



Matt Gruhlkey, #11

TALL XIV Session I - College Station

July 8-11, 2014

“Extension, Education, Expectations”

TUESDAY, JULY 8, 2014

TALL XIV began with a warm welcome by Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz. I'm sure most of us were a little nervous and yet excited to see what TALL XIV had in store for us. I count it a privilege to be part of such a great and honored program. The long list of very generous sponsors humbles me as I realize the value and high expectations that are given to each of us in TALL XIV. I am also reminded of the graciousness of my employer, Attebury Grain, LLC, who was willing to fund my tuition and allow me time away from a busy schedule to participate in this prestigious program. Dr. Mazurkiewicz immediately had a way to warm up the room and allow all of us to start the process of getting to know each other. The icebreaker was very useful in putting a “name to face”. After knowing Dr. Mazurkiewicz only a little while, I realized that this journey with him and my fellow classmates would be exciting, challenging and provide memories for a lifetime.

Dr. Douglas Steele gave us a quick overview of the TAMU system and each of its parts. I was immediately impressed that I would be able to gain access to such high level personnel in the TAMU system. It was impressed by Dr. Steele's willingness to welcome us to TALL XIV.

“Texas Department of Criminal Justice Agriculture Today”

Todd Swick

As Todd Swick began his presentation, I was impressed by his sense of humor and grasp of the facts about his organization. The sheer size of the operating budget, \$61.3 million and the 129,000 acres encompassed by his organization was impressive. As he went on further to detail the 300,000 laying hens, 13 swine units, large herd of brood mares, 14,000+ beef cattle herd and over 1500 trained dogs, my eyes were opened to the immensity of the system and how much Mr. Swick's organization provides for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The “payback” of \$50 turning into \$125, as Mr. Swick described it, really impressed on me the cost savings provided by the Ag Dept of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The size and scope of the ag production as well as the technology employed in that production certainly shows the State of Texas is a leader in this field.

TUESDAY, JULY 8, 2014 (cont.)

“Texas A&M Forest Service”

Tom Boggus, Don Galloway, Don Hanneman, Curt Stripling, and Hughes Simpson

As we sat and learned about whom the Texas A&M Forest Service was and what it accomplishes on a daily basis across Texas, the U.S. and the world, I recall being very impressed. What this organization does to provide a safe environment for all Texans truly is remarkable. Their ability to see problems arise, react to them quickly and get positive results struck me as I listened to each of them speak. The budget of \$65 million, along with the new web tools that were made available to the public, impressed me. The Texas A&M Forest Services' willingness to help local volunteer fire departments was impressive as well. I was especially impacted by Mr. Boggus' statement... “We want to build capacity in others”. This “struck a chord” with me and inspired me to think about how I can “build capacity” in others with whom I live and work. The use of technology and new tools was eye opening. The real-time data and techniques they use will certainly help to save more lives and property.

Etiquette Training and Meal

Susan Quiring, Ph.D.

As we sat down to the nice meal at the hotel, Dr. Quiring introduced herself and began to show us the basics of proper etiquette. I was immediately impressed by her positive personal style which encouraged all to participate. She was very approachable and truly wanted us to learn why proper etiquette is essential in business dealings. Her humor and engagement of the audience showed her to be a true professional in every sense of the word. I found the training very useful. Ms. Quiring was the perfect teacher to show us how and why we follow proper etiquette in business as well as life. I will certainly be using what I learned to become more polished in order to represent Texas Agriculture as it truly is..... a group of professional individuals and groups that truly know about and participate in big business.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 9, 2014

AG Media Training

Faculty, staff, and students from the department of Agricultural Leadership

As we began the session, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. Dr. Deb immediately grabbed our attention with her wit and directness. She certainly didn't take herself too seriously, and that put us all at ease. The mock press conferences were a great way to help us learn to think on our feet, apply our current skills and be put under pressure to see how each of us would respond. The tough and sometimes absurd questions from the “press corps” challenged all of us. The students and professors did a great job trying to distract us from the real issues. Dr. Deb gave us some very useful tips on how to deal with the media. I found it very practical and helpful. This type of training is invaluable as each of us in the TALL program face an ever-changing world that knows less and less about how agriculture affects everyone's lives. It will be important for all of us to provide a positive, honest and trustworthy face for agriculture so that the rest of the world can see what a vital role agriculture plays in everyone's lives.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 9, 2014 (cont.)

