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TALL XV

Session 1- College Station, TX

Tuesday, July 19, 2016

Extension, Education, Expectations!

After much anticipation, nervous energy, and high hopes, we began TALL XV I'm sure in the same way as every other class before us: with a warm welcome from our fearless and ambitious leader Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz. Dr. Mazurkiewicz provided a general overview of what would be expected of us, as well as what we should expect to glean from the TALL program. Dr. Mazurkiewicz shared that the number of hours we would commit to the program were actually more than one would expect to endure to obtain a master's degree. He also spoke of the importance and impact on their lives past TALL alumni credited the program with, and he assured us of the bond we would form with one another.

Dr. Douglas Steele, Director of the AgriLife Extension Service followed with encouragement for us to take what we learn and go forward into the Industry and work as ambassadors for Agriculture. Dr. Steele's sentiments were echoed by Mr. Jim Prewitt of Landmark Nurseries. I feel that it really says something about the TALL program to have the commitment and support from these two gentlemen and many others like them. They understand what is at stake in the this world in relation to feeding a growing population, and they have taken the time to help make sure that young people such as ourselves grow into future leaders of this Industry.

Texas Department of Criminal Justice Agriculture Today

Mr. Todd Swick, program specialist with TDCJ, gave us a great overview of the Department of Criminal Justice's agriculture production system. I had no idea of the scope of their Ag enterprises, operating on almost 140,000 total acres, 37,000 cultivated and 69,000 acres of pasture. Mr. Swick pointed out that the number one priority of the Prison system's farming and ranching enterprise is to provide food and fiber for the inmates reducing the tax burden on the average Texan. From a farrow to finish swine operation, raising their own horses and dogs, a three way breed cross beef production system, operating two feed mills, grain and fiber production, all the way to honey bees and laying hens, it would be an understatement to say that TDCJ's Ag Enterprise mix is diverse.

Texas A & M Forest Service

Our next stop on our inaugural session was at the Texas A&M Forest Service. Having started this journey in production agriculture and growing up on a ranch, it is shocking and humbling to realize how little we as producers know about all of the programs and people behind the scenes

working to help keep ourselves and our properties safe. I had no idea what the Forest Service did, and especially had no idea what all went into their work. I think I may have told everyone I have come in contact with recently about the Forest Service's early warning of fire risk in the Bastrop area, and how that enabled them in to evacuate 5000 people in a two hour time period. Tom Boggus, Don Galloway, and Curt Stripling, all with the Forest Service, did a great job of displaying and explaining many of their on line tools and the new technology they use to assess risk and react to fires in a timely manner. The highlight of the afternoon may well have been when Emergency Coordinator Don Hannemann demonstrated how they use one of their most technologically advanced tools which was a sand table. Topography from anywhere in the country can be overlaid on the table. Staff then builds the terrain out of sand to match the topography. Then, environmental conditions can be added, and realistic fire control measures can be applied to the fire enabling the crew to study the effects of the different treatments. It was impressive the level of technology currently being used by the Forest Service to prevent, study, and minimize the effects of wild fires.

Etiquette Training and Meal

In the interest of adding a little "culture" to our first session, Dr. Mazurkiewicz provided what some may call a refresher and others of us would call starting at square one in regards to etiquette. The main focus was meal etiquette but there was also talk about etiquette in general. Some of the more interesting points shared with us by Mrs. Susan Quiring were the proper way to eat soup with a spoon (scooping the soup up in a motion going away from you), following the lead of the host or hostess, passing every item on the table at least once to your right initially and then only requested items later, the proper resting positions for your silverware, and how to position your silverware to signal the wait staff that you have completed that course. I was greatly relieved to learn that it is proper to eat continental style if you choose to, as I picked up this method in Australia about 15 years ago and find it a much more efficient way to eat. All in all, the etiquette session was very worthwhile and I am sure that it will pay dividends by allowing us to act properly and make a positive impression on those we dine with in the future.

Wednesday, July 20, 2016

TALL XV cohorts cranked up Wednesday morning with a media training session. We started the session by being divided into groups of three. One group at a time, we were taken into the hallway and we were given a semi-controversial topic and about 5 minutes to prepare. We were taken back into the room where a mock press conference was set up, and we were subsequently ambushed by members of the mock media. Topics ranged from subjects such as inappropriate conduct of a 4H advisor with a young person to farmers vs the public concerning groundwater rights. At the end of the session, Dr. Deb Dunsford gave us some tips for handling the media. At the top of the list would be having solid talking points and sticking to them. At times, those being interviewed allowed the discussion to wander off track and usually that leads to a place we do not want to be. The main thing I learned from our Ag Media session is

that I never want to be accosted by the media, but the next important thing was the guidance we were given and how that would definitely help us make the best of any opportunity to advocate for our industry.

