

INTERVIEWER: You may be familiar with the distinctive blue corduroy jacket with the fancy gold emblem that means its owner is a member of the Future Farmers of America. There are roughly more than 300 FFA chapters in high schools and colleges across Minnesota, and many of the young adults involved are at the state fair in Saint Paul right now showing off their prized crops, landscapes, and livestock. T.J. Brown is the Minnesota State Fair FFA superintendent. He's on the line. Hey, T.J. how are you?

T.J. BROWN: I'm good. How are you?

INTERVIEWER: Good, thank you. See, when did FFA start then? In the '20s?

T.J. BROWN: Nationally, it started in 1928. Minnesota, I believe was '31. Don't quote me. I should probably know that, but don't quote me on that.

INTERVIEWER: It's OK. I've always wanted to know, what was behind the founding of FFA?

T.J. BROWN: That's a great question in a history lesson. At that time in our country, there was a big push for vocational education. And so that created ag education, actually, in, I think, 1917. And then FFA started about a decade later, which was just the student organization tied to those high school classes. So that is one thing that makes FFA very distinct from 4-H. FFA is distinctly tied to high school such as the school's concert band or the football team.

INTERVIEWER: Oh. OK. And I bet it was probably boys only for a long time?

T.J. BROWN: It was boys only for a very long time. 1969 is when they officially started allowing girls. There's quite a bit of rumors and folklore about girls who had participated earlier with their brothers' names and stuff like that. But officially, 1969.

INTERVIEWER: Because there is a growing number of farmers who are Black, Indigenous, folks of color, do you see more BIPOC youth joining FFA chapters now?

T.J. BROWN: Yeah. For sure, just in the last couple of years, we're starting to see an uptrend there too, which is great and very much needed. And honestly, it was a thing-- I mean, just completely transparent was something FFA was faulted with for quite a few years. But in a sense, it's a reflection of where these chapters are at and the schools that they're located in.

And so you get to greater Minnesota and you get to a lot of these places that was a reflection of the population. But we're seeing this growth, especially, in those BIPOC populations because we're starting to get more and more chapters in more diverse schools, which wasn't the case for sure just five years ago.

Minneapolis and both Saint Paul school districts have added agricultural education programs just in the last three years at a number of their high schools actually. That coupled with other suburban ones and some larger towns out in greater Minnesota have brought back FFA chapters, Mankato which is where I live. I just started an ag program four years ago and hadn't had one for 30 years.

But that totally opens the door to a whole different set of students that haven't been involved in FFA. So it's certainly at state convention stuff. You're starting to see a better representation of Minnesota's population from that standpoint.

INTERVIEWER: Now, let me ask you about the show, the FFA Livestock Show, because it's the event most familiar to folks, I think. And it's a huge event.

T.J. BROWN: That's correct. The first FFA show at the Minnesota State Fair was 1948, so that's why we're celebrating the 75th show this year. It wasn't too far into the '50s that they recognized that we had the largest FFA show in the nation, and we've held that title ever since. Give or take every year about 1,000 students and anywhere from about 1,000 crop samples, about 200 ag mechanics projects, and roughly 2,000 head of livestock.

INTERVIEWER: And we're talking about everything-- sheep, beef, dairy, hogs, goats.

T.J. BROWN: Yeah. That's correct. Beef cattle, dairy cattle, sheep, swine, and goats. We are looking at adding poultry and rabbits next year to the show, to the lineup.

INTERVIEWER: Now, I have to tell you, that I have shown horses at the state fair right across the street there from the cattle barn and it has always amazed me to watch the kids come in with their livestock in the wee hours. It's like a little city and the kids descend, and it's pretty amazing to watch.

T.J. BROWN: Yeah. That's a shocker for most people. They don't realize that in those barns, if they go to the fair multiple times, the livestock change over. There's actually three different sets of livestock. The first weekend of the fair is one 4-H, primarily is there with all of their livestock. And then roughly, about 1:00 AM open class is there with all of their livestock and then we'll switch out again for FFA.

INTERVIEWER: OK. So we have all these kids. But I've always wanted to know this too. Where do the kids stay? If 4-H has their building, where do the FFAers stay?