“A Different Kind of Career: Under Cover in the CIA”

Jim Olson

I was really looking forward to this session and wondering how my perception of the CIA would correspond to what truly happens in real life. Jim Olson certainly did not disappoint. He grabbed our attention immediately and proceeded to tell us of his heroic and dangerous life as an undercover CIA agent. His story seemed to come from a movie script, but this was definitely real life. As Jim told of his story, I couldn't help but pause and reflect on how much we all owe to brave servants like Jim and his wife Meredith, as they risked their lives each day to protect this great nation and to do the tasks necessary to preserve our sovereignty. The extent of the training Jim & Meredith received was impressive. And Jim's story of taking a life-threatening risk to gain very vital intelligence had me sitting on the edge of my seat. As Jim closed, he gave his thoughts on our nation and the threats we still face today. He gave us pause to think as he spoke of the threats we face as a nation, but also gave us hope as he reminded us of the brave servants who even today are serving our country in places all over the world.

Lunch & Program – Brazos Valley

John & Connie Giesenschlag

It was a nice change of pace to sit down to a great meal and meet other great people in agriculture in the Brazos Valley. John & Connie were gracious hosts. Their experience and life lessons could be felt even without a word spoken. It was great to hear from the sponsors and local producers. It was great to meet John Smith, Lynn Angell and others involved in TALL. Their words of wisdom and encouragement were good to hear. Agriculture, I feel, is unique in that it encompasses people from all backgrounds but who share the same goal of providing a safe and abundant food supply for their families, their state, their nation and the world.

Tour of Watermelon Farm

Jody and Clint Wiggins and family

The tour of the Wiggins family watermelon farm was great. We were able to be right in the midst of the action as workers packaged the watermelons for shipment to major retailers such as Walmart. The 80 million pounds of watermelons produced each year really grabbed my attention. This equated to 45,000 lbs/acre. As Mr. Wiggins described the operation, I was impressed by how the business has changed in some ways (smaller watermelon sizes sold to meet customer demands) but remains the same in other ways (melons are still hand planted and hand-picked to preserve the quality of the fruit). It was a mix of the old and the new. I also noticed the advanced labelling and packaging that was used to “brand” the product. That is very important when seeking to sell your product to the ever-conscious consumer.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 9, 2014 (cont.)

Tour Blue Bell Creameries

Paul Kruse

We had a great time at the Blue Bell Creamery. The tour was very informative and allowed access to the production floor to really see how things operate. The tour guide and all others that we met at the factory were courteous and truly seemed to love what they did at Blue Bell. The number of flavors and types of products that Blue Bell now makes is impressive. They truly seek to reach new customers with better marketing so that they can provide a customized product to each regional group of customers. But what most impressed me was when Paul Kruse was unapologetic about what they do at Blue Bell and that they just love to make ice cream. They don't seek to imitate others. They seek to do what they do best, which is to provide the best ice cream products on the market. Blue Bell truly is a great company with solid moral values and a bright future.

Tour Brazos Valley Recycling

Charlie Mancuso

The tour of Brazos Valley Recycling was very informative. Charlie and his daughter opened up their operation to us and showed us a different and more practical approach to the recycling business. They appear to be agile in business and willing to make changes to service their customers while conserving resources. I was impressed by the variety of recycling that they are involved with and the large contracts they have been able to acquire with key suppliers. The tour gave me a new appreciation of how things can be done differently.

THURSDAY, JULY 10, 2014

“ChallengeWorks”

Bob Gantt

It was a pretty warm day in College Station as we made our way to the course. We were able to do some great icebreakers to get to know the staff and each other a little better. The team building sessions in our breakout groups were very beneficial. It caused us to work together with our team and our neighbor to achieve a common goal. I learned new things about my team members and was impressed by their ingenuity and talents. Imbedded in the games we played were many metaphors to real life, the job site and the family. I could see many practical applications for the role playing in which we participated. The rock climbing was challenging and fun. It was great to see people surprise the group with their skills, courage and accomplishments. Our breakout group really bonded and learned quite a bit about each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Overview and bus tour of Texas Engineering Extension Service (TEEX)

Mike Wisby

We had a great tour of the TEEX. Mr. Wisby was impressive in his knowledge of training, procedures and good practices. You could tell that he was truly proud of the facility and the great training that it provides to people worldwide. As we toured in the bus around the complex, I was truly awakened to all the planning that is involved in running a safe city, state and nation. The diversity of the training scenarios that TEEX can provide is very impressive. It truly is a leader in the US for training in disasters. I am proud of TAMU's leadership in this area. As we concluded the tour, I reflected upon all that is required to keep us all safe in the case of a disaster. I was thankful for servants like Mr. Wisby, who daily serve the community, state and nation.

