

Wes Chandler, #3
TALL XIV
Session 1- College Station, TX
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Welcome/Opening Remarks/Orientation/Introductions

Before Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz began his introduction, I found myself looking around the room, wondering from which part of the great state of Texas my classmates might be coming from. I wondered what type of backgrounds they might have. I assumed we would have many things in common, and that there would be many people who even shared hobbies. As we each stood up and introduced ourselves, I immediately realized that the diversification of the group was remarkable, but we all shared one passion- a deep appreciation for agriculture. It didn't take long for me to realize that I was in the company of some very interesting people with a lot to offer the Ag industry, and it was a very humbling feeling knowing that I had been included in such a prestigious group.

We were welcomed by Dr. Steele, who immediately informed us that while agriculture is one of the greatest assets to our country, there are many struggles ahead for our industry, and it will be up to people like us to make sure we remain viable and relevant.

Texas Department of Criminal Justice Agriculture Today

The session really got kicked off when Mr. Todd Swick came and spoke to us about all the things they are doing at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. I never would have guessed that the prison system could still be so productive. Not only are the prisoners providing such a large portion of their own meals, but many of them are preparing themselves for jobs in the next phase of their lives. They seem to manage their property more efficiently than many for-profit operations do, and are such good stewards of the land and animals in the process. I'm not familiar with the operations in other states, but I have no doubt that they could learn invaluable lessons from their Texas counterpart, and could save thousands if not millions of dollars by implementing a program similar to the one here in Texas; not to mention the personal growth and maturity by the prisoners who are involved in such a program.

Texas A & M Forest Service

We were welcomed to the Texas Forest Service Emergency Operations Center by Mr. Tom Boggus, who gave us a brief overview of the scope of their responsibilities. Mr. Don Galloway then spoke to us about the statistics of fires and of course, about the devastating effects of the Bastrop fires in 2011. We then heard from Mr. Don Hannemann regarding the tools and technology used by the Forest Service to respond to fires. To respond to an emergency such as

the Bastrop fire in 2011, there is so much planning and coordination required. The Forest Service has the chain of command down to an art, and it seems as though they absolutely take over with all authority when they arrive on the scene.

The Texas Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal (TxWrap) and Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal (SouthWRAP) is a great web based tool that can be used not only by professionals in the forestry industry, but also by members of the general public who are interested or want to take every precaution when planning certain events or dealing with anything related to fires. Mr. Curt Stripling was very informative as he guided us through a demonstration of these tools.

Mr. Hughes Simpson wrapped up our Forest Service visit with a demonstration of TxForestInfo.com. There are so many tools on this site that are valuable to any forester or timber/property owner throughout the state of Texas. There is a Timber Decision Simulator that can assist in management of timber or investment of capital, as well as a Timber Supply Analysis that shows the thousands of tons of timber available within a certain radius of your city based on the parameters that you input.

Etiquette Training and Meal

We realized just how little we truly knew about proper dining techniques as Dr. Susan Quiring instructed us in the ways of fine dining. Although most of the practices held a relatively common sense approach, I had simply never given much of it any thought. Dr. Jim had informed us that even though he had been through the course 17 times, he still picked up new things each time. Dr. Quiring told us an intriguing true story about a young man who immediately lost a job opportunity due to poor table manners. I have no doubt that this lesson in etiquette will come in handy several times throughout the course of this TALL program.

AG Media Training

We traveled to the AgriLife Center where we met Dr. Deb Dunsford and the Ag Media training team. This was definitely a new experience for me. We broke up into groups of 3 or 4, and chose different Ag related topics at random to present in the form of a mock news conference. The questions that were asked varied by topic, and many were very relevant and legitimate questions regarding our statements/announcements; others however, were completely off the wall, and as we later found out, were an attempt to illustrate the correct way to handle questions that are off-subject or irrelevant to the matter at hand.

