



Continuing a tradition of Florida FFA leadership

By Ed Albanesi
Editor

FOR NINE CONSECUTIVE years *FloridaAgriculture* has presented cover stories on FFA leaders. The June issue for the past six years has featured a cover story on the then-current FFA president. We've heard many good reasons for FFA involvement.

This year's president, Clay Sapp, gave us a reason we hadn't heard before. Some might argue it's the best reason yet. Clay is the lone male on an eight-person FFA leadership team.

When on the road for Florida FFA Clay says, "I never walk out of a hotel room without looking perfect. The ladies make sure I am looking my best."

Of course when Clay decided to compete to become a member of the state leadership team he didn't know that he would be literally the last man standing. First there was a screening process to get through and then there was the actual election itself. Twenty-three students took part in the screening process with 12 emerging. Of this group, there were nine females and three males. Ultimately, Clay was the lone male elected.

Clay has tremendous respect for the other members of his leadership team. "The screening process helped to build this team and that is what's important to me," he stated. "My impact would have been the same no matter what office I held."

Other state FFA officers include State Secretary Valerie McKee, Area 1 Vice President Lynsey Meharg, Area 2 Vice President Kaitlin Van Heusen, Area 3 Vice President Elise Stoddard, Area 4 Vice President Michelle Perez, Area 5 Vice President Nicole Liles and Area 6 Vice President Jillian Murphy.

One of the highlights each year for the FFA leadership team is the "International Leadership Seminar for State Officers." For the past few years this seminar has been held in China. The seminar takes place in January and it wasn't until this past November that Clay learned that the seminar venue in 2011 had changed. Instead of China, the seminar would be taking place in Argentina.

Clay said he was initially disappointed but some of the sites they were able to visit in Argentina made up for any misgivings he might have had. "The Iguazu Falls near the city of Puerto Iguazu was probably one of the most beautiful sites I've seen in my entire life," said Clay. "The main waterfall, Devil's Throat, runs along the border of Argentina and Brazil and is similar to our own Niagara Falls."

Florida was well represented at the seminar with seven of the 63 participants hailing from the Sunshine State. "Argentina was remarkably similar to our country," said Clay. "We saw lots of grain, cattle, soybeans and corn. Argentina is the second largest exporter of grain, second only to the United States."

"It's summer in Argentina in January and I think the summers down there might even be a little hotter than our Florida summers," explained Clay. "I was also a little shocked about how similar our cultures are. Many Argentine citizens would prevent me from butchering Spanish by speaking to me in English. They would laugh and tell me, 'this is what you need.'"

Clay said officials at the U.S. Embassy in Argentina told the FFA visitors that American farmers should be grateful for the relationship they have with the U.S. government. "They told us that Argentina has taxed farmers so much that it's hard for them to stay afloat," he recounted. "We were told that at one time the government taxed them at a 50 percent rate."

The farmers that Clay met pretty much concurred with what the embassy officials had told the FFA students. "They told us they were somewhat disgruntled but were still very passionate about what they did," said Clay. "Some we talked to said it was pretty tough to make ends meet."

Students making the trip who like beef weren't disappointed by the menu served. "Argentina is well known for its beef and we had steak probably seven out of the 10 days we were there," said Clay. "All in all we had a great trip and I wouldn't have traded it for any other one."

Clay's ascension to the Florida FFA presidency was reasonably typical of those who preceded him. His dad, Ed Sapp, is an ag teacher at Madison County

High School. "I was familiar with ag classrooms ever since I was 2 or 3 years old," recalled Clay.

"At first I wasn't sure I wanted to join FFA," he confessed. "But I decided to become a member when I was in the sixth grade at Madison County Middle School. I started by showing cattle and this activity helped me to learn the purpose behind FFA and what my dad had been trying to teach me all those years."

Clay said he also became active in public speaking that first year. "I really didn't do well with my first speech," he said. "I forgot about half of it but the experience motivated me to improve."

In 2009, after winning the prepared public speaking competition at the district level, Clay competed and fared well at the state competition. A year later he finished in first place at the state competition and was able to make the "Round of 16" at nationals.

Clay's mom, Gina Sapp, is a registered nurse and comes from an agricultural family. "My mom's dad raised hogs and I remember helping him feed and wean the sows," recalled Clay. "When I joined FFA I wanted to become more involved and my grandfather and I started a show pig business. We started with eight animals and were able to sell about 70 show pigs that first year.

"My first-hand involvement helped me understand why agriculture was so important and I wanted to become an advocate for the industry. That's really how and why I got involved in FFA. It's allowed me to share that message with students, adults, legislators and others."

Clay first thought he might like to be a state FFA officer when he joined the organization in the sixth grade. But he cemented his decision in the 10th grade.

"I went to the state convention in the sixth grade and service on the leadership team looked good and exciting to me at the time," he recalled. "But I really became convinced when I was in the 10th grade and came to know some of the officers, such as Hillary Webb who was serving as state president. I then decided I wanted to be an FFA officer."

Along the way Clay has served as sub-district chair, district president and chapter treasurer, vice president and president. He was class president in each of his years at Madison County High School and served as student body president during his senior year. Leadership seems to be in his bones.

Clay has completed 49 hours at North Florida Community College and will finish up there as soon as he completes one more semester. He then plans to transfer to the University of Florida (UF) where he will enroll in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences and major in agricultural education. He then hopes to earn a master's degree in educational leadership.

During his year as FFA president, Clay and the other members of his leadership team have taken non-degree-seeking courses at UF. One was Prepared Public Speaking and the other was Leadership Development. We're not sure if Ed Sapp is hearing footsteps behind him but Clay did mention that his dad will be nearing retirement age about the same time he (Clay) is entering the workforce.

Clay has two older brothers and a younger sister. Will is enrolled in the Vet School at UF and Blake is pursuing a degree in agricultural engineering. Kim is a freshman at Madison County High School and is a member of FFA.

"I've encouraged her to become more involved in FFA," said Clay, "although at this time she seems more interested in becoming either an actor or a lawyer."

For his part, Clay believes his planned graduate degree in educational leadership may one day land him a job as a principal not far from home. He considers himself a "North Florida boy." And in case some of our younger female readers might be wondering, Clay (at least as of this writing) doesn't have a steady girlfriend.

"It's probably good that I don't because right now I don't know I'd have the time for her," he confessed. "But maybe after June 17 (conclusion of the 2011 FFA State Conference in Orlando)."

Are you listening, ladies?



Clay Sapp
2008 FFA
Gina Sapp



Agriculture
leadership
Perez, C
Nicole L

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Clay Sapp is all smiles after his animal was named Grand Champion Swine at the Florida State Fair. From left are Chad Lyons, Louisa Lyons, (Clay Sapp), Ed Sapp, Tori Lyons and Ricky Lyons.



Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam poses with the 2010-11 Florida FFA Leadership Team. From left are Jillian Murphy, Kaitlin Van Heusen, Michelle Lay Sapp, (Putnam), Valerie McKee, Elise Stoddard, Lynsey Meharg, and Tori Lyons.

