of Leadership" that our team has had the pleasure of learning during our training. I am going to focus on a different piece of the crest for each of the following seven journals. I picked this one because it is easy to just coast through life, whether you are in middle school, high school or retired and working in the garden. It is easy to watch the actions and listen to the words of others and base our lives on what others are doing. I once saw a quote in the office of my high school that said this, "What is popular is not always right, and what is right is not always popular." I challenge you right now to look at your life. Are you basing who you are on what is right, or on what others tell you your life should be? Well, "This is it!" Right now is your time to make a commitment in your life to stop tolerating the fact that you doubt yourself. This is your chance to begin helping people, simply by being a friend. I challenge you, as others have challenged me, to stop accepting 'okay' and pour your heart out to give your best in everything you do.

Also, it is always important to recognize those that have impacted our journey through life. I would like to take a few lines and express my appreciation to a couple of people in my life. Over the past eight years, as God has blessed me to be a part of the world's greatest youth organization, my journey has been filled with positive experiences and encouraging teachers of life. Some of my experiences have been challenging, but with every defeat and every doubt, the joy of overcoming the difficulty fostered growth and development. Some of the teachers have been in the classroom, some older, some younger. Some of these amazing people will never know the impact they have had on my life. Without God's continual blessings and their support, I would have never had the opportunity to serve my biggest role models, my fellow FFA members in this capacity. First of all, I would like to thank my beautiful family. They have taught me about faith, love and selfless service. I would like to thank my friends – each of you has taught me about truly living life. I would like to thank my home chapter, Plant City FFA, for their belief and inspiration. Finally, I would like to thank God for his continual blessings in my life.

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April 7, 2002

A gold medal is a nice thing, but if you're not enough without it, you'll never be enough with it." - From the movie "Cool Runnings"

Monday and Tuesday were spent at the national FFA center doing a variety of things. Monday was filled with acting like I was going to throw Amber into a pond, wrestling with Robin and beating the mess out of her. She can SO not hang with me. J Then again, Robin is one of the sweetest people I have ever met, but that is NOT the point. Also, Robin and I figured out how she could make me do a back flip like people sometimes do while swing dancing. In the course of our learning, I was flung to the ground pretty hard a couple of times, but as evidenced by the fact that I whipped Robin, I am tough, so no big deal. Dane and I were changing shoes and my teammates were lying down on people's front porches that they did not know. Now, you are probably wondering, "What in the world is this weirdo talking about?" That is a valid question, but calm yourself because I will tell you why. We were modeling the new FFA merchandise for next year's catalog. While the models might not be all that "hot," the clothing certainly is. When that stuff comes out, I will be busting all up in the catalog with hopes of drying up my account. J

On Tuesday, I just got some work done and then went over to my mentor's house (Tony Small) for some mighty fine food. We had a blast looking at pictures of a trip to Russia that he took some of his FFA members on, and chillin' with Lindsey's (Mr. Small's cool, crazy, and sweet daughter) sheep.

On Wednesday, I flew to Idaho, got in really late, and went to sleep. J Pretty exciting, huh?

Thursday morning, however, kicked off the rest of a pretty crazy, and extremely awesome week. Idaho's state convention, kicked off with several CDE's in the morning. Throughout the next couple of days, I chilled with the Idaho FFA members. We screamed in the sessions and watched FFA members who worked so hard throughout the past year be recognized for their efforts. As I sat and watched those members that came in first and those that did not, a realization came to mind. I realized that when each of my fellow students walked off of the stage, they were not a

different person because they won or lost. In that moment, the Idaho FFA members taught me that life was not about a title, or an award. I was reminded through a discussion with Holly from the Castleford FFA chapter that there is more to a person than looks, money, or popularity. They are about character, hardwork, and caring for people.

When I read the quote at the top of this entry, I see the "gold medal" representing a lot in life. I think about the other 35 individuals that ran for national office. Regardless of who "won," each of us returned home to our families the same exact person we left as. Each of us returned back to our communities, to our friends, to the people around us with the same talents, integrity, and the ever-present opportunity to help people everyday by simply being a friend. At the same time, each of us, returned home with the same insecurities, doubts, and weaknesses as before. Regardless of whether or not we returned home with a title, while we had another experience behind us, everything that truly matters in our lives had not changed.

As I write this, I am asking myself the question, "What is a gold medal in life?" The only answer I can come up with is that it is different for every person. We all have our individual hopes and dreams. Each of us has "gold medals" that we would love to achieve. With state conventions and end of the year finals now upon us, it is important that we realize that while it is SO important to give our best in everything we do, it is even more important that we focus on our faith, our heart (whether or not it is filled with genuine love and appreciation for other people), our family, and our friends.

As the convention rolled on, I met members that just truly touched my heart, like Shane Stevenson. You see, Shane has an obvious love for people. He is extremely talented and Shane was running for state office. When the new team was announced, Shane's name was not called, but that does not take ANYTHING away from Shane's ability or opportunity to help people. Shane IS good enough without his "gold medal" because instead of focusing his whole heart on a golden medal, he focuses on life. Shane focuses on being a friend.

The convention wrapped up on Saturday. After cleaning up, I was fortunate enough to experience a fun-filled lunch with the retiring state officers and state staff. I spent the rest of Saturday getting some work done.

Sunday was basically gobbled up by flying back to Indianapolis for a couple days of preparation and training for the upcoming NLCSOs (National Leadership Conference for State Officers).

March 31, 2002

Alright ... a couple of announcements before we begin. First of all, I apologize about the fact that it has taken so long to get this journal entry done. You see, a couple weeks ago, something happened that created a little havoc. J My computer stopped working. Now, I am not talking about it was making funny gurgling noises, or the screen would only show the color pink, I am talking about the fact that it would not even turn on. So, when it comes time to recording thoughts, actions, events or feelings, it can be mighty tough to frustrating to type away on a computer that does not work. For that simple reason, I have elected to wait before typing it up. J In addition, if you have sent me an email and began to think that I do not like you at all ... STOP! Do not even let it cross your mind. Second of all, if you find or come across any quotes that really speak to you, please forward them on to me. Thank you! J

Now the past couple of weeks have flown by like you would not believe. The year is now in full swing for sure. The past couple of weeks have been filled with gosh, some amazing people that have brought tons of joy and growth into my life as well as those around us, wonderful conversations with students that choose to stop living life halfway. They have been filled with the laughter and smiles of teammates and friends from several states. Finally, the past two weeks have created memories and hopefully friendships that will last for years to come.

The first day was spent with the FFA members at Columbus High School in Iowa. The morning started out with a trip over to the elementary school to participate in the PALS program. Being right before Easter, we were going to have an Easter egg hunt.

Well, much like my computer not exactly wanting to work, we faced a very large obstacle in trying to reach our goal. This time, the problem was that when we wanted to take small children outside so they could run around and find the eggs, it was, like, 18 degrees. So we elected to have a silent hunt in the school hallway. J

After the hunt, we spent the rest of the day talking about teamwork, setting goals, and some of the opportunities we have as FFA members. We had a blast doing several activities and just had a good time getting to know each other. Also, we had a fish fry with some sure-enough-tasty corn on the cob. After we finished devouring several plates of food, my friend Mike and I got out our miniature hockey sticks and played our own version of hockey in the hallway. We finished the day hanging out, and then we were joined by members from a couple additional chapters for the final workshop. The day ended with a flight home and a big hug from my loving parents. J

The next five and a half days were spent with my family and friends. Gosh, it was a great time to be able to just chill a little bit, and see the people that have helped to shape my life. The first couple of days were just spent catching up on letters, assignments, and sleep. J On Wednesday, I drove up a couple hours north to my beloved college town of Gainesville. I spent the afternoon visiting with staff in the College of Agriculture. I am so blessed to be going to school there. While there is no question in my mind that I am LOVING this year, I cannot wait to get back to school at UF either. That night, I met up with 15-20 friends for dinner. We had a great time just catching up on what all has happened in the past couple of months. From finding out that one of my friends, Kyle, has changed his major, to learning that my college roommate, Henry, is probably getting married to one of my best friends' sister (Tate), it was wild to hear everything that was going on. After dinner, we went to the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) meeting on campus. FCA is one of my absolutely favorite parts of UF. The people that attend are some of the most joyful, sincere people I know. It was a true blessing to sing and pray with some of my closest friends and hundreds of people that, while we did not know each other, we were still able to share in the joy and fellowship. As we were singing, I realized how truly fortunate I really am to have friends in my life that care, friends that challenge me to become a better person.

Friday morning, we woke up to the joy of yard work. J My parents cracked the whip and we got some work done together. That afternoon, my family took a little trip over to the beach. It was great to relax, get some sun, play some volleyball, even though I almost got a black eye after being hit in the head with the ball, and finally get some sun on my always frail, but now pale body. J

Saturday was spent with all of my family coming over for a day of food, stories from recent events, and hearing about plans for the future. On of the funniest things that has happened for quite some time occurred when my Aunt Jo Beth was carrying my cousin Meredith's cake outside and forgot about the step down. As a result, she jerked wildly sending the cake flying off the porch, throwing it into the bushes and somehow managing to get some in her hair. We were all laughing so hard we could barely stand up. J

Finally, Sunday morning was spent in church celebrating Easter and the hope each of us have for the future. Easter is without a doubt, one of my favorite days of the year. After church, my family took me to the airport where I flew to Indianapolis for a fun-filled, pretty exciting day.

March 24, 2002

"My life is my message." - Ghandi

After a pretty relaxing, yet productive weekend in Washington D.C., our team geared up for three days of meetings, education, and the opportunity to share the message of FFA and the importance of agricultural industry. March 20th was National Agriculture Day, so we had the opportunity to be involved in some of the festivities leading up to and during the celebration. On Monday, we met with Freedom's Answer, an organization designed to encourage young people to vote. Our team is extremely proud to be not only serving our organization, but our country as we travel this year.

If you think about it though, it does not take a title to serve our country. Each and every one of us has the blessed opportunity to serve our country through everything we say and do. We serve the United States of America by working hard, by caring for

people and by showing our pride and patriotism in America. One of the greatest ways we can show this is by getting involved and deciding who is going to control how we live our lives. One of the greatest ways we can dishonor the men and women that have died fighting for the country we have today is to not take the time to simply cast our vote.

At the same time, I sometimes hear other young people grumbling about how our country is. Well, if you have a broken leg, you don't just keep on walking – you get the bad boy fixed. The same principle applies to any situation in life. If you want something to get done, well then, you get involved! Our team is very passionate about having the voice of our generation heard, but it starts with you and me. It starts with the message we live every day.

Later Monday morning, we met with several representatives from GLOBE. They are an education group specializing in Science Education. They are really pumped about partnering with FFA because of our commitment to Agriscience in our programs. Just a fun fact that I have learned this year, and one that you might want to share, is that 71% of our Ag Education programs have an emphasis on Biotechnology. Science is an extremely important facet of the agriculture industry, on all levels. After our discussion, our team left with a definite excitement about the opportunity for our fellow members to learn and grow through getting involved with GLOBE.

We journeyed over to the Hart Senate Office Building. We were very fortunate to meet with staff from Kansas Senator Sam Brownback's office. Senator Brownback is a former national officer and obviously an FFA supporter. We learned that almost everywhere in Kansas Senator Brownback goes, people recognize him. Those around him notice everything he says and does. His life is his message. The question is, does it take a title for people to notice what we do? Think about it ... has anyone ever thanked or scolded you for doing something you thought no one else knew about?

Whether we realize it or not, EVERYTHING we say and do is noticed by more people than we will ever realize. The way we live our life sends not only the message of who we are as a person, but it also sends a message of what other people should be. When we truly care about people, we not only convey our character and love for them, but we also help others feel the warmth and joy, and we make it easier for them to do the same for other people. At the same time, every wrong decision we make, whether it is drinking, cussing, cheating, talking about other people – it makes it easier for others to do those same things. While we may not have the title of "Senator," each of us do have the title of brother, sister, older cousin, or friend. I don't know about you, but I feel with all of my heart that those titles are, by far, more influential in the lives of those we love than a congressional pin could ever produce. Let us value the opportunity to serve people around us by living a message of character, forgiveness, appreciation, and faith.

