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From aviation to yaks, Pontiac FFA offers virtual feast of U.S. ag

BY KAY SHIPMAN

FarmWeek

Adam Jacobs showed an airplane he might fly for agricultural aviation. Matthea Boatright displayed a hat she’d made from her yaks’ fiber. Brothers Peyton and Tyson Cramer brought viewers into a tractor cab to explain GPS and auto steering.

The Pontiac FFA Chapter showcased U.S. agriculture’s diversity recently during a coast-to-coast, live show-and-tell. The virtual event featured FFA members who provided 29 learning stations from eight states and five time zones.

“I think it’s awesome the agricultural industry has so much to offer, such a wide variety,” said Samantha Johns, a Pontiac chapter officer who will be a junior next year. Johns coordinated an intricate production schedule of different time zones and produced graphics for the event.

Chapter Adviser Jesse Faber explained his members usually host 1,200 to 1,400 elementary students each May for an Ag Extravaganza at the high school. When COVID-19 restrictions prevented that, Faber and his officer team mused about alternatives during a virtual meeting in early April. The winner? A live Zoom event on YouTube and Facebook. Recordings are available on {facebook.com/people/Pontiac-Ffa-/100001573601298} or Pontiac YouTube Virtual Ag Extravaganza.

“The idea was to be geared to young students as a virtual field trip. It was fantastic. I was impressed and proud of how many joined in and participated,” said Faber, who oversaw a seven-hour broadcast on three computers running simultaneously in his home basement.

The participants included several FFA members from Pontiac and other Illinois chapters. Faber reached out to FFA connections in other states, and educational locations expanded.

“I was expected it to be kids from our chapter and maybe last two hours … It exploded,” Johns said, with a laugh. “It was crazy with all the time zones involved.” Johns kicked off the event with a segment on caring for her seven registered show pigs.

Faber noted the diversity even within a single subject, such as beef production. He pointed to Emma Freebairn of Illinois showing a cattle feedlot, Colorado FFA President Ashlyn Ochsner discussing a cattle ranch and three other beef teaching segments.

Animal highlights included meat goats, hogs, horses, rabbits - and some exotic ones. Alaska FFA Secretary Matthea Boatright from the Kenai Peninsula described her yaks that she trains for riding and work as pack animals. Ninety miles from the Canadian border, Joe Walsh of Tok, Alaska, shared information about trapping wolves, wolverines and other wildlife.

A segment from Washington state highlighted how FFA members serve others. A combat veteran described Romeo, his Labrador service dog, and how Grandview FFA members had worked with his new companion.

Given the virtual technology involved, Faber said connectivity wasn’t an issue except for three challenges - two that occurred during presentations in barns and the third at a logging site in New York.

Johns appreciated the opportunity to show more about agriculture even in her own town. “You can’t bring a plane to school,” she said.

Faber acknowledged COVID-19 circumstances led him and his students to use technology and reach out to other FFA members nationwide who also were available because of pandemic restrictions. “I think there are a lot of opportunities and things we discovered that I hope we keep,” the ag teacher said. He mused one day students might divide the daylong recording into segments that could be used as individual lessons.

Johns mentioned a feeling undoubtedly shared by many Pontiac FFA members after their ambitious project: “When it was over, we heaved a sigh of relief.”

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