

Grants mean everything to beginning ag teachers

BY KAY SHIPMAN
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Advanced education, licenses to fly drones and drive a school bus, vindication and a mortgage. Four agriculture teacher education grants from the IAA Foundation mean different things to this year's recipients.

The Illinois Farm Bureau, through its charitable arm, the IAA Foundation, created the Illinois Agricultural Education Teacher Grant Program to support new ag teachers who complete their



Kelley Koester

first year of teaching. This marks the third year grants were awarded.

Kelley Koester, who teaches at Forreton High School, started her master's degree in education this fall at the University of Illinois, while also providing her students with opportunities inside and outside the classroom. "This grant means a lot to me," she said.

In addition, Koester and her fiancé, also starting his second year as a high school ag teacher, envision a farm in



Cody Carman

their future. The grant will help Koester reach her professional goal as a teacher and her personal goal of farming, she said.

Cody Carman, Neoga High School agriculture teacher, will use his grant to help solve a good problem. Carman had so many FFA members want to participate in activities they wouldn't all fit in a short bus. Carman would like to obtain a commercial driver's license so he could drive a school bus and take more FFA'ers. He'd also like to earn a pilot's license to fly a drone and teach his students about that facet of agriculture.

The grant "showcases how the agriculture industry realizes the value of agriculture education at the high school level. They understand the importance of what we're doing," Carman said.

Caseylyn Johnston, one of two ag teachers at Bureau Valley High School, received news of her grant at her first surprise party, which included written messages from the students. "This

(grant) makes you feel what you're doing is worthwhile and your profession is acknowledged," Johnston said.

Johnston noted she has started teaching an agricultural career exploration class to eighth graders. Encountering different students every quarter means she will eventually "see every one of them" before they reach high school, she said.

Abby Jacobs, Peotone High School agriculture teacher, described her grant as "humbling." The state has many phenomenal agriculture teachers who are completing their first year, and Jacobs



Caseylyn Johnston

"bounces ideas off them all the time," she said, adding she is honored to be considered among the top beginning teachers.

The grant "also means support outside our district for agriculture programs and FFA in Illinois," Jacobs said.

As for the money, "I'm going to use it to help pay a mortgage," Jacobs said. She recently bought a house and 15 acres currently planted in soybeans.



Abby Jacobs

To begin the grant program, IFB provided seed money, and the IAA Foundation is administering it and actively seeking more funding partners to continue adding new groups of first-year teachers. The program hopes to fund 32 teachers over 12 years.

Illinois and other states continue to cope with an ag teacher shortage. Last year, Illinois had 75 ag education teacher openings compared to roughly 30 ag education college graduates. At the same time, Illinois ag education is experiencing growth with the opening of new and reopening once-closed high school ag programs.

For more information about the ag teacher grant program, go to iaafoundation.org and look under the "What We Support" tab.