At our next stop, our team was fortunate enough to be briefed by several of the staff members from American Farm Bureau. These individuals represent thousands of agriculturists across America that live the message of patriotism, commitment, sacrifice and persistence. The staff members we had the pleasure of meeting with were all examples of how each of us should strive to share the message that the agriculture industry is the most important industry in the world. While each of us are involved in agriculture in different ways, regardless of how far a person may feel, food is our most basic need. In effect, each of us depend on the agriculturists that supply the highest quality, most abundant, safest food supply in the world at the lowest cost (pretty big achievement if you ask me) and each of us need to do everything we can to help these hardworking men and women feed our world. While we are all involved in different ways, through our commitment to the agriculture industry we can share its message of benefit and necessity in our own unique way as well. J

Tuesday was spent at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Our team had the opportunity to mingle with some of the staff during a reception. We were all very impressed by the number of former FFA members leading our industry. After the reception we were able to meet with both the Deputy Secretary for the USDA, Mr. Mosley (number two in command) and as an unexpected treat, the Secretary of Agriculture, Ann Veneman. Both of these individuals really showed a strong belief and support for FFA and our programs. Besides the meetings, the real reason we spent the day at the USDA was to job shadow a staff member. I was absolutely blessed to spend my day with Mr. Gilbert Gonzalez in the Rural Development division. Mr. Gonzalez and I really connected and we spent our day sharing information about FFA and his division. However, throughout the day, our conversation constantly ventured to life, leadership and our faith. Mr. Gonzalez talked about his Christian faith being the

most important part of his life. He talked about how important it is for people to have faith in something greater than themselves. Mr. Gonzalez shared his message of faith and hope by moving from his home in Texas to take a job in Washington, D.C., only a couple months after September 11. He said that his faith gave him the strength he needed to follow his heart. I hope and pray that each of us can have faith in our life. Search for what you believe in. The road of life is tough. It is filled with potholes, detours, and well, some sure-enough-crazy drivers, but when we make our faith a priority and surround ourselves with people with the attitude, character and love that each of us should hope to have, we can truly begin to live life.

Wednesday morning we met with Mr. Little from the Farm Service Agency. Our next meeting involved a presentation. The coolest, but craziest part of this presentation was our audience. We had approximately 100 3rd-5th graders in the middle of the distinguished USDA buildings. It was National Agriculture Day, so our team (minus Elio) worked with two 4-H members to educate some of the inner-city youth about our industry. Our time with the students ended up being about twice as long as expected, so we began doing all sorts of activities. We played childhood games. I even taught a group of about eight students how to sing the Chili's® Baby Back Ribs song. We formed a small choir and went around the room singing for people. We had a blast! Our team has a very special place in our hearts for children, and we relished our opportunity to be with students we just adored, and to educate them about the agriculture industry as well.

Wednesday night, I flew to Texas to hang out with some of my closest friends. We had an absolute blast attending the Cattlemen's Ball and doing our best to bust a move. It was a great time to be able to reconnect with some of my closest FFA friends. In fact, one of my friends from California, Meghan, treated me to something special. I had the chance to see a home video of Dane when he was a state officer in California. He was his regular goofy self. The boy was absolutely cracking me up! J Another pretty cool event was that I worked out with one of my best friends, Britt Carter. Working out is cool and all, but now I can barely walk! I really need to start doing some squats with hotel TV's or something.

Sunday morning, I flew to Iowa to hang out with the FFA members from Columbus High School. Sunday night, about ten FFA members, the FFA Advisor, Mr. Kuehn, a parent, and I went over to Moline, Iowa for a Quad City Mallards Hockey game. Now, while hockey is increasing in popularity pretty fast in Florida, it is still Florida. Before this year, skating around on the pond out back seemed about as foreign to me as wearing a Florida State Seminole t-shirt. J I tell you all of this to supply some reasons why I have absolutely NO clue about hockey. This was my first game and I was absolutely pumped to be able to attend. I rode over with three students, Mitch, Junior, and Mike. We had an absolute blast making fun of Mr. Kuehn's driving, talking about racecars (yet another sport I know nothing about J), and just getting to know each other. Before the game, we toured a John Deere showroom and had the chance to hop up in some of the machinery. In addition, we walked over to another John Deere building and had the chance to take some pictures with the tractor John Deere is restoring to give a lucky FFA member at national convention.

Junior, Mike, and I each got a duck call from a souvenir shop and did our best to be the loudest people in the arena. I was truly blessed to be able to meet all ten of these students. Throughout the game, we cheered together and had some time to get to know a little about each other. After the game we grabbed some pizza and headed back to Columbus. Throughout the entire night, I was extremely impressed with each of my fellow members. They helped me see even more that our life is our message to the world. Some of these students faced some tough times in their lives, but they never allowed the difficulties to rule their lives. Michael talked about how a lot of the students in his school drank, but that he thought it was stupid and pointless. Michael showed the courage it takes to live life to the fullest each day. He showed me that even as a ninth grader, when you have the courage to stand up for what is right and you have the desire to do good things in life, you can do that as a friend and as a leader every day.

What message is your life sending to other people? Never doubt that people are watching you. Think about the people in your family. Think about the people in one of your classes. You know how a person is; you know if they truly care about other people, or if they do not. You know if they have the courage to be themselves, or if they are just giving in to the pressures we face as young people. What message do you want your life to send? Think about it for a moment.

May we live life every day sending a message of love, instead of hate. Let us show the

world that life is not about doing what other people are doing so we will fit in, it is about standing strong in character and caring, firmly believing in the potential we have every single day to help people, simply by being a friend.

March 17, 2002

An excerpt from John Maxwell's book Developing The Leader Within You: "Leonard Ravenhill in 'The Last Days Newsletter' tells about a group of tourists who were visiting a picturesque village. As they walked by an old man sitting beside a fence, one tourist asked in a patronizing way, 'Were any great men born in the village?' The old man replied, 'Nope, only babies.' Leadership is developed, not discovered. The truly 'born leader' will always emerge; but to stay on top, natural leadership characteristics must be developed."

The opening quote really cracks me up. I can just see some old man, hunched over in the barbershop with his corncob pipe. On top of its ability to make me laugh, it makes me think. This week I was so impressed with just how much the members at the Massachusetts State FFA Convention were willing to learn and grow. The students helped me see that while each of us have the potential to do some great things in our life, we have to be thirsty for leadership before we can live it. From Monday to Wednesday the Massachusetts FFA members showed courage and a desire to live life to the fullest.

On Monday, the convention started out with registration and immediately, Matt Lohr (from Virginia) and I began doing workshops. Students filled the room and taught each other about creativity and goal setting. It was apparent that the students knew, that if they would allow themselves to get out of their comfort zone and participate, they would have fun and walk away actually having learned something as well. The convention theme was "A Time To Remember" and man alive did the students bring this theme to life!

One way students challenged themselves, and apparently had a good time doing it, was by competing in the Career Development Events (CDE's). I had the privilege of watching several students in the Demonstration CDE. One important thing to realize is that each state decides what events to offer on the state level. While Florida has the Citrus Judging CDE, Alaska might not. J So while some states don't have a Demonstration CDE, Massachusetts has a very effective one.

Basically, the objective is to demonstrate something involved in agriculture. Some examples included grooming of a particular animal to micro-propagation. I was very impressed with the hard work the students put into their individual or team projects. Christina, from the Pathfinder chapter, made a fake horse that was five feet tall. Also, FFA members pushed themselves to get up in front of other students and present their demonstration despite the butterflies that might be ready to just explode from the belly region. J Lindsey and T.J., from Norfolk FFA, worked crazy hard in preparation, and while they did not walk away with first place, they walked away with pride in their hearts because they knew they did their absolute best.

Whether we were being crazy and enthusiastic at the sessions, cheering on the FFA talent or truly thinking about what our dreams were, the first day was filled with students showing that they were willing to do what it takes to become true leaders in their home and community. There were students like Matt and Rob that sat on their second story balcony and formed their own "welcoming committee" as they would say "hey" to every student that passed. Or a group of about ten members who spent their time between reflections and curfew talking to each other about their dreams.

With this convention being the first I had the chance to attend outside of Florida, the first day created a ton of excitement, but it was just the beginning. Tuesday began with three workshops. Students, like Kim, shared their goals about going to college. James told us about his hopes to grow his landscape business. More importantly, he talked about the specific steps he needed to take to accomplish his goal. Whether we were blindly drawing someone else's dream car, or watching a student balancing a broom in the palm of his hand we had an absolute blast.

During the time we were chilling in the workshops, other students were making their convention "A Time To Remember" by competing in the remainder of the CDE's and gearing up for the dance at the end of the night. That evening, they held their annual

Awards Banquet. As I sat through this banquet I was inspired over and over to see both those individuals that received awards and even more impressive the students I knew had competed that cheered for their so call "competitors" when their own name was not called. This reminds me of another John Maxwell quote that says, "You can love people without leading them, but you cannot lead people without loving them." This is so true. Anytime we begin to value an award or title more than the people around us, that is the moment we begin to lose focus of what life and leadership is all about.

After the banquet, we ran back to our rooms and met up again to bust a move on the dance floor. If there is one thing that is for sure, it is that the Massachusetts FFA knows how to throw a serious dance. J The floor was packed with people wanting to have some good, clean fun and meet some new friends at the same time. Finally, we calmed down and headed to our rooms after a crazy, busy, but fun two days.

Wednesday morning, we all watched the retiring addresses of their wonderful state FFA officer team: Dillon, Julia, Kevin, and Tim rocked the house all week. Not because they were the loudest, or the craziest, but because they helped all of us see that leadership is not about being seen, it is about being a true friend to people and doing everything we can to serve other people. After a ton of hugs and sad goodbyes we all parted ways and I headed off to North Carolina to join Elio and Mrs. Jan Ferris (National FFA Foundation) for a couple of exciting days of Business and Industry visits.

On Thursday morning, we went to Everex to learn about their involvement in the poultry industry. Everex specializes in the chicken industry, and I specialize in eating all kinds of meat, so we were a natural fit. J That afternoon, we headed to Aventis CropScience. We learned about their company and how they are being affected by the consolidation that is going on right now in the agribusiness industry. Finally, we ended the day at Carquest where we were impressed by a tour of their facility and their commitment to helping young people both through the FFA and through the Special Olympics. That night, I called a whole bunch of my closest friends just to let them know I love them. It was great to be able to talk to both family and friends to find out what is happening in their lives because well, I am just never there! J

After spending all day Friday at BASF, Elio and I headed to Baltimore. When we arrived we rented our car and drove to the other side of Washington, D.C. Elio did a great job of driving, but I kind of slowed the process down a tad when I steered us onto a road that took us an extra thirty minutes. Elio was nice though and did not beat me with his shoe (he is usually nice like that).

Saturday was a day to just get caught up on phone calls and work. We just relaxed and hung out. That night, Dane, Amber, Elio, and I (Robin and Abbie were out of town) went to see the new movie, "We Were Soldiers." While the movie was pretty gory, it was one of the best I have ever seen. It was so tough because the events in the movie were based on true events, and just to know that 58,000 American soldiers died fighting for freedom in Vietnam just tears me up inside.

Sunday was a wonderful day. I woke up and went to church at Fairfax Baptist. The past two Sundays I have not been able to make it to church because of travel, so this was just a true blessing. My faith is the rock on which I stand. So anytime I am able to learn more is a time I truly value. Regardless of the spiritual avenue you decide to take, I encourage you to grow in your faith and constantly search for what you believe. Life is tough, and being a part of something everlasting makes each day go a whole lot smoother.

Throughout high school, I would hear the word leadership all the time. People would say that I was doing a great job as a leader, but at a Florida Leadership Adventures conference after my tenth grade year, I realized that I was anything but a leader. Sadly, I saw myself as a leader simply because I held an office in my chapter. At the end of the conference, we were supposed to write a letter to someone that has impacted our lives. At the end of the activity, I received a couple letters from people that I looked up to, thanking me for helping them. After reading these letters, I realized that while I obviously had the potential to be a leader I had never made one conscious decision to do so. It is easy to view leadership as simply winning a CDE or

having a title below our name on our FFA jacket. However, leadership is not about popularity, looks, money, or titles. It is simply about making a serious decision in your mind that you are going to serve people in every way you can. At the same time, it is realizing that leaders just don't pop up out of nowhere – they develop, they learn, they grow each time they learn something new and each time they interact with people.