THURSDAY, JULY 10, 2014 (cont)

Social and Reception at The AgriLife Center

It was a wonderful reception at the AgriLife Center. There was a great crowd of dignitaries at the event to welcome all of us to TALL. I was impressed by those who attended and really enjoyed getting to know all of them. Mr. Mazurkiewicz had some great opening remarks. He was careful to recognize all the special guests in the crowd and that really impressed me. His professionalism is truly remarkable. It was an honor to introduce ourselves to the group and begin our journey as TALL XIV. I was reminded of the great comradery that we all have in agriculture and reminded of the great leaders that are showing us the way to be leaders of our own.

FRIDAY, JULY 11, 2014

“Setting the Context: Strategy, Policy and the Fate of the Nation” David McIntyre, PhD

I thoroughly enjoyed the presentation by Dr. McIntyre. He was very engaging and had a strong and direct message for all of us. He impressed upon us the difference between strategy and policy. His insight on world events and what drives nations and leaders to act and react was very informative. He also is a true hero and has served his country with honor. I appreciated his direct approach to problem solving and how the complex world needs to be addressed as we enter an era of unprecedented change.

Brigadier General Joe Ramirez

Brigadier General Ramirez was a great speaker. He gave us a background on who the Corps is and what it stands for. His honorable service to our country was evident as he spoke of serving in Iraq. His heart-felt story of presiding at a fallen hero's funeral was stirring and made me proud to be an American. He shared his own story of coming from a great and proud family with humble beginnings and how he chose to escape a life leading to crime in order to attend A&M and go on to serve with distinction in the US Army. Brigadier General Ramirez was very inspiring and moving in his presentation. He stirred in all of us a sense of pride in being part of something bigger and helping our fellow man or woman. It was a privilege to be in the presence of such a leader and hear him speak.

“Responsibilities of the TVMDL” Terry Hensley, MS, DVM

Dr. Hensley gave a very informative presentation on what the Texas Veterinary Lab truly does behind the scenes to keep our animals and food supply safe. I was impressed by the width and breadth of testing done by the lab. The TVMDL is truly an organization based on service to Texas and the US. It's a leader in its field and impressed me with its willingness to reach across state lines to help others.

FRIDAY, JULY 11, 2014 (cont)

“Behind the Scenes” Tour of the George Bush Presidential Archives Robert Holzweiss, Ph.D.

Dr. Holzweiss gave a great overview of the Bush Library and Presidential Archives. Before the tour, I didn't have any idea of how the Archives functioned and to what extent the information is protected and yet still shared where possible with the American public. Dr. Holzweiss' tour was very detailed and informative. He truly appears to be a great professional and very good at what he does.

Closing Remarks and Adjourn Jim Mazurkiewicz, Ph.D.

Dr. Mazurkiewicz closed this initial session of TALL XIV with some closing thoughts. He encouraged us to glean the most we could from this opportunity and reminded us of the opportunity and responsibility we have as TALL class members. He encouraged us to share with our friends, co-workers, family and neighbors about the importance of agriculture in all our lives and how TALL can be a positive influence for good in agriculture.

Take away/Recap:

Great first session of TALL XIV! It was a great opportunity to learn more about my new classmates and meet Dr. Mazurkiewicz. The support staff of TALL, Jennifer and Jackie, are truly great people who know how to organize events and make things go smoothly. I can tell already that this program is going to be a positive and life-changing event for us all. It will certainly involve quite a bit of work, but will be well worth all the effort as we build lifelong relationships with others in agriculture across the state, the nation and possibly the world. I look forward to meeting again with my classmates in October as we continue on this journey to learn more about ourselves, others and the great business of agriculture that we all call home.