A Different Kind of Career: Under Cover in the CIA

Our next speaker was definitely one that I won't soon forget. Mr. Jim Olson, a retired under cover CIA agent, had such an amazing story of his accounts as a spy in various parts of the world. It was obvious just by listening to him speak that he is a true patriot who has such a passion for our great country. It takes a brave individual not only to be a part of a program like

the CIA spy program, but to be put in so many situations where not only your life is at risk, but the life of your family as well. Fortunately for Mr. Olson, his wife was a very much aware of the risks that came with being married to a spy, as she was one herself. According to Mr. Olson, she was more than capable of taking care of herself in any situation. This lifestyle was one that they very much enjoyed, but it also came with many obstacles. Mr. and Mrs. Olson were not able to tell their own kids the truth about themselves until late in their teenage years. Even worse, Mr. Olson's own father in law was under the impression for many years that Mr. Olson was simply unable to keep a steady job, as he bounced around from job to job on a regular basis as a part of his cover. Mr. Olson openly admitted that there were many struggles that accompanied being a spy, but he added that he would do it again in a heartbeat if he had the chance to start over. I feel certain that I was not the only person intrigued and inspired by listening to this gentleman's unique experiences.

Lunch & Program

We had a great buffet style lunch in the small town of Snook, TX where we met John and Connie Giesenschlag, as well as well as many other local community leaders. The lunch was great, and Mr. Giesenschlag was very friendly, and treated us like family. John Smith of Citizens State Bank and Lynn Angell of Monsanto Company, both of whom are TALL alumnus, spoke to us about their experiences in the program and assured us that we would benefit greatly from having someone like Dr. Jim to lead the way.

From there we went to Caldwell, TX and saw the Wiggins family watermelon operation. Upon arriving, we saw men and women pulling watermelons off a conveyer that weighed/sized and placed a sticker on each melon, and then sent them to a station according to its weight. They were then stacked neatly in large cardboard containers, and picked up by a forklift when the container was full.

Blue Bell Creameries

After seeing the Jody and Clint Wiggins watermelon operation, we traveled to Brenham to take a tour of the most famous creamery in Texas, which is known all over the country, and even around the world. We broke up into three or four groups and took off in different directions. The group that I was in was led by Sam, who had only been working for Blue Bell for about a year. After taking the tour however, I would have thought he had been there his whole life. He was extremely knowledgeable about the operations of the company, knew the employees on a first name basis, and was very passionate about his job. He told us that the Kruse family was very generous to their employees, and their retirement plans offer them ownership in the company. You can imagine my surprise when I found out that Sam was a CPA for Blue Bell- I haven't known many CPA's that were so close to the employees and so familiar with the day to day operations of a company like he is.

After the tour we all got to try a free bowl of any type of ice cream we wanted, and then sat down with Mr. Paul Kruse as well as all the men who guided the group tours. They answered all our questions, and told us that when Blue Bell hires employees, they don't just want to give you a job, they want you to make a career working at Blue Bell. It was easy to see why they have been so successful over the years, and there is no doubt they will continue their success as they expand their operations throughout the United States.

Brazos Valley Recycling

Later that evening, we went to visit Charlie Mancuso and his daughter Amanda Laird at Brazos Valley Recycling. They showed us around their facility, and told us about their plans to expand their operation. They have taken a very simple idea of collecting trash, and expanded it into a very diverse business that includes separating the different types of recycling products, as well as a shredding truck for local businesses, and mulching machines for grinding up wood and used roof shingles. They have also branched out into sanitation disposal, and have been very successful with all of these ventures. The father-daughter duo seems to work really well together, and each of their strengths make up where the other may have a minor weakness.

ChallengeWorks

We spent a fairly large portion of the next day at the Texas A&M University Challenge Course under the direction of Bob Gantt. Although throughout the course of this first session we had begun to get to know our classmates fairly well, this "ChallengeWorks" course only solidified those relationships. We broke up into two teams, and spent most of the day on various leadership, communication, and trust building games/activities, as well as problem-solving and team decision-making challenges. We all took our turn climbing the rock wall, where some pushed their comfort zone and challenged their own fear of heights, and some were quite content guiding the ropes and encouraging their teammates. Before leaving, the two teams devised a "skit" to present to the other team that brought showed the different types of leadership and team building skills that we had worked on throughout the day, and believe it or not, both teams came up with almost identical ideas- a game show skit.

Texas Engineering Extension Service (TEEX) Emergency Training Institute

Once again, we loaded up on the bus and sounded off our numeric roll call to make sure no one had been left behind as we always do before taking off. When we arrived at the TEEX Emergency Training Institute, we were welcomed and shown around by Mike Wisby. It just so happened that a fire school was going on that day as it had been all week, so we got to see exactly how the training occurs. The facility there is the largest of its kind in the world, and people come from countries far and wide to train for various types of situations and scenarios. Sitting on about 300 acres of real estate, this facility is really something to see; there is nothing quite like it, and it's easy to see why it is one of the best there is.