If you truly want to be a leader, then surround yourself with an environment where you can learn. For me, I learn about leadership in church and in everyday conversation. As an FFA member, each of us has a multitude of opportunities to learn about leadership at convention and conferences. If you are serious about improving your life and more importantly, learning how you can help others do the same, find your "great passions" (like we talked about in the last journal) and apply them to what you experience and learn at every single leadership conference you have the chance to attend. If money is the problem, talk to your advisor. Tell him or her that you know the only way to improve your leadership ability is to develop it. Go to businesses around your community and respectfully ask for their support. We have all heard the saying "where there's a will, there's a way." The way to becoming a leader takes commitment and a conscious decision, but the rewards over the rest of your life will far outweigh the challenge. Decide to become a leader, pay the price up front, and enjoy a rewarding and successful life because you will help others every single day.

March 10, 2002

"Only passions, great passions, can elevate the soul to great things ..." - Romans 12 :11

Much of Saturday morning was spent sleeping. After finally waking up, I plugged in my computer and began working on a variety of things. In addition to doing work, much of my mind was consumed with the Gator basketball game on TV. If you do not already know, I am a HUGE Gators fan. When I was in 11th grade I counted up my number of Gator shirts in my closet and found 26. Oh yeah, that's right! They are extremely stylish, you should buy one for yourself. J While I have calmed down in my craziness as a fan, my love of the Gators still shines through. After playing a tough game, my boys lost. While this is not cool, I had to move on because if I did not, Robin, Abbie and Elio would have driven on to Michigan without me.

The rest of the day was spent driving in some pretty serious snow to Cassopolis, Michigan. Our team spent the eight days at the Edward Lowe Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership. When we arrived, our team met with staff to discuss the schedule for the next week. Also, our team did the first of five individual reflection and team discussion times. "The Essence of Teamwork" was both the first and my favorite. We were asked questions like "What am I doing each day to serve my teammates?" After being asked these questions, I realized that there was no doubt in my mind that I was not giving everything I have to help my teammates.

I had been helping when help was needed, and I had been doing a decent job of being a good friend and teammate, but it became clear the only way to elevate our team to great things would be to have, and act upon, great passions, instead of filling a responsibility. Our team had a wonderful discussion until about 2 a.m. about what we could do better to serve each other. We used very open and honest communication to express both our appreciation and concerns. Each of us learned about areas where we could improve as a team member and friend, but no one's feelings were hurt at all because we realize that we are here to serve each other and every FFA member, not ourselves. We realized that having and carrying out great passions are not easy and take constant growth and dedication. At the same time, we realized that by tactfully sharing our concerns, we give each of our teammates the chance to improve. I was extremely proud of our team because instead of just saying we have great passions, we are truly beginning to live that passion.

The next two days were spent working on our keynote speeches and workshops for the state conventions we will be attending. Just knowing convention season is right around the corner is just driving us crazy with excitement. We are pumped! Also, our team did two more reflections together. The first reflection was "We all need constant reminders." We focused on what reminds us of why we are giving everything we have in the way of love and commitment this year. It was great to hear what excites my teammates. They are each a reminder of why I love the FFA with my whole heart. What is great is realizing that each person on our team is no different than any other FFA member. Every one of us sat in a classroom, developed an SAE, doubted

ourselves and experienced difficulty and defeat. With this, it becomes clearer and clearer that our organization can shape our lives if we can develop what our great passions are and begin to go for them with our whole heart. It is simply never settling for good, when you can be giving your best.

In addition to doing work, our team had some time to relax. On Monday night, Dane and I dropped Doug Kueker, one of last year's national officers off at the airport and picked up a good friend, Rozann Carter. Rozann spent a couple hours with our team eating some pizza and watching one of our team's favorite movies, "The Goonies." It was great to just kick back and do nothing but laugh. The second additional reflection was "What's next?" This was an absolute blast! We talked about what our goals were at the end of this year. For example, it was wonderful to hear about Dane wanting to maybe turn pro as a downhill skier. After thinking for several minutes, I realized I had several goals. I have decided to begin going to Sunday school instead of sleeping a little longer before church. I have also set the goal of getting involved again with the Special Olympics. Finally, I set the goal of being the first man to swim from Florida, all the way to Africa. Just kidding! J That would be quite the swim! One positive would be that no shark would want to eat my scrawny little body anyway, so maybe there is a chance.

Our final reflection piece was "The best is yet to come." Our team focused on how we are going to channel our great passion to help produce great things in our organization. We talked about our goals. We also discussed the fact that for anything positive to happen, we are going to have to be committed and ready to work hard. After a couple days of refining speeches and workshops, taking some time to refocus on our objectives this year, and three coaching sessions with our staff, we embarked on the second half of our retreat. We spent the rest of our time discussing the upcoming National Leadership Conferences for State Officers (NLCSO). The curriculum was written by a former National Officer and it is just plain AWESOME! Our team obviously gave some feedback about everything we loved and also some ways to maybe strengthen it a little. The rest of our time was spent creating a theme for the conference and tying our theme into the information and activities that are in place. I am not sure that the theme is public yet, but as soon as I know we can release it, I will do so. So right now, I am going to create the need to wonder what it might be. J

Finally, on Sunday, I headed to the Massachusetts State Convention. I will include everything about this adventure in next week's journal.

Our retreat was an absolute blast. It was great to have some time for our team to just relax and get some rest, but also to do some good work. We feel great about the commitment level of each person – both to our team and to every single member in our organization.

I would venture to say that each of us should ask ourselves what our passions are in life. Whether they are being a team member in sports, our faith, being a friend to others, our schoolwork, the environment, our animals, or our family. The second step we need to ask is if our level of passion in that area is great, or is it just there?

If you are cool with just living an average everyday life – that is one thing, but if you truly desire to be a great person who changes our world, well – it is time to examine what we are passionate about in life and begin working our hardest to do great things. Tiger Woods doesn't win major golf championships because he is lucky. He spends five or six hours every day practicing. Ministers do not help people understand life and their respective faith without learning first. If we want to be understood as a person of passion, we must first understand what our passions truly are. Then, with commitment in our everyday lives and asking for, not just accepting help from those around us, our great passions can elevate our soul and our lives to great things.

March 3, 2002

"Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

This week's opening quote might not fit the usual pattern of the typical, emotion-driven quote that we focus on. However, this week has helped me realize the important of channeling our thoughts, feelings, and passions – and then sharing them through our actions and words. In my opinion, one of the most important steps we can take in life is to speak and act directly from our heart. While I am still a very strong proponent of this, while visiting Business and Industry groups across the

Northeastern U.S., I have learned the importance of understanding a situation before trying to address it.

Elio and I were very fortunate to spend a week meeting with and expressing our appreciation to several companies that sponsor the programs we offer. Whether it is the American FFA degree, Career Development Events, Proficiency Awards, or Scholarships, someone provides both guidance and financial support for each of us to have that particular opportunity. In addition, Elio and I were able to meet with several companies that could possibly begin supporting FFA.

One of the coolest and most important parts of our organization is that we mirror what is going on in the agriculture industry. So one of the main objectives Elio and I had was to learn about their company. We would ask questions about their company, the issues they faced and their goals for the future. We would also ask questions about what qualities they look for in their employees. We got a variety of answers including ethics (strong morals and values), communication skills, the ability to work with other people, a willingness to grow and experience new things, and the ability to sing songs from movies written prior to 1950. Just kidding about the last one! J

After learning about their company, Elio and I would begin connecting what we learned to the FFA. For example, if they talked about ethics, we would mention our Code of Ethics. Also, we would share our organization's commitment to healthy lifestyles. It was extremely important to understand before pouring out information. Elio and I were fortunate enough to meet with several companies like Campbell's soup, Schrade knives, and the Philip Morris Youth Smoking Prevention program. Elio, Jana Jaure (who is a National FFA Foundation staff member and our boss for the week), and I had an absolute blast driving through the Northeast. Whether Elio and I were scaring Jana as she walked through a dark hallway in an almost empty hotel, or trying to eat our pieces of cheesecake that would fill up a small suit case, we definitely worked in some fun into our schedule of meetings.

On a different note, on Thursday, Jana, Elio, and I were in New York for a series of meetings. After our meetings wrapped up, we hopped on the subway and headed to the Financial District. Last May, I was very fortunate to drive from Washington, D.C. to New York with two of my friends. While we were in the city, we decided to go to the observation deck of the World Trade Center. We marveled at just how enormous these two buildings were. We were in awe of a city where people from all nations, from all backgrounds, with different hopes and dreams come together to discover and grow. On Thursday, my mind raced with awe at these very same people who came together to clean up a seemingly insurmountable amount of debris. I was inspired to see the actual heroes of our country still working together, tirelessly to help their city and our country recover. At the same time, my heart was torn with the memory of planes crashing violently into the buildings where thousands of people worked. My heart was broken to see nothing where the very place of vibrant thought, business, and life once stood proud and almost indestructible. With thoughts and emotions filling my brain, it amazed me that nothing, not a word, could leave my mouth. It seemed impossible to comprehend both the destruction and power of hate, and the reasons their cowardly hatred developed.

It is the times like these when we just don't understand the things that happen in our lives that cause us to think. When we ask ourselves why something happens, instead of just taking life exactly how it is, we begin to discover a world of understanding. Finally, we can begin to ask ourselves the question, "What can I do about this to help?" Think about the toughest time you have faced. Did every person you interacted with know? Is it possible that you hurt someone's feelings? Instead of punching the lady behind the counter who seemed to be rude, we can ask the simple question "How are you doing today?" Instead of just telling a friend, "Oh, everything is going to be fine," take the time to listen. Instead of just spouting out advice seek first to understand.

People don't frown for no reason, and people are not mean because they are truly happy. We never know what is person is going through at any given moment. At the same time, we never know the potential we have to help others if we would only take the time to care and to understand what that person may need. Think about the toughest time you have faced. Did every person you interacted with know? Is it possible that you hurt someone's feelings? Just like Elio and I needed to find out what situation each company was in before offering our thought, let us always do that with both the people and challenges in our life. It is easy as a friend, and as a leader, to just begin tossing out ideas and thoughts, but sometimes we can help our chapter, our friends, our family more by listening, by understanding, and then acting upon the

situation with our whole heart.

February 24, 2002

"You cannot overestimate the unimportance of practically everything."

I hope that your FFA Week was a huge success. I hope you and your chapter members had an absolute blast sharing the message that FFA is changing lives. Whether your chapter did a community service project, cooked for members in your local community, took advantage of the opportunity to recruit new members in your school, or had your own Olympics "FFA style," continue the fun and excitement into all of your FFA activities. Don't just let the relationships that you have built with the people in your community fade away until next year.

I was fortunate enough to be able to spend my week in the state of Minnesota. Throughout the week, I had the chance to spend time with FFA members from across the state. In addition, along with two of the state officers, Mamie and Ida, worked with Business and Industry individuals. We visited several businesses with the hopes of learning about the current state and the future direction of the agricultural industry. We had the opportunity to thank them for their constant support, to share an update about what is going on in FFA, and finally, to create and strengthen relationships between the FFA and our leaders in Business and Industry.

After arriving in Minnesota, I had the chance to hang out with several of the Agricultural Education Club members at the University of Minnesota. We tried our best to chomp down a six-foot sub, but we just could not quite do it. I was very fortunate to be able to hang out with several of the members the entire week. Whether we were getting to know each other at the reception or hanging out with some of the wonderful guys at the Alpha Gamma Rho house, I was very impressed with these incredibly dedicated, caring individuals.

The first actual FFA event was a pancake breakfast at the Kenyon-Wanamingo FFA Chapter. I had an incredible time with my fellow FFA members cooking pancakes, meeting some of the FFA chapter's supporters in the school and community, and well, you know, eating those mighty tasty pancakes, sausage, and bacon! The students showed me their brand new greenhouse and I even had the chance to spend some extra time with some of the students finding out all of the exciting things that are happening in their lives and in their FFA chapter.