T.J. BROWN: Yeah. So there's 600 beds above the cattle and hog barns and four different rooms. And people in campus and then a few that don't have room do the hotel thing. But for the most part, everybody is in these dorms above the barns, which is great fun and a good memory but it's literally World War II surplus army bunks three high. We don't put anybody in the third bunk anymore.

But communal bathrooms and showers and those buildings were built as public work projects back in the '20s or earlier, and it's largely unchanged up there.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, my goodness. And we should say that firsthand about this because you were an FFA in high school.

T.J. BROWN: That's correct. I started showing entering my ninth grade year and all the way up into college. And every year, enjoyed staying in those dorms and each room holds almost a couple people. And so some kids alarms are going off at 4:00 AM to go melt cows and other people are rolling in at 11. You don't get a whole lot of good sleep for those four days. But it is an experience and a memory.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me what it feels like to be in these kids' shoes right now. I mean, for some of these kids, they've worked, what? More than a year with their animals.

T.J. BROWN: Yeah. If it's a breeding animal, you're right. A year or possibly longer. That they've been working with those livestock. Training them, feeding them, washing them, grooming-- feeding. Very precise rations. Show livestock are baby-- beyond belief, probably, far more so than people who are way too caring of their pets.

Show livestock takes that to a whole new level. And so when a young person has spent hundreds if not 1,000 hours caring for that animal to get to walk into the ring for 30 seconds, maybe up to 10 minutes to ops to be evaluated. And all that's based on one person's impression, a judge.

We try to bring in very good national caliber judges, but it's still one person's opinion, and is still a subjective art of judging livestock. That whole year's worth of work is riding on that opinion and see what ribbon we're going to get and what premium we're going to earn. And it's suspenseful and there's a whole lot of emotions. We see kids crying with joy, crying with sadness. Sometimes it's hard to see, but it happens.

It's just one of those really awesome life learning experiences. Just crowds going nuts, and that's awesome because you know how much work the kids put into it. And it really does ramp up level of responsibility and teaches a lot of life skills.

INTERVIEWER: So did you win a ribbon at the fair?

T.J. BROWN: Yeah. I won a few back in the day.

INTERVIEWER: Good for you, OK. So you know what you're talking about.

T.J. BROWN: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: See, what do you say to young folks to prepare them for winning or losing? And I ask that because I know you've been an FFA instructor since you left being an FFA youth.

T.J. BROWN: Yeah. Nothing you really get prepared for in college when you're learning to be a teacher, how to deal with that, but you're just trying to help them see the bigger picture. Always try to look at the positives, assure them this is just a glimpse in time, but it's teaching them skills and foundation for the rest of their life.

INTERVIEWER: See, before you go, I bet you-- if you were to ask 1,000 kids, they probably have 1,000 different answers. But do you think the big prize is the supreme champion, especially, on the breeding side for each animal?

T.J. BROWN: Yeah, for sure. On the breeding side, there's no doubt it's the supreme champion. So Monday morning of Labor Day will be when we award the supreme champion in each of those livestock species. So that is, for sure, the thing that most people turn out to the award show to see.

In the regular livestock show, people only compete with their breed and against their like-breed, the same animal, and we choose the winner of each breed. But then we bring back the champion from each specific breed like a dog show where you end with golden retrievers competing against a bulldog and is competing against a chihuahua and a Saint Bernard.

INTERVIEWER: Best in show. Yeah.

T.J. BROWN: Yeah. Best in show. They have no similarity whatsoever, but who's just the best overall characteristic of their type? That's the really big award. The big title, the big banner. That's Monday morning, and I believe 10:00 AM in Compeer Arena, that's-- what most people turn out for, they want to see that.

INTERVIEWER: And then after the show and after the fair ends, you go on vacation.

T.J. BROWN: Yeah. I go right back to work.

[LAUGHTER]

Yep.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I appreciate your time T.J. It sounds like it's an awful lot of fun. A lot of work, but a lot of fun.

T.J. BROWN: Yeah. Absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: T.J. Brown is the Minnesota State Fair FFA superintendent. He mentioned going back to work. He's also a teacher of agribusiness at South Central College in North Mankato. By the way, that big switch over in the barns happens looks like Friday. The FFA competitions start Saturday. And there will be presentations this weekend honoring 75 years of the FFA at the Minnesota State Fair. You can catch that on the small stage outside the Miracle of Birth barn.