Social and Reception at the AgriLife Center

After a long day of rock climbing and fire schooling, we went back to the hotel and got cleaned up for our reception at the AgriLife Center (by the way, the new AgriLife Center is absolutely amazing). We arrived early, and met many TALL program sponsors and alumni, as well as various leaders from the Texas A&M system, from professors and administrators to men and women involved with the Forest Service and Extension system. Dr. Jim made his opening remarks, and I soon realized as he gave his thanks to the sponsors and others who made this program possible, that this program has more support than I ever would have imagined.

We were welcomed by Mr. Jim Prewitt, and then we heard from Dr. Bill Dugas, who introduced our keynote speaker, Dr. Mark Hussey, Texas A&M University Interim President. All of these great men are very active advocates for agriculture, and it was an honor to hear from each of them.

Our TALL XIV class then gave our own introductions to the audience, and then we were introduced to our dinner hosts for the evening. I really enjoyed this portion of the program, as it gave us each an opportunity to spend time one on one with people who were either in an industry similar to ours or someone who at least has a passion for agriculture just as we all do. My dinner host was Mr. Bill Oates, who is an Associate Director for the Texas A&M Forest Service. We have a wonderful meal at Casa Rodriguez in downtown Bryan and a great visit over the course of the evening. After dinner, our hosts carried us back to our hotel, where we could get some rest and prepare for our final day of the first TALL XIV session.

Setting the Context: Strategy, Policy, and the Fate of the Nation

On the final morning of our session, we heard from Dr. David McIntre, who has obviously done his homework in his respective field. It was amazing to me how he could take such political subjects as terrorism, war, and homeland security, and have such an unbiased approach at trying to produce strategies and form policies to address these types of sensitive issues.

Brigadier General Joe Ramirez

One of the most touching stories of our time in College Station came from Brigadier General Joe Ramirez, who is the Commandant for the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets. He told us about his humble beginnings, and about his parents who were very moral and spiritual people. He came from a large family, and got involved in some things he knew he shouldn't have, but when he got the opportunity to go to college, his parents knew that this would be the only chance to change his life, so they pushed him to go.

He has had such a colorful career, but the most touching story he told was about attending the funeral of a fallen soldier. A mother had lost one of her three sons, and General Ramirez had the responsibility of giving the flag to the family. Obviously, it was a very emotional time for

everyone involved, and when it came time to give that American flag to the mother of that fallen soldier, he told her that words could not express the gratitude that he had for that young man and the sacrifice he had made for his country. She told him not to worry, that she would be sending him all of her sons. He told us that he couldn't help but shed a tear during their exchange of words.

A few years later, General Ramirez was at Texas A&M welcoming all of the new members of the Corps of Cadets, just talking to them, asking them where they were from, and trying to get to know them. One young man approached him, and when General Ramirez asked him where he was from, he named the small town where General Ramirez had attended that funeral for the fallen soldier. On hearing the young man's response, General Ramirez looked behind the young man, only to find the same mother who had told him that she would send him all of her sons. They immediately hugged and had a wonderful reunion, and she told him that she still had one more son coming through the ranks that wanted nothing more than to follow in his brothers' footsteps.

Responsibilities of the TVMDL

After everyone in our TALL class dried their eyes, we welcomed Dr. Terry Hensley, who told us about all the great things that are going on at the Texas A&M Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory. The technology they are using is incredible, and they are very much looking forward to their new facility that they are expecting to be up and running by 2016.

George Bush Presidential Archives

Our last stop for the session was to the George Bush Presidential Museum & Library. Dr. Robert Holzweiss gave us the VIP tour, where we learned so many things about the museum, and in particular about the process of declassifying documents. Of course the question was asked about how many things they come across in those documents that are absolutely life changing, but Dr. Holzweiss informed us that those moments are very rare in his line of work. Dr. Holzweiss made sure that he did not include any personal feelings or politics during the tour, as he said that by doing this, you could potentially change the course of history, whether it's intentional or not.

Closing Remarks and Adjourn

Dr. Jim gave us his final remarks and took us to the Freedom Horse Sculpture for our group photo before we parted ways. It was amazing how close we had gotten in such a short period of time, but we all visited for quite sometimes before we went our separate ways. I have no doubt that everyone is very much looking forward to our next session, and my expectations for this TALL XIV class have definitely been exceeded.