The next morning was some pretty crazy stuff. On Thursday of the 2001 national convention, I played hackysack with a couple of really cool FFA members from Minnesota. Well, when I get to the Agriscience Academy in Minneapolis, the very same FFA members were my tour guides! I could not believe it, but we had the chance to hang out and just really talk a lot about life with the entire FFA chapter. This was a wonderful example of how extraordinary the opportunity we have to meet fellow members from different places truly is. Please take advantage of each opportunity to meet people everywhere you go. The unique talents and experiences other people have are quite possibly the greatest opportunity we have to learn in life. After our meeting, we grabbed some lunch and played another game of hackysack. Overall, we had a blast hanging just getting to know each other.

The second FFA Chapter I was able to visit was the Dassel-Cokato chapter. We had a blast just chilling in the classroom getting to know each other, laughing, and sharing stories. In addition, the FFA chapter did a wonderful job organizing an all-school assembly. This was a wonderful chance to share the FFA with the entire school and at the same time, hopefully, to help all of the students gain a new perspective on leadership. That afternoon, I went with a good friend of mine, and a consultant for the National FFA Board of Directors, Mr. Chuck Stranberg and an extremely sweet FFA member, Kris Shultz, to a local radio station where Kris is employed, to do an interview about the FFA and all of the excitement caused by National FFA Week.

After Mr. Stranberg and I left the radio station, we headed out to this lake. Now you have to realize that one time when I was twelve I got extremely pumped because it got cold enough at my house for there to be a layer of ice on my dog's drinking water that was about one quarter of an inch thick. Now this was quite a different/scary experience for a little boy from Florida. I mean, I have never done anything like that in my life, but it was an absolute blast! We took this tool called an auger and drilled an actual hole in the ice. This was an experience I will never forget.

The next morning, FFA members came from across the state for "FFA Day" at the state capitol of St. Paul. It was a blast to just hang out and get to know some really awesome people and to see them begin to educate others about the FFA and the life-changing experiences we gain. That night, I was fortunate enough to be able to go to the Princeton FFA Chapter. We spent a couple hours working with each other in teams and talking about the importance of working together as a team instead of a bunch of different people headed in different directions. I was amazed at everything the Princeton FFA chapter was doing to give their absolute best while working together to accomplish a team goal. While this visit was terrific, I was a little sad when it came time to leave because I knew this was the last chance I had to hang out with fellow members in Minnesota.

Overall, this week was truly wonderful. In addition, I had the opportunity to work with two of the state officers, Mamie and Ida, along with the Minnesota FFA Foundation Director, Ms. Val Arsvold, and to visit with several business and industry representatives. Now, I am a person that just gets so pumped when talking about the FFA, I have a tendency to want to bombard people with thoughts, ideas, some of the excellent programs that help our students, and ways our two organizations can partner. One of the most important steps I had to take was to narrow my thoughts down to only the most important parts.

As I really got to thinking about this, there was a realization that this is the same thing in life. It is so easy to get caught up in everything that is going on around us that we find ourselves spinning in circles that seem to restrain us from truly living our life. It is so easy to get caught up in exactly what grade we get in each class, how others feel about us, and making sure that we are constant busy, that we can lose sight of what is truly important in our lives. That is why I have included this excerpt from a wonderful book on leadership and life by John Maxwell.

"You cannot overestimate the unimportance of practically everything."

Developing The Leader Within You:

"I love this principle. It's a little exaggerated but needs to be said. William James said the art of being wise is the "art of knowing what to overlook." The petty and the mundane steal much of our time. Too many are living for the wrong things. Dr. Anthony Campolo tells about a study in which fifty people over the age of ninety-five were asked one question: "If you could live your life over again, what would you do differently?" It was an open-ended question, and a variety of answers constantly reemerged and dominated the results of the study. These three answers were:

- *If I had it to do over again, I would reflect more.
- *If I had to do it over again, I would risk more.
- *If I had it to do over again, I would do more things that would live on after I am dead."

What is exciting is the fact that we have the opportunity to choose what is most important in our life. The difficult part of that is the fact that what we decide is the most important part of our life determines how we live our life. One of my favorite leadership and life quotes that has helped provide direction in my life is Matthew 6:21, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart will be." Truly ask yourself what is really important in your life. What is going to continue on after we leave the FFA, and even more importantly, when we leave this earth? Maybe it is your faith. Maybe it is your family. Maybe it is the opportunity that each of us has every single day to help other people, simply by being a friend. Regardless of what you set your heart on to be, keep it always with you in your heart.

After we establish what is the foundation of our life, the next extremely important step is to live life the best possible way we can. Instead of focusing on exactly what to say, we should focus more of speaking straight from our heart. Instead of focusing on the end grade in our class, we should commit to giving our absolute best. Instead of beating ourselves up over mistakes we have made in the past, we can realize that that people know when we are giving life everything we have and moving on from there.

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**The 2001-2002 National Officer Journals****Barrett Keene**

2001-2002 National FFA Southern Region
Vice President

E-mail: bkeene@ffa.org**Where I'll be this week:**

Indiana

August 25*"He who loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver..." - Ecclesiastes 5:10*

The summer is beginning to fade away. The leaves are about to start changing (unless you live in central Florida like me) and the temperature is about to drop (some places faster than others). It is almost time for the Florida Gators to start playing (I know you are as pumped about that one)! And finally, national convention is coming up mighty fast. Man alive, this is a time to be pumped. It is time to get concert tickets and, if you are anything like my sisters, start deciding what to wear to school for the next month. The big kicker though, is that finally, after a boring summer of relaxation and fun, we get to have homework again! Goodness gracious, this is a cool time.

Everything in my life has been wonderful. My family is doing wonderful and my friends are still not making fun of me a lot. Amber Haugland has agreed to stop beating me up. Robin Niehaus is still dishing out hugs like crazy. I am still whooping up on Abbie. Elio is letting me borrow a cool book called "Traveling Light" by Max Lucado. And Dane, well, he is having a blast impersonating the butler from our favorite new movie, "Mr. Deeds." In short, our team is doing great.

The last journal entry wrapped up with a trip to the Arkansas State Convention. After leaving Arkansas, I headed to the big city of Washington, D.C. I was only in Washington for two nights, but I would have been willing to give my little sister's car to have stayed longer. One of my favorite things to do in FFA has always been to attend leadership conferences. Every FFA conference I have ever been to has shown me ways that I need to grow and the steps I need to take to grow into the best leader and friend I could be. Three summers ago, I went to the Washington Leadership Conference. Well, this year, I had the chance to hang out for a while again. We toured some of the coolest sights in D. C. That night I had the chance to speak at both of the hotels and meet some more pretty cool people. I met Kim and Shellie from Texas. These girls were absolutely cracking me up. Also, I met several members from the Tomball FFA Chapter in Texas.

I had the next six days off, so I decided to be crazy and fly out to New Mexico to surprise my girlfriend at her family's ranch. I was really pumped and Britt's brother was going to be waiting for me at the Amarillo airport. While I was sitting at the gate in Dallas, I put on my headphones and jammed out to some music while I was typing some e-mails, and I completely missed my flight I didn't hear the gate agent announce the boarding and I was only about 25 feet away. When Chase and I finally arrived, Britt was completely surprised. The next six days were filled with bull riding, breaking wild stallions and roping everything that I could. Okay, so none of that is actually true. I did however rope multiple fence posts and I even rode a horse...YEEHAH! Who's the man...I say Cowboy Barrett! That's who. We had a blast and Britt's grandfather Hosse (one of the coolest people in the world) let me help work the cattle. He even let me brand a couple times. I messed a couple up pretty bad, so I decided to leave that to the experts.

In addition to my cowboy festivities, I also dabbled a little in the game of basketball. Now at New Mexico's state convention, I began to talk trash with a FFA member from Clayton FFA. Her name is Nyla McNaughten and she is some kind of good on the basketball court. In fact, I went to a girl's basketball game at her high school two Christmas' ago and I still remember my girl Nyla whooping up on people. Well, after running my mouth at convention, the time finally arrived to walk the walk. So, I showed up with a healthy lunch of Sonic chicken fingers, fries and a milkshake and we went to town. Nyla pretty much whooped me all up and down the court, just draining shots left and right. Our games would come down to the last couple of points and the pressure was on, but almost every time she would fire up the net because she was cooler than the other side of the pillow (if you watched Sportscenter, you would have some cool phrases like that too). After a little R&R, some work a "Top Hand", some not so dominating b-ball and catching up on some work I headed out to Nebraska.

The next two nights, Abbie and I went over our notes for the National Leadership Conference for State Officers (NLCSO). There was a roller-skating rink two buildings from where we were staying (and I love roller skating...yeah, it is a little weird, I know), but we were successful in fighting off the urge and getting some work done.



After a couple days in Lincoln, I headed down to Orlando for the Florida State Convention. Now, I am just going to lay it down on the line, I love Florida FFA members. This year I have been missing them pretty bad. I was stoked about going to the state convention; however, there was a problem. A couple months before convention, the really cool golf and tennis resort our convention was held at for about 10 years shut down. When this happened, the dates for convention moved back a week. This is all cool and dandy, except that I was only able to be at convention until registration officially began. Tons of chapters arrived early, so it was great to be able to see and catch up with tons of my friends. It was so neat to see members that were in middle school when I was in FFA, assuming leadership roles. The FFA members from Pine Ridge FFA invited me over for some mighty tasty chicken and rice. One of my best friends and fellow state officers, Jimmy Elfish, is from Pine Ridge so I have been blessed to spend tons of time with some of the most caring, talented members in our state.

After a really cool day with my fellow Floridians, I headed back up to Nebraska to get ready for NLCSO. Seven state officer teams from the Midwest all came together in Nebraska kick the year off right. The theme for this year's conference was "Creating The Wonder." The conference centered on two main parts, workshops and teamwork. The conference was filled with hilarious and inspirational memories. There were times like getting crazy on the basketball court. Most of my shots were horrible, but chilling with friends like Matt from Iowa, Chris from Nebraska and wild man Dan from Kansas were some of the coolest times this year. There were crazy times as the officers presented their workshops to the group. Goodness gracious, if you are from the Midwest, be aware that it might get crazy when your state officers come to town. Also, on the last night, most of the state officer team participated in a karaoke contest. Abbie and I were literally almost falling out of our chairs in laughter at the acts that were being presented. Iowa won first place and took home the traveling trophy, which was a cow bone (I am really being serious, a cow bone). There were also the inspirational moments like sitting in on reflections with the Minnesota officers and hearing my friends talk about what they were going to do to SERVE their fellow members over the next year. I was big time motivated to hear some of the goals and hopes for the next year. As I said earlier, leadership

conferences rock.

After tons of hugs and getting hooked up with a Nebraska Huskers T-shirt by the Nebraska crew (I think they are still moaning about the fact that I wear a K-State Wildcats shirt upon occasion as well), Abbie and I headed for the airport. My parents picked me up at the airport. Over the next three days, my schedule was empty. I slept, ate and played some basketball with my good friend Jimmy. We had a blast. About halfway through what turned out to be a two and a half hour game it started pouring. Being extremely tough and manly (obviously) we kept right on playing and had a blast doing it.

After a couple days with family and friends, I headed up to upstate New York to meet Abbie for the second NLCSO. Now, I have always heard that New York is a pretty cool state, so I went up a little early to check it out myself. I walked off the plane about 11 hours before Abbie was scheduled to arrive, so I hopped in our rental car and drove three hours one-way to Niagara Falls. Whoa. Talk about a waterfall Niagara Falls was incredibly impressive. I watched a short movie from PBS or something and found out some cool information for us. Niagara Falls was created during the Ice Age. Don't e-mail me with questions about how this happened because that was not in the video. There is one mile of rapids that lead up to the actual falls. The water falls 170 feet. The water itself is gorgeous, but as a whole it is awe-inspiring. One-fifth of the fresh water in the world goes through these falls. I was kind of dumb and dropped my cell phone over the fence, but it landed on a grassy ledge right about the river on the Canadian side. Being the wild man I am, I hopped across the fence, and grabbed my cell phone without falling (Thank God!!!).



The next morning, Abbie and I headed north to Camp Oswegatchie. The land in upstate held up to the rumor of being beautiful. After a couple hours, we pulled into Camp "O" and set up for the conference.



