

**By Mary Rezac**

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LINCOLN -- Melissa Keyes was giving a presentation about agriculture when a boy from Lincoln asked her, "What's a farm?"

"It was kind of sad," said Keyes, a senior at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "Nebraska's a huge agriculture state; these kids might live right next to a farm and not know what that is."

Keyes' passion for "telling the story of agriculture" and correcting misinformation was what drove her to become an Agricultural Ambassador last year.

A special outreach of the National FFA Foundation, the Agricultural Ambassador program trains 20 students annually to give presentations on various agricultural topics. Students are selected from across the nation to receive a \$1,000 scholarship for the year and give up to 30 presentations to an array of audiences.

Jenna Genson, the adviser for the ambassadors through the National FFA Foundation, said the idea for the program started about 10 years ago with the goal of simply informing the average person about agricultural practices.

"It was really spearheaded by two of our major sponsors who saw a need for more young people talking about [the agriculture industry]," Genson said. "These sponsors recognized how valuable it is to have non-employees sharing the message so it didn't seem like a company initiative or a sales pitch, per se."

The ambassadors give presentations to any group of any age, in both urban and rural settings. Mollie Wilken, a UNL senior who also served as an ambassador last year, said she learned to tweak her message based on her audience.

"If I was in rural areas, I mostly talked about being an advocate, because those people are usually more familiar with what's going on in the industry," Wilken said. "But in urban areas I talked more about production practices and why they're done the way that they are."

Wilken said one of the biggest misconceptions about agriculture production is that animals are treated poorly. Wilken, whose parents own a cattle feedlot, said her background made her particularly passionate about that topic.

"I wanted people to know that we respect animals more than anything; we make sure they're happy, we make sure they're healthy," Wilken said. "We ensure that they have a very good life and then when they're sent to the processing plant, there's not an inch of their body that isn't used for something."

Wilken also recalled someone asking her whether farmers keep the best meat for themselves and sell the rest to the general public.

"I had to assure him that we produce food that we ourselves are proud of and we would feed our own bodies and our own children," she said.

"But that was also one of the best parts about this opportunity, was being able to learn what the average consumer was thinking about agriculture," Wilken said. "I realized that the little things I thought were easy to understand were not, if you've never been exposed to the industry."

Genson said consumer awareness is a main goal of the presentations.

"Farmers and producers are basing their lives on this industry; what they do is not a secret," Genson said. "That's why we're sharing the story of agriculture; there's a lot of perceptions that farmers are hiding something when they're not. We try to create a presentation environment where people can ask questions that will be answered openly and honestly."

Keyes said one of her favorite parts of the program was working with kids from urban areas and opening their eyes to what it really means to be a farmer.

“I was at a school in Omaha with my sisters ... some of (the students) asked if we have electricity, if we drive old cars, if we wear overalls. When they think of a farmer they think of a cartoon,” Keyes said. “Then they see me and my sisters and we look like anybody else.”

Informing kids is also a good way to inform parents, Keyes noted. “When kids learn about something new, they’re so excited and that was so cool to see,” Keyes said. “And you know most of them are going to go home and talk to their parents about it and spread the message about agriculture.”

Wilken said she remains close to the other ambassadors she met during her time in the program and would recommend the experience to anyone in the field of agriculture.

“I would really encourage anyone who has a passion for agriculture and who wants to truly make an impact to apply and try it,” Wilken said. “It’s not every day that you get pushed to do something as great as this and to really do something good for our industry.”

For more information about the program and how to apply, visit:

<https://www.ffa.org/programs/outreach/agambassadors/Pages/default.aspx>