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TALL XV
Session 1 – College Station, TX

Growing up on a farm and ranch in West Texas, it's easy for me to relate this state to agriculture. In fact when I think of Texas I think of cotton and cattle. Products produced in Texas benefit not only the United States but many other countries across the globe. However, our industry continues to be threatened. These threats include urbanization, increased regulation, weather, an uninformed public and others. I chose my career path in hopes of developing products that allow producers increased profitability as well as improved quality of life. I believe that TALL is another medium to further complete this task.

The first session of Tall XV began with an address from Dr Jim. He provided a history of the program that proved more extensive than I previously believed. It was very interesting to hear how the program started and when it began in Texas. We also introduced ourselves to the group early in this session and I was extremely impressed and humbled to be selected to participate in TALL XV. Each of my classmates are leaders in their respective fields and I look forward to learning as much as I can from each of them. Dr. Steele spoke of 6 qualities that are important for leadership and challenged us to be voices for Texas Agriculture. Mr. Prewitt spoke to the group providing some expectations for us as members of TALL as well as revealing his passion for the Ag Community and this program. I enjoyed learning about his outreach programs which only further cemented his sound advice on leadership.

Our first speaker was Todd Swick with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. I enjoyed Mr. Swick's presentation very much. Not only did he have some staggering statistics about the prison farm system but included several humorous stories. I could tell he enjoys his occupation and was very impressed with his knowledge of each individual farm, ranch or prison unit. He believes the best way to lead is by setting a good example. I have conducted research trials and serviced products on the prison farm here in the Brazos Valley. While this particular property is impressive I did not realize how much food a fiber are produced across the state by the inmates even today.

Upon the conclusion of the first presentation of TALL XV we took our first bus ride. I did not realize that the Texas Forest Service Command Center was located in my backyard. We were greeted by the Director, Tom Boggus. Tom did a great job explaining the large scale that the Forest Service operates and had some interesting and helpful personal remarks. I could tell he enjoyed addressing our group and we all enjoyed his comments. A specific chain of command was mentioned several times throughout the afternoon. I agree with this style of leadership that the Forest Service does not micro manage each individual station. They get the resources in place and allow the local leaders to make local decisions.

We then learned how the forest service does its unbelievably stressful and important job. Mark Stanford, Don Hannemann, Curt Stripling and Hughes Simpson all presented specific tools used to prevent and fight wildfires. We were able to look at specific fires and all the associated statistics. These included the fires of 2011 one which threatened my parents farm in West Texas. The technology available for mapping and viewing these fires was very impressive. The conversation then turned to prevention. We were informed that most of the state burned every five years before it was settled. This kept the fuel available to a wildfire at a minimum and did not allow for such uncontrollable and destructive wild fires. Increased population and urban expansion are also reasons wild fires are more devastating today. We also learned about all the web based resources available to the public. These sites are designed to assist users in managing their individual properties for fire prevention or prediction.

Our last scheduled speaker for the evening was Dr. Susan Quiring of Susan's Ballroom dance and Etiquette. She began her presentation by laying down some ground rules and some "YOU WILL NEVER DO THIS AGAIN" bad habits we might have. With each course I learned more about what I might have been doing wrong but more importantly why I was doing these things taught by my mother and grandmother. The most enlightening comment explained that all etiquette was design to slow down the meal and expand the conversation and enjoyment with other diners. However the most enjoyable part was watching Ms Susan correcting the wait staff as they served the meal.

Wednesday began with a quick bus ride to west campus where we met Dr. Deb Dunsford with the Ag Communication Dept. I was unsure and nervous about what we would be required to do but Dr Deb provided some expert coaching. More importantly, she explained why this experience was important. We were required to participate in a mock press conference on “interesting” topics. With only minutes to prepare it was very important to work as a team and think quickly. Some groups did better than others and some groups were definitely more entertaining than others. Dr. Leggett’s advice was to stay on track and not to provide information that was not requested. She also suggested to be prepared and to stay informed on current topics. Dr. Deb then explained that we should be cautious when approached by an unknown media source. Per Texas law a conversation can be recorded as long as one of the individuals is aware that it’s being taped. Although this was an uncomfortable task I did learn form the experience.