While setting up, we met a FFA member from the John Bown FFA Chapter in New York City. Victor helped us move tables, set up materials and taught us some of the slang from New York. Victor also shared his experience of being in the city on September 11. The rest of the afternoon was spent setting up, taking care of details, and marveling at just how beautiful Camp "O" is. The camp is on about 1,200 acres. There are lakes and huge evergreen trees all over the place.

NLCSO began with some wild and woolly workshopoly (FFA's version of Monopoly). The conference was filled with crazy times like the game show "Let's Make a Deal" and the Camp "O" staff organized a karaoke contest for the officers, similar to the one in Nebraska. I still cannot get over some of the costumes worn from everything from "Men in Black" to "Summer Loving."

In addition to the actual conference, there were several other events that are unique to the Camp Oswegatchie NLCSO. One example is the flat out awesome low and high ropes courses they have there. We were busting up on all sorts of acts like the flying squirrel and the zip line. It was a fun and challenging opportunity for the state officer teams to develop some teamwork skills. The second event that was completely unique to Camp "O" was a peculiar initiation conducted by a certain swamp man and his two little helpers in front of the entire group. They had Abbie, Linda Burke from Massachusetts and I doing some pretty whacked out stuff, but it was all in good fun. After we wrapped up with the conference, Abbie and I made our way back to the airport, even though it took us about seven "U" turns to get where we needed to go.

Thankfully, the airplane pilot taking our flight to South Dakota was a much more efficient driver. Now, I mentioned at the beginning of this entry that attending leadership conferences has always been one of my favorite parts of being a FFA member. Well...if you think about it, every place I have talked about so far has been a different leadership conference. In other words, this whole stretch has been one mighty fine party.

Every party seems to get better at the end. Fireworks shows have a grand finale; the dance at the Florida convention this year even featured a small after party dance session for some of the teachers. This trend of exciting ended is not so coincidentally involved in this journal entry. The East River South Dakota Alumni Camp was one serious bang. Gosh, the people in South Dakota are just as nice as can be. . I met people like Eric, who encouraged me like you wouldn't believe. Eric was always building people up. I met people like Noelle. Noelle was one of the sweetest people I have met all year. We talked about character and how that character is the most important thing for a person to have. Noelle helped remind me that when we live our lives with a caring heart, integrity in making the right choices, and excellence in always pushing ourselves to grow, we can become a leader of character.



On another note, I give tons of props to the state of South Dakota for the extremely high number of Florida Gator fans they have. Don't get me wrong, South Dakota FFA's enthusiasm and genuine kindness causes me to absolutely love them, but the whole Gator thing, well that bumps it up a couple notches. It was so cool to be able to spend time in the small groups and listen to members share their goals. It was also awesome to watch the South Dakota State Officers and see how much they truly care about people. Their team is made up of leaders, in other words, people that want to serve others with their whole hearts.

I love the verse that is at the top of this page. Silver is used here to represent material possessions. It is saying that if we get so concerned with the amount of money we have, what we have is never enough. We could one day be making \$50,000 a year and because of the fact that there is more money to be made, set our sights on \$75,000 a year. Then we look at look at our boss, neighbor, friend, or sibling who makes more and we continue to sacrifice time from our family, our faith, to make more. The same thing holds true in anything. I am no different. Right now, I am at home. I sold my car earlier this year for the simple reason that, well, I am never home. So, right now I am looking for a new car to drive. Now after having a quick, sporty car, as I glance through all of my options I find myself saying, "Well, you definitely need something better." I begin narrowing my options down to a Camero Z28, a Mustang GT, a Grand Prix GTP, or a Jetta, but it has to be at least a six cylinder. Then today, right before I started writing this journal I realized just how foolish all of this stuff really was. Who cares what car I drive? Who cares how fast it is? Who cares if it is better than the last? I was allowing myself to get caught up in the ever-growing cycle of silver. I was loving a car, something that will eventually break down, stop working and rust, when I should have been loving things that were much more important. Take a moment and think about the thing(s) in your life that you have been placing more value on than you need to. Would it matter more if you lost your car or your parent? What matters more, a teddy bear you were given as a small child, or the necklace in the jewelry store you would "die" to have? So many times we get so caught up in frivolous parts of life and every time we do, they drag us farther and farther away from where we need to be. As I think about it though, we have a beautiful opportunity. While this principle applies every time to a material possession, regardless of whether it is a house, a boat, clothing, a bank account, or a car, it also applies to thing that DO matter in life. If we truly love someone, then we constantly want his or her lives to be better. The cool thing about it is that when we have TRUE love and compassion in our hearts it does not matter who a person is. We are obviously more attached to those we have grown up with, but when we have true love, it pains us to see others hurting. When we have true love for people, we would give anything to bring joy to their heart.

When I reflect back on every leadership conference I have ever been to, I can never recall being taught about the importance of a V8 engine, but I do remember goal setting. I cannot quite recall being taught the proper ways to wear jewelry so I can look good, but I do remember learning about ways to make others feel good by lending them a helping hand.

The love of silver, the love of things (that is all they are) that will stay here when we leave this world is a battle each of us face in our own way. The worst thing we can do though, is to continue living a life where the number of zeros in our account is more important than the number of lives we have touched though our love for them. Please join me in the internal fight to replace a love a dependency on things with a love for all people. May we never be satisfied with the love we share with our fellow man.

August 11

"For change to happen in any community, the initiative must come from the individual."-
The Dalai Lama

Have you ever seen a really fast car drive past you? Have you ever kept your eyes constantly looking straight out a car window as the telephone poles whip by? Have you ever raced a turtle?...or how about one of your grandparents? If you have done any of these things, then you know exactly how I am feeling about this year right now...fast!!! It is flying by and I am loving every minute of it. Our team is doing wonderful. My family, well they are just mighty cool. My friends are just waaay too nice to me. Florida Gator football season is only 20 days away! I took a nap today. I mean, I am doing GREAT.

This quote comes from a book the Dalai Lama wrote about compassion and love. Now, I am not Buddhist, but I AM down with some love and compassion. Reading the book was actually a really cool chance to read about something important from a different perspective. This particular sentence just really stuck out to me. It actually reminded me of Reflections at last year's National Convention. One of the coolest parts of the program was that throughout the audience would shout, "It starts with me!" Now, I am pretty sure the Dalai Lama (who is the religious leader in Tibet) was not at last year's convention, but I bet if he was, he would have been shouting this line at the top of his lungs right along with us.

Gosh, it just never ceases to amaze me how many FFA members are bringing this philosophy to life everyday. In the last journal, the last place we hung out was in Puerto Rico. After leaving the rain forest and salsa dancing of Puerto Rico, I had the chance to have some fun in the home of some massive cornfields and of course, the "Alligator dance." If you have not guessed yet, I am talking about Nebraska. Now Nebraska is a pretty cool state, but I was fortunate enough to hang out in THE place to be...The Leadership Center in Aurora. About 200 FFA members came together for a couple days of craziness and learning at the Chapter Officer Leadership Training (COLT...because that is just way too long to be typing more than once). The state officers did an around the world theme and the whole group split up into smaller groups that went with one state officer. Throughout the week, I bounced around from group to group just chillin' and having some fun. During the time we were hanging out in small groups, the students taught me all about tanking (where you put a big cow water trough in a river and float down), we played duck, duck, goose, we talked about how leadership is influence and tons of other cool stuff. During free time, we played slow pitch softball. The first day I went 0 for 3 (that is pretty pitiful). Of course my pride would not allow my horrible showing to be the end, so I played every chance we had. My good friend Anita Estes and I talked about our faith and had a good time laughing about life. I got whooped pretty bad by lots of people in Ping-Pong...no big deal. I am tough.

During the dance though is when it got crazy. Now I had been hearing all about this "Alligator Dance" all stinking weeklong. Finally, the song "Taking Care of Business" came on and all these people start clapping, then slapping themselves, then slapping the ground, then rolling around on the floor, then kicking the air. Then doing it over and over again. Now obviously, I had to hop on in, but I must say, those are some wild and wooly people in Nebraska. Even cooler than traveling through the continents, dancing up a storm, and talking about tanking was hanging out with some of my new friends. One of the other students at the conference was a guy named Thomas. From the moment I met Thomas there was no question that he was a pretty cool cat. His nickname was "T-Bone" and while Thomas tried to act tough, I could see right through his toughness to a pretty cool heart. It didn't matter what was happening, Thomas was constantly trying to get other people involved. Sometimes when others would say something to put Thomas in

the spotlight, he would turn it to other people. It was clear that Thomas had all the potential in the world to really become a true leader.

The cool thing is though, each and every one of us have the potential to be a true leader. Our states don't have to elect us to state office. Our chapter does not have to elect us to chapter office. The thing it DOES require though is a decision in your heart. That week Thomas made a decision that he was going to clean some things up in his life because he knew that they would hold him back from helping people. Thomas began to look at life not worrying so much about how people felt about him and more how people felt about themselves. That is what matters. Who cares if a person likes our hair-do, do they like who they are as a person. Thomas knew that he was sick and tired of people picking on others for the way that they looked, but he did not just complain about it. Thomas changed his life and by doing that begins to change each of the communities he is in, his family, his friends, his school. Thomas said, "It starts with me."

After leaving Nebraska, I headed back home for a couple days. After getting off the airplane in Tampa, my mother and I stopped by both of my sisters' jobs to surprise them with a big hug and a kiss. Before we stopped at my older sister's, my mom and I grabbed some Cuban food. One of my favorite meals in the whole wide world is deviled crabs and black beans and rice. The only problem is, this combo tastes and smell good, but does a number on my breath. So hear I am chillin with my big sis' Jessica. We are hanging out in her office with a whole bunch of people I don't know. I go to hug her and she just busts out with "Boy...you have some bad breath." Man alive! Everybody is laughing...except me. Gosh, sisters, all the time just treating you so bad. If you are, or if you have a brother you already know what a blessing brothers' are. Okay, okay, so maybe we can aggravate somebody every great once in a while. I tell you this because being away from my sisters this year so much has really helped me see how blessed I really am to have them in my life. Even if your sibling is annoying you, or embarrasses you in front of people you don't even know!...just hug them and be thankful for the blessing they are in your life. Every night, I thank God for my little sister Jaime and my big sister Jessica. They are sometime aggravating, but beautiful people.

The next night, my parents and I drove down to Sebring to see my cousin Meredith graduate from high school. It was so awesome to be able to see her graduate and take the next step in her life. Meredith is, no kidding, an all-world athlete, she was senior class president, homecoming queen, she is going to be a college cheerleader, and she is an honor grad. I mean, she just rocks the house. On top of that, she received the only two awards given out that night because of her love and compassion in her community. See, the awards and accolades that Meredith receives don't mean nearly as much to her as each person she meets. When Meredith gave her speech that night, none of her speech focused on herself. She talked about the class' times together and challenged each person to be a true leader in life. Meredith impacted the lives of people all across her community because she is a true leader, a person that cares.

The next night, I went with my little sister, Jaime and my best friend Chris to a boxing match in Tampa. The place was crowded and crazy, but we had a blast. We were seated right behind the family section and Chris and I would start chants for boxers we didn't even know. We were going crazy. I even got up into the ring and boxed twice. Okay, that is not the truth. If that was the case I would probably have not gone back out on the road, per a doctor's request. The next day was just a chance to be able to go to church, pray, relax, play basketball, and do some serious eating...enough said. After a couple days of hanging out at my house, I boarded a plane headed for Kansas. I arrived two days before the convention started so I could hang out with the state officers and the state officer candidates before everything got started. The first time we all got together was for a luncheon with some of the leaders from Kansas State University. Now I went to a couple gatherings during the convention and from the first one, to the last, I was amazed at just how much the people loved the KSU crown rolls. Basically, the crown roll is a big ol' honking cinnamon roll. I mean, they were devoured and people were actually debating about who got to take each of the extra ones home. I can't say I blame them though, crown rolls are pretty tasty. Anyway, the state officers from Kansas last year are some pretty cool people. Several of the officers were good friends with some of my friends from Florida so we joked a lot about that. Plus, I was big time impressed with how sincere and cool the candidates were. Before the reception, I hung out with these two guys from the Winfield FFA Chapter, Dan and Craig. They were some pretty cool cats and we will talk more about them in a little bit.