Next, we had the pleasure of listening to Dr. Craig Nessler tell us a little more about the AgriLife system and their role in research. Dr. Nessler underscored the fact that Agriculture is the ONLY essential industry in the world. As simple and true as that statement is, I have never really stopped to consider it until now. Sustainability seems to be the new buzzword in our industry these days, and he maintained that the four keys to sustainability are economic viability, stewardship, social acceptance, and resilience. It is a scary thought to think about where Texas Agriculture would be without the AgriLife system and the research they conduct.

Royalty Pecans

Next, we loaded the busses and made the trek towards Caldwell and stopped at Royalty Pecans. We were welcomed and enjoyed a fantastic meal. Hosted by John Giesenschlag, TALL alumnus John Smith, and owner of Royalty Pecans, Mike Adams, we learned more about the diversity of the agricultural community in the Brazos valley. Mr. Adams talked about their operation, which includes 14,000 pecan trees. Intensive management, drip irrigation, and attention to soil health are all factors that help Royalty Pecans remain successful. As a great example of leadership, Mr. Adams spoke about his time on the Texas and American Pecan boards and marketing initiatives they are pursuing to increase demand for their product. There is currently a lot of research pointing out health benefits of pecans that these organizations plan to utilize in their marketing efforts. Our time there ended with a tour of the Royalty Pecans visitor center overlooking their beautiful landscape.

Wiggins Watermelons

Meeting with Jody and Clint Wiggins of Wiggins watermelons was an outstanding lesson in where initiative, perseverance, and hard work can take you in agriculture. Members of a multigenerational watermelon farming and distribution business, you do not have to be there long to see that Jody and Clint run their business like a well-oiled machine. It was interesting to hear about the struggles of a business this size keeping up with government regulations, red tape, and trying to meet the demands of customers and retailers. Mr. Wiggins made the point that many of his competitors were too small in scale to be able to keep up with the many obstacles and regulations that he faced. He shared that his payroll can be anywhere from \$150,000 to \$300,000 per week during harvest. Selling approximately 100,000,000 lbs of watermelons a year, the Wiggins family has built a business to be proud of.

Blue Bell Creameries

With high hopes and dreams of all you can eat Blue Bell, TALL XV cohorts again boarded the bus and made the journey to Blue Bell Creameries in Brenham. I think that this TALL trip may be historic as it was the first class to visit Mr. Paul Kruse and his world famous Blue Bell factory

after a company wide shut down in response to listeria contaminating their ice cream. Mr. Kruse and two of his top executives toured us through the production facility, allowing us to see how the ice cream was made and packaged. As fascinating as the personal tour of the plant was, the most rewarding part of the day was getting to sit in the Blue Bell Boardroom with Mr. Kruse himself, and have a conversation about overcoming challenges that would have put most companies his size out of business. Hearing about how they discarded \$64 million worth of ice cream when listeria was discovered, making the decision to keep going and restart and grow their business, as well as talking about the principles that they have stuck to all of these years that made their company great was priceless. Thankfully, we did get the nod to visit the ice cream counter and hear Mr. Kruse exclaim, "Ice cream is on me. Eat all you want." With sleepy dispositions and full bellies, we reluctantly posed for a picture in the lobby of Blue Bell and then boarded the bus for the ride back to College Station.

Thursday, July 21, 2016

Challenge Works

I am not sure what to say about Challenge Works other than it was awesome! We started off with an introduction and welcome by Bob Gantt and his trusty sidekick Kasey. After doing a few stretches and warm up exercises, we completed some icebreakers and got to know each other a little better. Splitting into two large groups, we separated and then completed several team building exercises. Using creative problem solving, teamwork, and leadership skills, we played several very challenging games. Most activities required our team to listen to a specific set of rules, devise a plan to complete the game or task, follow through with our plan, and then evaluate our performance and make necessary adjustments. One of the highlights of our trip was setting a record for one of the games by successfully transferring 95 tennis balls from one bucket to another through a very round about system. The previous record was 84 balls. It sounds silly, but the process and the teamwork, as well as seeing the differing talents of your cohorts really made the exercises worth-while. We completed our day at the Challenge Works complex on a couple of their ropes courses, suspended 20+ feet in the air, depending on your teammates to keep you safe. It was a little nerve wracking for those of us not fond of heights, but it was great to be challenged and rise to the occasion to meet that challenge.

Texas Engineering Extension Service (TEEX) Emergency Services

After being properly exhausted by all of the high altitude rope climbing and being challenged all day, we visited the TEEX Emergency Training Institute and were welcome by Mr. Mike Wisby. Mr. Wisby gave us a very thorough overview of what types of training they do at the school, how they are funded, and how they have grown through the years. It was interesting to learn that they have an annual budget of \$50 million plus, and they are funded by the customers they serve. At the conclusion of his talk, we boarded the bus and Mr. Wisby gave us a tour of their "scenarios" that cover their 300+ acre facility. Everything from overturned passenger train cars to airplanes, ships, and grain silos, if it could catch fire or a person could become trapped in it,

there's a pretty good chance TEEX has one on their training grounds so that they can better train emergency responders all over the state how to handle a myriad of situations.