Our next speaker had a very impressive resume. Dr. Craig Nessler is the current director of Texas A&M AgriLife Research. Before excelling in this prestigious role he was a professor of biology, Associate Department Head and director of the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station as well as dean for research in Virginia Tech’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. While at Virginia Tech he was the first person to metabolically engineer an increase in vitamin C in plants. I feel this is the type of research Dr. Nessler really enjoys and promotes. He spoke of the importance of agriculture in the politics of today’s world. Agriculture = food and food = peace is a phrase I found enlightening. We tend to be strictly focused on the dollars and cents of production while some regions of the world cannot produce enough food. I also appreciated his definition of Sustainable Agriculture. First the practice must be economically viable. Next it must properly steward the environment and natural resources. The third requirement is to be socially acceptable in other words the majority of the public should not object. Lastly the techniques must be resilient to shock. These might include drought, commodity price etc. I enjoyed Dr. Nessler’s comments and am proud he is the director of AgriLife Research.

Our next event was a lunch meeting with several producers of various crops in the Brazos Valley. I have been looking forward to this event since being selected to TALL XV. I have

assisted with or spoke at this lunch meeting for TALL XII, XIII and XIV. We met in the impressive location of Royalty Pecans owned by Mike Adams. Mr. John Giesenschlag began the meeting by addressing the class. Mr. John is such an inspired individual and really believes in the leaders TALL helps create. He also sets a great example by standing up for agriculture and our local community. Mr. Adams then explained his pecan operation and the importance of being involved in agriculture policy. I agree that if we are not proponents of our local production regions, regulations might dictate how and what we are able to produce. It was also interesting to learn about the global pecan export markets he is very involved in creating in places like China and India.

We then traveled to the Wiggins Watermelon warehouse to learn about this family and watermelon production. The Wiggins family and I have rented land from the same landlord for many years. This can be a difficult situation as some of the herbicides we are developing have excellent efficacy on watermelons. However, I never knew the whole history of where and how the business started five generations earlier. It is amazing that they are able to produce almost six million watermelons per year and the quality of the product is not compromised. I know they have almost a cult following in the College Station area.

I was very excited about our last stop of the day. I have not toured the Blue Bell Creamery in many years and have never met the CEO Mr. Paul Kruse. Mr. Kruse greeted us warmly and was excited to show us the plant and visit about Blue Bell. After a quick tour we were invited into a large board room where Mr. Kruse had some encouraging words about agriculture and TALL. I found it interesting that early in his career he did not want to work at the plant but had a law practice in Brenham. Eventually the conversations lead to the listeria contamination and subsequent consequences. Mr. Kruse explained the process from recalling millions of gallons of ice cream, rebuilding the creamery and trying to take care of the affected employees. He told us many examples of individuals providing support and heart warming stories how Blue Bell was important to them and their family. He then gave us some powerful advice on leadership. Shortly after the contamination the company decided to fix the problem, reopen and survive this horrible ordeal. Once the decision was made he would not let anyone

look back. The focus was to fix the problem and move forward. I was very impressed and know that his leadership and confidence drove the company to succeed. He then invited us to the store to eat as much ice cream as we wanted – and we did.

We spent most of Thursday at the TAMU Challenge Works. Bob Gantt, the program coordinator, greeted the group to give a history of the program and what they strive to teach each participant. We started our day with activities designed to help the group become more comfortable and acquainted. I was grateful for this as I was still trying to learn everyone's name and background. As the activities continued I noticed a trend, we could not succeed without every individual's input. Listening to instructions and following someone else's lead is another lesson we learned. It can be difficult for confident, strong willed individuals to allow themselves to be led. Our last challenge required the support of the whole team. We were required to maneuver simple obstacles that happened to be forty feet off the ground. At first, I was reluctant that my classmates were responsible for my safety should I fall. We each took a turn holding the rope that supported an individual as he or she climbed and maneuvered the obstacle. I'm glad to report that no EMT was required. Early in the day I had my doubts on the value of the Challenge Works. However, I found it to be very informative and actually fun.