The next day, my boy Dane flew in and the convention kicked off. So there was some definite craziness and fun times in my life. It was really cool being able to hang out and meet students from the cool state of Kansas with Dane. The first night, Kansas FFA rented out the Manhattan Mall and filled the place with FFA members. There was a big section in the center that was cleared out and turned into a mighty crazy dance floor.

Now, the convention had not even started, so I did not really know anyone and no one really knew me. I had a blast just sitting down with a random group of people and hanging out. They would ask me tons and question and I would give them honest, but crazy answers like, "I am from the Plant City Chapter," "Oh, Plant City is southeast of here a pretty good ways," "I am the only person here from my chapter," "My advisor didn't even come." Some would figure out that I was an officer, but most wouldn't. It was just really neat to just hang out with people.

I sat down with these twins and started talking. Their names were Michael and Mitchell. We were having a good time eating some pizza and talking about football, and Mitchell said, "I saw you in New Horizons with the shark acting crazy!" We started laughing and then I realized they were the younger brothers of Michael Burns, one of the state officers in Kansas. The whole week in Kansas, Mitchell, Michael and I hung out tons just laughing, being crazy, and having a good time. Later in the week, Dane and I had the chance to meet some of the members from the Winfield chapter. They invited us to dinner and our time together ended up being one of the coolest times of this year. There was John Wait, who had inspired everyone in his chapter to say "Ahhhhhhhh" and lean back everytime a person says, "wait" in a sentence. John also told me a pretty crazy story about when he was trying to do a trick with the seatbelt in the chapter van and got hung up in it so bad he could barely move. There was Dustin, a cool kid who in the ninth grade has already set the goal of helping people one day as a state officer. I was fortunate enough to meet Brady, a ninth grader who is proud to say he gets bucked off of horses more than any person he has ever met. He told me story after story of times he went flying and sometimes falling off horses only to crash into the ground. I doubt there has been another period of 30 minutes this year that I have laughed that hard. The Winfield members also worked the backstage at convention, so when nothing was happening, we would just hang out and teach each other different dances and even making ourselves dizzy by slinging our head in a figure eight over and over. Gosh, Winfield FFA rocks the house. Just to hear about the things they are doing for their community and to be able to experience how much they CARE about people, I was inspired. I am pumped for the Winfield community because the FFA members are living the phrase "It starts with me!"

After the convention wrapped up, Dane and I had the chance to go to a reception for all of the past state officers and their families, as well as the new officer team and their families. One thing neat about going to state conventions is the opportunity to meet the state officer candidates and to get to know them. Earlier I mentioned meeting Daniel and Craig, well, they were both elected to state office and since that time, I have been fortunate enough to spend a lot of time with their entire state officer team. I am so pumped for the FFA members in Kansas because I fully believe their officers have their focus where it needs to be, on our fellow members.

The next stop on the crazy ride of state convention season was Las Cruces, New Mexico. I had met each of the state officers in New Mexico briefly at National Convention last year, so it was a lot of fun to be able to hang out with their team again. Actually, Elio, Dane and I, along with a couple friends had pummeled their team in the middle of the night with pillows. So I was a little nervous about heading down there because there was no telling what those crazy New Mexicans were going to do to me. The first night was really cool because after a wonderful dinner with my just flat amazing girlfriend Britt, I had the chance to just visit with the state officers for a long time. We spent the entire next day just getting ready for the convention. Dal was stealing my wallet (I wish I had a pillow the because I would have whooped him again) and Quentin and Kolbyn were hiding it from me too. Jonathan was amazing me with his organization. Their whole team was just so much fun, but extremely nice too.

Once the convention started, I was blown away at how cool and just flat out nice all of the members were. One of my close friends, Marshall Baker is from the Texaco chapter and it was really cool to meet and get to know members from his chapter. I hung out with the guys from House FFA tons and even borrowed five bucks from my boy Jordan when I had more food on my plate than money in my wallet (It was mighty good though). I was blown away by how sincere, passionate, and sharp Mandy Prude was when she delivered her prepared speech. Kolbyn and Stuart Joy inspired me with their love for the agriculture industry. Overall, we just had a blast.

Now the New Mexico convention was a blast to visit and the members were extremely nice, but there is one part that is a little crazy. There is a club, a pretty cool club called "The International Coinsures of Red and Green Chili." The leaders in New Mexico FFA and at New Mexico State University was gracious enough to let me join the club, but under one condition. First, you have to go through initiation. During a sponsor reception, they called me up in front of everyone and gave me a heaping spoonful of

three different type of chili. The first was mild and goodness gracious, that stuff was so hot, I am telling you, if I had burped, something would have been caught on fire! It was some serious stuff. They commenced to shove two more spoonfuls down my throat and these weren't even hot, for about the first two seconds and then, sweat just starts rolling down your face. Apparently they could sense the heat because they doused me with a fire extinguisher or something. I am telling you, I was so hot I don't really even remember. Hey, but no big deal, bring it on again New Mexico! You don't scare me

After an awesome couple of days in which I met members like Nyla Mcnaughten from Clayton FFA that just are so sincere and caring that they can't help but to do good things for those around them I must say I walked away from the convention feeling great about the members we have in this organization. We have people that care.

The next afternoon, I arrived at the Arkansas State Convention. Pretty much as soon as I arrived, they put me on stage for some greetings. It was crazy! We just tossed my luggage down a corner near the exit and went to town on stage. From the moment the first session ended and I had the chance to meet some of the members, I was blown away by just how genuinely nice the students were. I mean, the whole "Southern hospitality" thing was really ringing true. Students greeted me with a sincere smile and a firm handshak. Gosh, we had a good time

The Arkansas convention was held at Camp Couchdale. It is probably the biggest FFA camp I have ever been to. They had cabins all over the place. They had the "Dungeon" which was a really cool room below the dining hall where it seemed like a couple hundred guys stayed. It was really neat to hang out down there because everyone was just so laid back and easy to talk to. At the end of the first night, I had the chance to hang out with a group of guys, two with guitars and sing some old country music. Now I am weird, I don't really like country music that much, but you start singing some Cash, Hank Williams Sr., or Don Williams and the party is on the road baby. My boys Matt, Cory, Jay and I sang away for the longest time and it was such a neat time to just relax and have some fun. They guys did not me know at all, but welcomed me in and made me feel right at home at Camp Couchdale

Whether it was aggravating the state officer girls along with the crazy guy state officers, busting a move at the dance, hanging out with and getting to know the new officers in Arkansas, meeting Branson, whose sincere love for people and his rock solid faith in God inspired me, or hanging out with the AWESOME members from Melbourne FFA, the Arkansas Convention was a wonderful time.

When I look back at this journal one thing that fills the pages is the simple, yet beautiful fact that FFA members are some of the most sincere, genuine people in the world. God blesses me each day to meet so many people that inspire me that I can hardly keep in touch with all of the those people that I love. It is a pretty neat and blessed difficulty to have. When I think back of all the people I have met this year, the people that stick out, the people that make a true difference in their community, in the lives around them are those that care. They aren't necessarily the best looking, the most athletic, the most intelligent, the best dressed, the tallest, the funniest, that stuff has NOTHING to do with touching anyone's life. The people like my boys from Winfield FFA in Kansas, Thomas from Nebraska, Mandy from New Mexico, and Branson from Arkansas, among others, are people that believe in their ability to impact those around them. In addition, they not only care about people, they do something, no, they do everything to help those around them.

Each and every one of us can impact our world. Each one of us can help an angry father, a lonely mother, a hurting sibling, or a peer that is hurting. It comes down to whether or not we choose to take a stand in life. It comes down to whether we are just saying, "It starts with me," or whether we are truly LIVING that statement everyday. Don't doubt the impact you can have. Don't allow the struggles in your own life to keep you from helping others stay afloat in the storms of their life. Say it in your heart..."It starts with me!" Now live it.

June 2, 2002

"Rest and be thankful." -William Wordsworth

It is just killing me how fast this year is whipping by. The last three days have been truly wonderful, as I have done nothing BUT spent time with my family. God has truly blessed my life this year. The past eight plus months have been some of the most enlightening, beautiful, thrilling and challenging months of my life. They have brought friends into my

life who taught me about faith, hope and love. I have learned and experienced the importance of character. In addition, my strengths, love, commitment and energy have been stretched like no other time in my life. Our team's commitment to excellence and knowing that we are so blessed to be serving thousands of amazing students has pushed me to constantly give my all in everything we have done. Gosh, it just amazes me what a blur most of this year has been and then, how some conversations with people at state conventions or chapter visits are so vivid in my mind.

With this year being so fast paced and challenging, it is times like this, when I am just hanging out, when I remember the importance of the quote up above. As I sat with my family on the porch of my friend Tate's river house, I kicked backed and counted all of the blessings that fill my life. I considered the fact that we live in the most amazing country in the world. My life is filled with freedoms billions of people around the world do not have. My family loves each other unconditionally, I have friends like Chris, Jimmy, Tate, Chad, Marshall and Britt that keep me accountable for my actions and constantly inspire me to live according to my beliefs everyday. It is still hard to believe I have the chance to be able to serve our organization in this way. There is no question that I am a rather active, sometimes down right crazy man, but over the past couple days and especially in those two hours, it has been truly beautiful to take a step back and reflect on all of the blessings in my life.

In my last journal entry, we flew through the wild and wooly month of April. Now, we have to step into a month I LOVED for a variety of reasons, the month of May. Now, I do not know about where you have grown up, but in Florida, after Mid-March it begins to get warm. Every March, my family takes all of our jackets, sweaters, sweatshirts and long sleeve T-shirts and packs them away in storage. Yeah, well, spending my April in places like New Hampshire, Idaho and Nebraska taught me that it still gets chilly until late APRIL! That is crazy. Being from Florida, I am a wimp with the cold weather. So, I was pretty pumped about wearing some shorts and a short sleeve T-shirt in the morning.

Well, after spending three days at home with the fam', I headed out to Oklahoma on the morning of April 29. That afternoon, after getting all settled in, I walked over to the convention hall, to see the state officer team and see if there was anyway I could help. See, most states see my huge bulging muscles and take advantage of my rare strength by having me move things, like a podium, a speaker, or a small car. Okay, okay, so I don't have huge muscles. Okay, okay, so I don't even have medium sized muscles and no, no one ever asked me to carry anything for them. Which is probably smart, but regardless, I still wanted to help. There was nothing really that I could do, so I turned to plan B...EAT! Now this is something I can do. The members from the Guthrie chapter were nice enough to let me sit down with them. In Florida, we don't really eat brisket. Well, I have discovered that I do in Oklahoma. I went back for thirds and enjoyed every bite. That night, I went to the State Officer Parent Recognition Banquet. The officer team showed their sincere thankfulness to their parents in an extremely humble, selfless way.

The next day marked the kickoff of the convention. I was fortunate enough to be able to hang with the state officer candidates during the morning and we had a blast eating, talking and even teaching each other some new dance moves. The convention kicked off with a bang and never slowed down. From the Oklahoma chorus just rocking the house to busting a move at the dance, the convention was an amazing time. One thing I talked about in my speech in Oklahoma was living each day to the fullest. Well, I had the chance to meet a couple members who were shining examples. The cool thing is, I met these two individuals during different sessions, but almost in the same exact spot in the convention hall. See, at the Oklahoma convention, to get down on the floor, you have to have a delegate pin on your jacket. Yeah, well, I did not have a delegate pin, but I still needed to be on the floor before the session. As I was passing through the Courtesy Corp delegate badge checkpoint, a young female member named Cassie blocked my path and said "Excuse me, where is your badge? If you don't have a badge, you aren't getting on the floor." Cassie was doing her job to a tee. After some explaining, Cassie let me on the floor, but she was doing her job all the way.

Then, before the next session, I was walking to my seat and happened to stop and talk to another Courtesy Corp member. His name was Chad. Chad and I chatted for about only about four minutes before the lights went off for the session to start. However, in that four-minute period, Chad blew me away with his courage and zest for life. Chad was in a wheelchair as he had been for most of his life. Chad told me about a surgery he was going to have within the next couple of months. The excitement in Chad's face and voice amazed me because, while he was going to be in a full body cast for an extended period of time and then in a half body cast for weeks more, when he finished his recovery there was a chance Chad would walk. As he told me his story, I couldn't even

say anything. Chad was so thankful for the life he had and the chance to move forward in his life. Chad was truly living life...no doubt about it. As I look at my life, it is so clear there are so many things that could and even need to be improved. I hope and pray that I too can be willing to pay the price to grow and develop in life.

