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By NCTA News

FFA students talk it up virtually

CURTIS, Neb. – When FFA students across Nebraska were unable to give speeches as their Nebraska State FFA Convention in Lincoln was canceled in early April, a college ag teacher said “let’s go virtual!”

Doug Smith, associate professor of animal science and agriculture education at the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture in Curtis, pitched his proposal to the Nebraska Department of Education and State FFA leaders.

All gave an enthusiastic thumbs up for the virtual challenge.

“Our goal was to offer high school FFA students an opportunity to give their state-qualifying speeches from District Leadership Development Events in February and March,” said Smith.

Within a week, 48 FFA students signed up as Smith assigned each a time slot for virtual Zoom presentations on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday mornings of this past week.

“I was surprised at how quickly it all came together for the students,” said Ashtyn Vivion, Alliance FFA advisor and a former Nebraska State FFA officer. “My three state qualifiers jumped at the chance to give their speeches.”

Due to coronavirus pandemic health directives closing the NCTA campus and high schools, the judges, students and FFA leaders connected virtually.

Professor Smith was at his kitchen table in Curtis, where he maneuvered two contest Zoom rooms simultaneously from side-by-side electronic devices. Participants were from FFA chapters spanning all of Nebraska.

Eager FFA speakers did much the same at Smith, speaking to cameras on cell phones, tablets or computers from their home offices, living rooms, or even the quiet zone in a bedroom.

One at a time, each entered the Zoom waiting room, prepped to deliver a virtual speech with no one present other than on a screen.

“I am so grateful that we had this experience – they are thinking about the students,” said Brionna Schafer of Alliance. “There is still something I can do with FFA in my senior year.”

On contest morning, two judges in each virtual room evaluated speeches in live time as the local FFA advisor and a Nebraska FFA leader logged on virtually, as well.

“I really liked the virtual part of it,” said Schafer, who tackled the difficult topic of suicide by agricultural producers. “This gave me opportunities to have an extra practice before state convention and to get feedback from the judges.”

Schafer, who will study pre-law at the University of Wyoming this fall, also qualified for state in her first foray into FFA with her chapter’s Career Development Event teams for Ag Sales and Farm and Agribusiness Management.

Vicky Armstrong, Maywood FFA advisor, gave the format high marks.

“I really enjoyed it as everything flowed very smoothly,” Armstrong said. “I saw it from the perspective of an advisor who had students participating and as a judge (of cooperative speaking).”

Her two Maywood students, Kohl Rutherford, a sophomore, and Karlie Gerlach, a senior, were in public speaking. The topics, respectively, were poultry in the Jr. division (grades 9 and 10) and global agricultural trade in the Sr. division (grades 11 and 12).

Gerlach, who graduates in May, plans to study agricultural economics at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The week prior to the NCTA contest, Rutherford and Gerlach practiced their speeches on Zoom. They tested the technology setup and acoustics at their home environments. Virtual speaking was a first for each.

“The NCTA event was a good opportunity for the kids to prepare for the state contest,” Armstrong said.

While a format for state LDE’s are not yet finalized, Nebraska FFA announced Friday that Career Development Events will be conducted in a virtual format.

Professor Smith enjoyed offering the virtual event. “These FFA students took the virtual challenge and did a great job.”

NCTA’s agriculture education program awarded prizes to the top five speakers in each category:

FFA Creed

1. Emma Peterson- Gothenburg
2. Annsley Vernon- York
3. Whitley Rut- Arthur County
4. Jacie Wolfinger- SEM (Sumner-Eddyville-Miller)
5. Hadleigh Hoos- Gordon-Rushville

Jr. Public Speaking

1. Mary Worthing- Arthur County
2. Berren Strobe- O’Neill
3. Levi Schiller- West Point
4. Spencer Walahoski- SEM
5. Seth Wert- Central City

Sr. Public Speaking

1. Payton Schiller-West Point
2. Lindsay Stuckey- York
3. Seth Daup- Gothenburg
4. Jocelyn Hamilton- West Holt
5. Victoria Perry- Shelby-Rising City

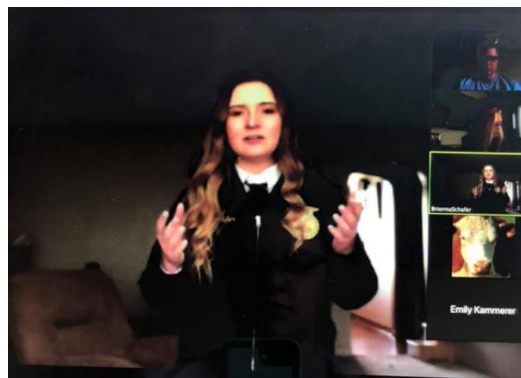
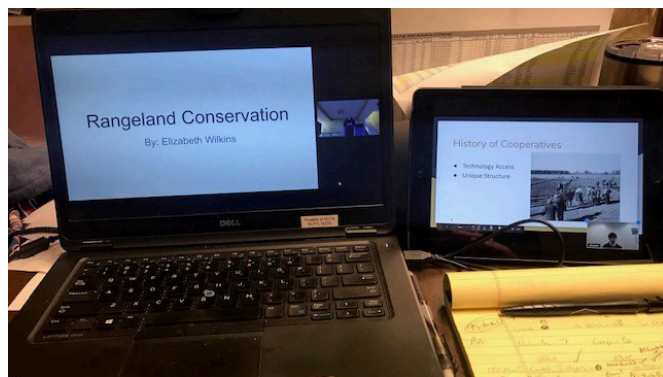
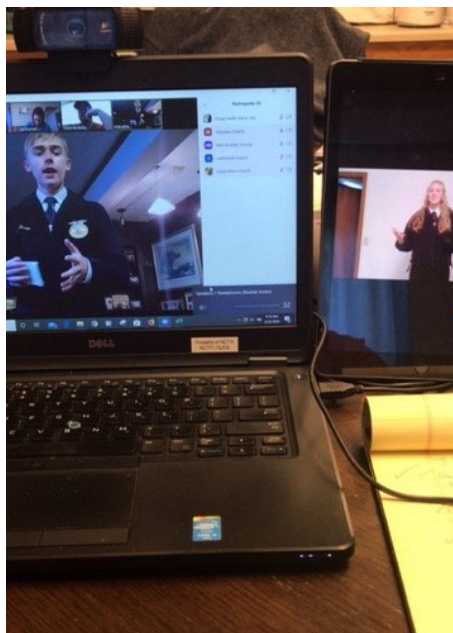
Cooperative Speaking

1. Alex Worthing- Arthur County
2. Abby Scholz- BerMis (Bertrand-Loomis)
3. Morgan Wallinger- Stuart
4. Jenny Goesch- Boyd County
5. John Esser- York

Natural Resources Speaking

1. Emma Ohm- Arthur County
2. Emma Stewart- Lakeview
3. Emma Bixler- Neligh-Oakdale
4. Elizabeth Wilkins- Ainsworth
5. Audrey Reiter- SEM

For information about the NCTA Ag Ed program, see <https://ncta.unl.edu/agriculture-education> or email Smith at doug.smith@unl.edu.



Nebraska FFA students used a virtual format for public speaking in a statewide program. The Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture hosted five Zoom events on three mornings this week. (Courtesy photos)

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