After the challenge course we were allowed to visit the Texas A&M Engineering Extension Serves (TEEX) or fire school. This was impressive as trainings were ongoing while we were at the facility. Mike Wisby, the Associate Division Director, spoke to us about the history of TEEX and what types of trainings are conducted there. They train on four specific areas municipal, industry, coastguard standard and airports. I was impressed by the number of individuals trained per year but also the percentage of these individuals from foreign countries. The scenarios seemed very real word as large fires were being extinguished as Mr. Wisby spoke. We were then allowed to visit the other training mockups. These included ships, a destroyed city and even a farm with grain bins, tractors etc. As a College Station resident I sometimes get discouraged with the traffic during the fire school weeks but I have a new respect for the important training and instruction that is conducted at TEEX.

Thursday evening concluded with the reception at the Hildebrand Equine Complex. I enjoyed meeting and visiting with the guests that were invited from the local Ag community. The speaking portion began with Dr Jim addressing the group and providing some background information. The highlight of the evening had to be the keynote speaker Brigadier General Joe Ramirez Jr. General Ramirez presented his background story from an inner city Houston kid to his current position as the Commandant of the Corps of Cadets at Texas A&M University. This included a decorated career in the US Army where he commanded an artillery battalion in Iraq. He explained how important it was to know the individuals under his leadership and understand their concerns. It was evident that he took this very seriously as he knew all 800 of his battalion by name. Although this is an extreme scenario, we can use this advice in any leadership role. General Ramirez also shared a moving story about a funeral he presided over in rural Nebraska. The support he witnessed for the fallen soldier and his family was very inspiring. He then challenged us to live in such a way that we have no regrets. I thank General Ramirez for his service and for the chance to hear his story. I am also proud that he has chosen to lead the young men and women of the Corps of Cadets here at Texas A&M University. We were then introduced to our dinner host. Michael and Shay Goudeau treated me to a wonderful meal and good conversation.

Friday morning began with an interesting lecture by Dr. David McIntyre. Dr. McIntyre is the Director of the Integrative Center for Homeland Security. Before this role he served and taught strategy in the US Army. He also has taught at West Point, George Washington and UT. Dr. McIntyre spoke about the difference between education and training and how education is important for an individual to derive at his own conclusions. He also defined states, nations and empires and how these classifications affect the safety of its citizens. I also enjoyed listening about his theory on the blessings of necessity and the curse of plenty. Dr. McIntyre provided a wealth of knowledge on these interesting and serious topics.

Dr. Kenneth Meier continued our political themed discussions. He has conducted research on the policy governing everything from education and insurance to tobacco and gun control. Currently he is evaluating the politics of minority education and how institutions are

governed. Dr. Meier spoke on how public policy should be derived and the turbulence of our agriculture industry. This turbulence derives from changes in technology, interrelated policy, international markets and weather. I enjoyed Dr. Meier's lecture except for a slide containing his predictions for the upcoming elections.

Our final lecture was presented by Dr. Akey of the Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Lab. He gave us a history of the lab since its inception in 1967. This is one of the busiest diagnostic labs in the country receiving 600 samples per day. We also learned of the collaboration with other countries to help test as well as train scientist on proper methodology. Dr. Akey was very excited to update us on a new lab being built on campus. I was impressed with the capabilities for handling extremely contagious diseases.

Matt Lee with the George Bush Presidential Archives presided over our final session of the week. He has worked with the Bush Library for the past ten years. I was very surprised to hear that the majority of these documents were still in their original paper form. Mr. Lee explained how hard it was to convert the information to an electronic form because as technology improves, systems change and support for the older system decreases. He showed us where the documents are stored and explained how easy it is to obtain the documents for photographs or research. We were also allowed to view some of the items presented to President Bush while he served. There are many more items than what is displayed in the library. After the tour of the archives we visited the museum where I learned about our 42nd president.

Dr Jim concluded the first session of TALL XV with some words of encouragement and gratitude. I was surprised how well I knew my classmates by the end of this week. We all had encouraging words for each other regarding up coming work or children etc. I am excited for our next session in the Texas Panhandle.