Later that day, I met up with one of the craziest, most fun, most sincere chapters I have been able to meet. That afternoon, while setting up for a workshop, I met some members from Fox FFA. After the workshop, they invited me to go get lunch with them. (Timeout- When I was in high school, I always thought it would be cool to ask one of the national officers to go out to eat with our chapter. Yeah, well that has been one of my absolutely FAVORITE things to do this year...so ask them). First, we ate lunch, where we laughed like crazy. Then we walked down to the Oklahoma City Memorial where we fought back tears and prayed for the families of the victims. While visiting the memorial, I was reminded of just how catastrophic the suffering in New York really was. I was torn apart seeing the pictures of the mothers, father, friends and children all together in a room. It also reminded me of the importance of treating each person we come in contact with genuine kindness. The last night they had more than 12,000 people registered at the start of the State Degree Ceremony session. I absolutely could not believe it. The big feeling though, was excitement about the obvious pride in the SAEs of the Oklahoma FFA members. Some people view SAEs at a somewhat less important level than the classroom and FFA, but I am a firm believer that SAEs should be valued at an extremely high level. It was neat to see tons of people in Oklahoma feeling the same way.

After hanging out with the state officers until late, I woke up just in time to catch my shuttle to the airport. I was crazy tired, but I woke up about thirty minutes before the plane touched down in Tampa and began looking out the window. Now, I always request an aisle seat. I just like them the most, but on my flight home I chilled by the window. As we approached Tampa airport, I was amazed at the view. I fly into this airport all the time, but it is almost always at night. As we sailed over the Gulf of Mexico, the beaches, and then finally over Tampa Bay, I was blown away by the view I so often take for granted. It might sound small, but because I took the time to really observe my surroundings, I noticed beauty I have never seen in my occasional glance. This made me think about all of the situations I find myself in and the people around me. I began to think about the fact that in both situations, when we follow the quote at the top of the page and take the time to be thankful of everything in our life, we discover that life is as beautiful as we allow it to be.

That night, I went to the Plant City FFA Banquet. Gosh, it was sooooo good to be able to sit back and see everything that is going on in my home chapter. At the very beginning, Casey Hampton, now the state winner in Creed, recited each of the five paragraphs with confidence and with conviction. The chapter did an amazing job planning and presenting the banquet. It is a true blessing to be a small part of the Plant City chapter. The students there just pump me up because, while each young person has a world of potential, they are challenging others and more importantly themselves to take advantage of the potential they have in life. I was depressed because I had to leave so I could repack and be back at the airport to leave for Maryland at 4 a.m.

The next morning, I arrived at the airport a little sleepy, but very pumped about being able to make it to the final session at the Maryland convention. After finding that my flight was delayed like three hours, I begged and finally persuaded the airline to switch me to a different airline. After that I was feeling mighty good. I had been a little stressed, but "Maryland Baby, here I come!!!"...nope, my second flight was delayed for three hours too. I usually never get stressed about anything, but I felt...and still feel... horrible because I was not able to follow through on a commitment. I even called our travel agent at the National FFA Center, Agent Jessica, all upset. The Maryland state staff was absolutely AMAZING and just way too nice. Gosh, I love those guys.

The next eleven days were spent in College Station, Texas (man alive, I have gone to Texas a TON this year!). The first couple days, we worked with our NLCSO (National Leadership Conference for State Officers) partners to clear up any questions we may have.

Our trainers brought in a guy from San Diego and he would give it to you straight. Each pair would present different sections from the NLCSO curriculum. You could be right in the middle of a big part and he would say "start over." I was so proud of our team. Every person realized that everything we do, including committing to grow and improve, is for and about the members we are blessed to serve. Each of my teammates was able to push pride to the side and replace it with heart. That is hard to do, but they are constantly doing stuff that amazes me...so that is cool.

After getting the curriculum down and our presentation skills whooped-up and shaped-up we had the chance to actually present NLCSO to three different sections of a leadership class at Texas A&M. I actually knew several of the students in the class. It was an amazing chance to reconnect with some pretty cool friends. In addition, Abbie and I had about 40 students to hang out with in our section and we did not know a single person. That was a blast too because we had the chance to get to know 40 remarkable people. Also, we had the chance to learn tons from them as they evaluated both the conference and our performance as presenters. Whether they were granting Abbie and I junior status, so that we can whoop (one of many Aggie traditions), or eating at the famed Chicken Oil restaurant, Abbie and I were very fortunate to hang out with an extremely cool group of students and develop several friendships with some Aggies. In addition, it was nice to be in one place for 11 days. That was the longest we have been in any one place since before Christmas, so I actually put my clothes in a drawer and stuff!

Now leaving Texas was tough, but the next stop on this crazy adventure was one of the coolest, most heartfelt places I have ever visited. From the age of ten, I have wanted to go to this place. Several of my friends in high school are from here and they would have commercials in Florida often to draw tourists on down. Now, there are not a huge quantity of places with FFA south of Florida, but the one place that is makes up for the lack of numbers with some of the most passionate, welcoming people I have ever met. For those of you, who like me, did not excel in the geography portion of your social studies class, I am talking about PUERTO RICO! Goodness gracious do I love that place. No, it is not a state, but it is a territory and they have a strong FFA association. I arrived at the convention, ate some pollo (chicken), hopped up on the stage, and went to town on a speech. Now, I don't speak Spanish very well. The main reason is that I don't know the language. That seemed to be somewhat of an obstacle. Just like any other obstacle, when we continue to step forward we bust right through it. So, I took my English-Spanish dictionary up on stage and translated for myself after every word. The speech took somewhere right under an hour and a half, but most of the members left and went swimming. JUST KIDDING! My good friend Javier Moreno translated for me, and everything was just fine.

After the first session, I met Eladio, who was later elected to state office. Eladio spoke excellent English. I don't hear very well so when he was telling me about his SAE in yam production I thought Eladio was saying "llama," which in Spanish you pronounce (yama). He was talking about how they grow in the field and how he harvests them. I was going crazy because he was talking (in my mind at least) about some crazy stuff. I mean, harvesting llamas. How are you going to pick llamas? Those things are heavy! We laughed for a long time about my confusion. . That night, we kicked off the convention of more than 400 people with a crazy pool party. Surprisingly, I was cold, so I wimped out of the water after 15 minutes and began talking to random people. My two years of Spanish in high school came in very handy. Although I have forgotten most of it, I could ask, understand and share the basics. The students were amazing, welcoming and tons of fun.

Whether I was chillin' with the students from the Timiteo Delgado FFA chapter or being amazed as Javier and my friend Audianez translated the state officers' retiring addresses. They shared their personal faith, their love for Puerto Rico, and the importance of being a friend and a role model. In addition, I had the chance to do a workshop for the state officer candidates and any interested members. I was blown away by the thoughts and hearts that were being shared and committed to with every answer.

On the last night, we had a dance. Now there was NO two-stepping, there was no swing dancing or what I call traditional busting a move. However, there was some dancing going on that was much better than that. Growing up in Florida, I have had the chance to do a little Latin dancing, but this was an intensive training course. We danced and danced some more. I LOVED it! The next day, everyone from the convention went home, but I did not. Instead, I began on a post-convention journey of fun and friendship. Almost the entire state officer team, along with several past officers, stayed at the hotel for two days to relax and recoup. We swam, toured old San Juan, went to the rain forest, chilled at the beach, and really got to know each other. We danced in the lobby of our hotel until 2:30 a.m. The people were some of the most sincere, caring I have ever meet. Whether Luis and I were saying "Can-Can" over and over as we did my laundry late at night, or climbing up a mountain through a stream with my good friend Adam (a.k.a. El Torro), mis amigos showed me the time of my life.

Before the state officer team said goodbye, they each took turns sharing everything they felt. With the help of my good friend Javier, I was able to understand the words of love, encouragement, memories and hopes for the future. Almost every person in the room

was crying. As I hugged my new friends goodbye, I started bawling like a little baby. The Puerto Rico convention, because of the people I was blessed to meet, was one of the most amazing experiences of my life.

The quote at the top of the page said "Rest and be thankful." This past nine months I have learned more than ever the importance of slowing life down to notice the beauty both in our life and in the people that surround us everyday. When we can truly be thankful, we begin to worry less about the fact that our parents stay on us about our responsibilities and focus more on the fact they would give everything they have for us. We begin to care less about the fact our brother or sister borrows our clothes without asking and more about the late night conversations shared while growing up. We begin to care less about the fact that we may not be as talented as another person in some areas in life and more about the things we can do well. When we take time to count our blessings in life we free ourselves from the constraints of life. We allow ourselves the opportunity to NEVER have a bad day again. We knock down the barriers life may put up with a determination to live and to enjoy life.

The cool thing is, we are all blessed differently in life. Take a moment and consider your blessings. In my life, I have friends that believe in me and challenge me to become a better person through their integrity. I am blessed with a personal faith that serves as a strong foundation in my life. I am blessed to be a part of a MIGHTY FINE youth organization. The agriculture industry fills my life with the best food industry in the world. I am growing up in a country blessed with freedom granted through the blood and lives of millions that believe enough in America to give everything they have to preserve our freedoms. I am blessed with a family that loves me unconditionally. Those are a few of the blessings in my life.

It is so important that each of us take a moment to consider the blessings that fill our lives. When times get tough. When our schedule is more packed than Robin Niehuas' suitcase before a long trip, we can reflect on the blessings in our life and know that today and tomorrow will be beautiful. They will be as beautiful as we allow them to be. You and I have the choice to allow the clouds to roll in and dampen our minds, or to CHOOSE to fill our everyday with thoughts of the rays of sunshine that can light our way.

April 29, 2002

"Man has no choice but to love. For when he does not, he finds his alternatives lie loneliness, destruction, and despair."

- Mayra Marquez, Burncoat FFA member, Massachusetts

Goodness gracious, it has taken me forever to get this entry up here. I apologize. Things have been pretty crazy. In the last entry, I talked about my computer crashing. Well, two days after I sent that entry in, someone got a new computer. MY COMPUTER!!!! That is not cool. An airline lost my luggage and before they baggage service brought it to my home in Plant City, well, someone decided they wanted a new computer. Now, obviously I could have typed away in some random hotel room, but unless there are keys to type on and some way to save those thoughts, typing is a little unproductive. Anyway, the past two months have honestly been two of the best months in my life. I've been blessed to meet some of the coolest, most sincere, serving, fun people I have ever met. It has been challenging, busy, filled with not a ton of sleep, but tons of learning and growth. We will explore some of these adventures in this journal entry that takes us through the rest of April.

It all got started April 8-10. Our team met in Indy at the FFA Center to plan and prepare for National Leadership Conferences for State Officers (NLCSOs). Basically, the people that actually wrote the conference e-mailed us the curriculum. This includes all of the activities, directions, lists of supplies, everything. It was our job to then in our pairs (Abbie and I, Amber and Robin, and Dane and Elio) internalize a couple of parts of the conferences, spice it up by making it our own and be ready to present it. It is safe to say that we were all a little nervous. We had each worked hard, but it is still challenging. In addition, we were evaluated "in the moment" throughout our presentation. In other words, if we do not do something right, our trainers will help us see what we can do better. It was a time of growth. In addition though, it was both awesome and hilarious to see all of us present. We always have a blast and when we struggle, everyone else on the team is there to build each other up.

In addition to working on NLCSO, our team also found some time to kick it up a little as well. One night we met probably eight staff members from the Center to play

"walleyball." Basically, this is volleyball in a racquetball court. You can smack the ball off the walls, off anything. We had a great time and it was nice to actually take time to play a sport (bc I love sports). In addition, most of us had the chance to hang out one night at the Olive Garden with Jason Givan. Jason came with us to dinner and we laughed like crazy as we caught up on everything that has been going on. Jason is a great guy.