TALL XV Reception

Once again witnessing evidence of the influence the TALL program has had throughout the years, those who showed up to support us at the reception Thursday evening read like a who's who of Ag leaders in the local area as well as on the state level. There is no doubt there is widespread support for the program, and it has become more humbling to be a part of every day. Dr. Mazurkiewicz started the program by welcoming our guests and thanking them for their support. Giving a brief overview of the continued success of the program, Dr. Jim went on to introduce Mr. Prewitt who made his second appearance of the week. As a great business man and as a contributor and president of the TALL foundation, Mr. Prewitt is a fine example of an advocate for agriculture that we should all aspire to. The keynote speaker was introduced by Dr. Larry Boleman. We had the distinguished honor of hearing from a great American hero and serviceman, Brigadier General Joe Ramirez. General Ramirez is a great success story of having grown up in a military family in a rough part of town to rising through the ranks of the military and ending up as the Commandant of the Corps of Cadets. Brigadier General Ramirez shared what he feels makes a great leader, and how to effectively lead people. He also shared a very touching story of a family in Kansas whose son paid the ultimate sacrifice for our country. Even after losing one son in Iraq, the mother, whom General Ramirez made an impact on at her son's funeral, willingly encouraged her other sons to enlist and one of them attended Texas A&M for the opportunity to serve under General Ramirez. One cannot help but admire General Ramirez's leadership or the true patriotism displayed by this great family.

After the conclusion of General Ramirez's speech, each TALL XV cohort walked to the podium and introduced themselves. I have been in many programs and have had the opportunity to speak in front of people many times, but there was a surprising sense of pride I felt introducing myself as a TALL XV cohort. It truly is an honor.

Closing out the night, I had the pleasure of dining with local business owner Jim McCord and the Honorable Judge Duane Peters and his wife Bettie. We had a great time, enjoyed a very nice steak, and talked about our common interests in the cattle business. I think that it is very ingenious the way that the TALL program pairs local leaders with cohorts for networking opportunities as well as just the experience of being exposed to different people and different situations.

Friday, July 22, 2016

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

On the final morning of our time together, we started the day with a very interesting discussion about nations and human nature. One of the first points made by Dr. David McIntre was the reason for the United States rise and becoming the greatest country the world has ever known

was due to the reformation and the encouragement of people to read the Word and make up their own minds about what they wanted to believe. In a nutshell, freedom is a powerful thing, and empires, socialism, and kingdoms do not prosper long term because the desire of people to fight for what they truly believe in is removed when levels of freedom are lost. The effects of terrorism on governments and society, explanations for the nature of men, and reasons for the apparent decay of our social system were all discussed at length. Unfortunately, Dr. McIntre did not have sufficient time to go into the solutions to all of these problems due to time constraints.

Government and Public Policy in Today's World

As sort of a follow up to Dr. McIntre's discussion, Dr. Kenneth J. Meier discussed ideal public policy and the fact that the number one goal of Ag policy should be stability. The hot button topics and biggest policy concerns related to agriculture according to Dr. Meier are Trade, Immigration, and Sustainability. It appears that he is right on target with that assessment.

Texas Vet Medical Diagnostic Lab

Rounding out our list of speakers on the final morning of our first session, we received an overview of the Texas Vet Medical Diagnostic Lab. Having been involved in many cases where samples have been sent to the diagnostic lab, as well as knowing people who have been employed there, I took a special interest in hearing about the scope of what the lab does. It is an important job, to say the least, considering the impact that certain diseases could have on our industry. From helping a local rancher identify an issue that could have a significant economic impact on his herd, to early identification of an epidemic that could negatively impact the entire country, I am glad that we have people like Dr. Akey and his staff working hard every day to ensure our safety and profitability.

George Bush Presidential Archives

Finally, the last stop of session one was a behind the scenes tour of the George Bush Presidential Archives. It is unbelievable the resources that it takes to declassify and organize the over 40 million documents present at the Library. This being my first visit to the museum and Library, I learned that researchers may call ahead and request archives be pulled, and then they may photo those archives and take the photos home to complete their research. They are provided with the archives in a monitored location to prevent anyone from tampering with the documents. People come from all over the world to look at records from the archives. We also had the opportunity to view the area where personal artifacts of President Bush's are cataloged and stored. The Library staff shared that every Christmas President Bush 41 used to make the rounds and thank all of them for the work they are doing and wish them a very Merry Christmas. Since his health has been declining he has not been able to make the trip the last few years and they really miss getting to see him.

Conclusion

The only thing left to do at that point in our session was to take a group photo in front of the horse statue near the museum. After squinting heavily for the photo, Dr. Jim concluded our session with a pep talk about getting our narratives done, writing our thank you notes, and keeping in mind the good work we could do for the industry between then and the next time we meet. With a healthy dose of enthusiasm, a slight bit of exhaustion, and a warm and fuzzy feeling from the new bonds we were forming with our cohorts, we parted ways and headed home. TALL XV Session 1 was a resounding success!