



Meet FFA's Shining Stars

Four exceptional entrepreneurs were named American Stars at the National FFA Convention. **BY CLAIRE VATH**

Each year the national FFA organization names 16 finalists for its prestigious American Star awards. We featured those in our October 2008 issue. Out of the 16, four winners are chosen—one in each category.

At the 81st National FFA Convention in Indianapolis, Ind., this October, Derek Lowrey of the Trenton FFA was named American Star in

Agricultural Placement; Laura Bruner, Pettisville FFA, American Star in Agriscience; Travis Schnaithman, Garber FFA, American Star Farmer; and Jason Hanstedt, Pulaski FFA, American Star in Agribusiness.

As they proudly wear their blue jackets and clutch their plaques, grinning comes easily to the group. After all, they've earned it. *The Progressive Farmer*

Left to right: Derek Lowrey, Laura Bruner, Travis Schnaithman and Jason Hanstedt PHOTO: MARY ANN CARTER

got to sit down with Derek, Laura, Travis and Jason after the ceremony.

When asked why programs like FFA are so crucial, the unanimous answer is “leadership.” As for what they’ll do with the prize money, they all laugh. “I’ll use it to fund my education,” says Laura. The guys’ answers include “investing in stock” and “putting the money back into FFA projects.”

Milking responsibility

AMERICAN STAR IN AG PLACEMENT

Early on, Derek Lowrey watched his father take a job in town to save money for his farming operation. Following suit, the Laredo, Mo., native did just that, doing odd jobs at a neighboring dairy. Within months, Lowrey began milking cows. “I never milked a cow before I worked there,” he laughs. “I never pictured dairy being part of my future.”

Lowrey also began his FFA Supervised Agricultural Experiment his freshman year of high school, purchasing and backgrounding feeder heifers. His dairy income goes into savings for the farm he hopes to someday purchase.

Aside from those dairy responsibilities, Lowrey is the farm’s resident mechanic. He also helps neighbors with chores and operates his own custom farming enterprise, while expanding his beef backgrounding operation. To top it all off, the 21-year-old has 25 antique tractors in his collection, *and* he’s in college.

Reaching for the stars

AMERICAN STAR FARMER

When Travis Schnaithman attended the 2000 Oklahoma FFA Convention, he was awestruck. “I couldn’t believe a person only a few years older than me could have a program that consisted of over 60 cows and 350 acres of wheat!” It was then he envisioned an operation of similar magnitude. “I really started my eighth-grade year, following my grandpa around.”

That can-do attitude and sweat equity paid off. The 21-year-old from Garber, Okla., now has 75 Suffolk ewes, six rams, 67 Maine-Anjou influence cows, 3½ bulls, 62 bred heifers and 74 stocker heifers. He also farms 907 acres of wheat, soybeans and alfalfa.

And he’s learned a little about self-promotion along the way, fostering good customer relations. The Oklahoma State University agribusiness senior plans to

return home as a fifth-generation farmer. “I don’t want to be the generation that lets it slip,” he adds earnestly.

Ending hunger

AMERICAN STAR IN AGRISCIENCE

While most farm kids happily join clubs promoting agriculture, third-generation FFA member Laura Bruner of Pettisville, Ohio, was initially resistant to the idea. “I told my parents I didn’t want to be in that class,” she laughs. Soon, though, Bruner found her niche at agriscience fairs. “I was astonished that my research could have real world applications,” she says.

Her breakthrough project, though, came in the form of the squash variety, Cucurbita pepo, which, Bruner explains, “has the potential to help with world hunger in third-world countries. It is cheap and easy to grow. It also has high nutritional value.”

That research, including in-depth genetics, was furthered while working at Rupp Seeds. Now at The Ohio State University, the 20-year-old works in the biology lab and aims to obtain a PhD in plant genetics.

As part of her research, Bruner has traveled to several impoverished countries. “Through these trips, I believe I have obtained a better grasp of how best to become a positive influence for the rapidly changing fabric of agriculture in America.”

Not your average junk dealer

AMERICAN STAR IN AGRIBUSINESS

Jason Hanstedt combined his love of the outdoors with sheer economics. After honing his forestry skills on his parents’ acreage, the 21-year-old Pulaski, Wis., student began his own wood and recycling business.

“I started in a firewood background,” he says. For the past few years, Hanstedt has also been in the scrap iron business. “We don’t portray the typical junk dealer,” he says. “We try to keep things environmentally friendly.”

In his business, Hanstedt has felt the sting of the economic downturn. “In the last 2½ weeks,” he says, “the steel in my warehouse has gone from \$300 a pound down to about \$110 a pound.”

But the 21-year-old remains cheerful and optimistic about his future. Now, he says, “my hope is to continue building the business into a bigger and bigger enterprise in the community and become a recognized community business.” ●



on the web

To see all 16 nominees for the American Star awards and more, visit about.dtnpf.com/ffa