Whoop, Whoop!!!! (that means I am excited). Now it was time to head on over to New Hampshire to hang out at the state convention. I have never really been in this region of the country, so I did not really know what to expect. Also, I have always heard about people taking vacations in New Hampshire, and wondered what exactly was going on up there that people go crazy over. Yeah, well, New Hampshire is absolutely gorgeous. The southern part was really nice, but gosh, the northern half of the state is some of the most beautiful country I have ever seen. The White Mountains were incredibly pristine with beautiful trees and streams I would have given anything to just hop on in. It was still a little chilly, and I am a serious sissy when it comes to cold water, so I whimped out. Mike and Carrie from Winnesquam FFA picked me up from the airport and we headed up to their school. It seems like every person in that chapter is just so incredibly nice, it is not even funny. Everyone from the teachers to the youngest members blew me away with their kindness. I rode up to the convention with my friend Mike and we chatted the whole way there. We talked about FFA, life in general, and Mike hooked me up with all sorts of cool information about New Hampshire. As an example, did you know that Thomas Jefferson really lived in New Hampshire and not Virginia? Just kidding, but New Hampshire does have everything from camping, to jet skiing, to snow skiing.

New Hampshire's convention was tons of fun. Whether it was hanging out with my crazy, big-hearted friends from the Seacoast School of Technology, or going running at 6:30a.m.!!!! with Thomas, Tim, and Steve from Winnesquam, the time I spent in New Hampshire was a wonderful experience. My boys from Winnesquam blew me away as they donned the uniforms of a policeman, a fireman, a soldier, a volunteer, an FFA member, and Uncle Sam during the talent show and led the entire convention in a touching rendition of "God Bless the USA." They showed us all about living with true love as they turned the attention away from themselves and honored our country and each person that suffered. It was beautiful. Also, I had the chance to hang out and get to know Martin Vito. Martin is a state officer in Connecticut and a great guy. We went to dinner with some pretty cool people from the Pinkerton FFA chapter and ended up chatting that night after the dance until about 3a.m.

On April 13th, I headed down to College Station, Texas. This is the home of Texas A&M University. I was going down to some planning and preparation for NLCSOs. I spent the next couple of days practicing and taking care of some final details so we could be ready to go through the NLCSO test pilot program held at A&M every year.

On the 16th, I started out on an eight day California adventure. I flew into Dane's hometown of Eureka. As I was flying in, I looked out the window and man alive, I was amazed about how lush and green the landscape was. We spent the day touring the Eureka Zoo and the park downtown. That night, we had the chance to eat some of Mrs. White's good food. Also, Dane's dad and I busted out a video of the opening skit at the California Convention when Dane was a state officer. Dane was killing me in his role as a crazy crop duster. The next day, Dane and I drove from Eureka (2 hours from Oregon) all the way to Fresno. The trip took about nine hours. We drove through the towering redwood forests, beside crystal blue streams, and the vineyards in Napa Valley. In addition, we each drank about a gallon of water. It actually turned into something fun. That night, we went out to eat with the state officer team. Dane I got some frog legs.

Very soon, students from all over the state started coming into Fresno to get ready for convention. One of my favorite things to do is just go hang out with people before convention when they have no idea that I am serving as an officer. One chapter, Righetti FFA was just bringing in their luggage when we started hanging out. I was talking with everyone when I got in trouble with an advisor for talking. It was actually pretty funny. We continued to hang out throughout the convention and had an excellent time. The night before everything started, Dane and I went with the state officers and all of the officer candidates to a dinner at Fresno State University. Later that night, as the candidates were taking their written test and preparing to go through their first round of interviews we just hung out and laughed as they got ready for a pretty nerve racking week. The convention kicked off with a bang complete with the State Officer team rappelling in from the ceiling and fireworks to boot. Pretty crazy, definitely cool.

At a convention of more than 4,000 people, you obviously do not have the chance to get to know everyone. I was very fortunate however to really go to know several people. One person was Jimmy Pierce from Righetti. Jimmy has tons of qualities, but one of the

most impressive is the fact that he is so sincere. Jimmy and I had the chance to hang out a lot. One night we were chilling in the lobby and Jimmy told me two things that really connected with the quote at the top of this entry. First of all, Jimmy told me that he had chosen during the convention to stop judging people. He said, "I cannot wait to get back to school on Wednesday, so I begin talking to the people I have ignored because they look or act different than I do." The second Jimmy told me was the fact that he wants to be a state officer someday "to help change lives." Gosh, that is what it is all about. When we allow true love into our hearts, we cannot help but to make decisions that redirect our lives and lead us to helping other people. Jimmy decided to begin valuing each person for who they really are. Also, Jimmy wanted to be an officer, NOT for the power, the prestige, or the title. Jimmy decided to run for state office to help change lives. As a ninth grader, Jimmy taught me about selfless leadership. He serves as an example of what you and I can do, if we only open our hearts.

On the last night, after a week of witnessing crazy enthusiasm, students meeting people from across California, and tons of fun, it was time to bust a move. Dane and I went out to eat with a group including most of the people on his state officer team. Gosh, I love those guys. Afterwards, Dane and I changed and ran on down to the dance. After dancing for probably an hour I started dancing a lot with this one big group of people. One girl, her name was Nichole Rencher, was absolutely cracking me up with her crazy dance moves so we started trying to teach each other new ways to bust a move. A little while later Nicole and I met a guy named Dan. Dan was in a wheelchair, but man alive, my boy was busting a move on the dance floor with everything he had. Dan did not care ONE BIT how he danced or what people thought about him. Dan was truly living life. When the next slow song came around, Dan asked Nicole to dance. As I walked away to grab some water, Nicole leaned down and they swayed back and forth in the middle of literally thousands of people. Now I am NO sissy, but at that moment, I had to do everything I could to hold back the tears from flowing. I mean, this is a perfect example of people truly living life and living love. Dan and Nicole could not care less what others thought of them. Plus, they totally removed the thought that the other person was different and through their caring hearts they made my week.

After the convention ended, I rented a car and drove the beautiful four-hour stretch from Fresno to Hollywood. In the past two years, I have met almost all of my girlfriend's cousins. However, one of Britt's cousins, Cy, is an actor in Hollywood and we were never in New Mexico at the same time. So, I called him and asked him if I could just go stay with him. It was pretty crazy! When I got there, it was like, "Hey, so nice to meet you, where do I put my stuff?" Cy and his girlfriend Genevieve are wonderful people and we had a blast going out to eat, touring Hollywood, eating Thai food (good stuff!), and walking Cry's dog, Bamph. One time, Cy and I took Bamph on a walk in this really cool park in the Hollywood Hills. We were walking along and this little lady with a couple dogs walks past us. I told Cy, "That lady reminded me a lot of Cheri Oteri (the female Spartan Cheerleader on Saturday Night Live)." He said, "That was Cheri Oteri." Now usually, I am not a big star, famous person magnet man, but this was a different situation. You see, Cheri is like my cousin or something. It was a sad day at the University of Florida when Cheri left SNL. My friend Tate and I wallowed in depression for a good week. To move on with the story, I stopped her and we talked for three to five minutes. She was so sweet! I told her how much my friends and I loved her, that we believed in her, and that I would say a big prayer for her. Cheri began tearing up. Man alive....I love that lady. Cheri Oteri rocks!

On April 25th, I left L.A. and flew to Washington, D.C. to hang out with the 10 winners of the Risk Management Agency Essay Contest. I encourage you to consider turning in an essay. You never know what will happen and we had one of the coolest times ever. Basically, the group consisted of eight of winners, some advisors, and some parents. It was great to hang out with a very small group of people. The first night we chilled in a workshop with some crazy, dorky, tall, skinny, blond-haired presenter. Okay, Okay, YES!!! I admit it, it was me. After we wrapped up, most of the students, a couple parents and advisors, and I took the metro (the subway) to the mall to get some food. We had a good time just talking and hanging out. After dinner we realized that the metro system was going to shut down in about ten minutes. Because it was so late at night, it took us about 45 minutes just to get back to the hotel. It was okay though because we had a good time just being crazy. The following day was spent recognizing the winners on their outstanding essays. Also, we met with a couple representatives from the USDA's Risk Management Agency and even took a picture with the secretary of agriculture

On the afternoon or the 26th, I headed on home to Plant City, Florida. I honestly do not remember much about this three-day period. There are some things I do remember, however. I remember going to sleep, a lot. Goodness gracious, sleep is some pretty cool stuff. I remember playing basketball with my sisters' boyfriends. It really stinks that I never have the chance to play ball because when I do, I am a pitiful sight! I definitely

remember my mother's good cooking. Finally, I remember going to church. It is so nice to be able to go to my home church.

Our team developed a vision statement at the beginning of this year. We titled this creation "The Flame of Excellence." We had four logs that fed our fire: Family, Agriculture, Friends, and Faith. Combined with a heart in the center of fire, the fire fed by our logs and our love would hopefully produce Service, Integrity, Leadership, Growth, and Unity. One of the biggest things we have to keep in the forefront of everything we do is that we need to constantly feed our fire with these four logs. Our schedules would make it pretty easy to leave these foundation pieces out of our everyday life.

The scary thing is, however, that it doesn't take being an officer to be in this very same boat. Think about it, we have school, homework, chores and other responsibilities at home, some of us have animals that we own and sometimes show. Some of us have part-time jobs. Each of us has FFA. Each of us has other organizations that we are involved in. Maybe we have pets. Maybe we have siblings that we watch or help in some way or another. Some of us play sports. There are a multitude of things that we fill our lives with. I am no different. During high school, I was involved with about 20 different clubs and organizations. I was a leadership nerd, so to speak. My advisors constantly cautioned me about "not stretching yourself to thin." I would venture to say you have probably heard this same speech. My argument was and still is to a somewhat smaller degree that every time stretch a rubber band, it is never the same. It stretches, it grows. Well, that same thing happens with people. When we challenge ourselves, we grow, we learn, we experience life in a variety of ways. This year, however, has helped me understand the importance of making sure that everyday, I revisit those logs in my life that are the very reason for any fire that might produce light.

I challenge you to take a moment and think about your life. What are you involved in, what do you fill your time with. Most importantly, what are the logs in your fire. What is the foundation you stand on. What makes you who you are. Finally, are you taking enough time to fuel your fire with the logs that allow you to burn so brightly. The sentence that spurred this thought was when I mentioned going to church. In the eighth grade, my friend Patrick complained to our science teacher about the fact that it seemed like almost every Wednesday night, she gave us a homework assignment. This was tough because Patrick went to church every Wednesday night. She said, "Well, think about, what is more important, getting your work done, or going to church." She was very surprised when Patrick passionately said church was more important than any homework assignment could ever be. In fact, I think she was a little taken aback. There was no hesitation in Patrick's voice because at the age of fourteen, Patrick was already fueling his fire with the logs of his personal foundation.

These logs should be things we feel very strong about. Our logs should each be something we feel very passionate about. When we combine our passion with the love of a heart, then we are able produce a fire that produces the flames you desire. After taking the time to establish which logs are going to serve as the foundation of our life, if we will direct our thoughts, our actions, our words to others, with true love, our fire will grow. This growing light, will be a lamp in the darkness for others and eventually spread to others.

Mayra's quote at the top of this entry is one of the most beautiful thoughts about love I have ever heard. "Man has no choice but to love. For when he does not, he finds his alternatives lie loneliness, destruction, and despair." A couple years ago, I was asked to reflect on the question, "What is more important in life, passion or love?" Since that time, I have considered the question several times. The opinion that surfaces in my mind is that while passion can produce a blinding light, the light of love is a staying light. While this is obviously not always the case, a passion can fade rather quickly, but true love spans the test of time. When we combine our passionate feelings about agriculture, our family, our friends, our faith, or whatever your logs may be, with true love for others we have a fierce, undying flame.

However, as Mayra said, when we remove the heart from our fire, we find ourselves in the cold, bitter, dark wilderness of life, all alone. The feelings of despair flood our life. I would venture to say that the easiest way to be loved is to love another. The easiest way to be trusted, is to trust another. The easiest way to have a friend is to be a friend. Be the light you want to see in this world. Gosh, I have really missed this. Regardless of the fact that I have no idea who, if anyone will read this journal, I value the interaction I feel is there. I apologize for the craziness and vow to catch back up and move ahead within the next couple of weeks.

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