

Flying High



Former NJAA member soars with FFA.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**, field editor

Even when ninth grader Abbey Gretsch was just getting started in FFA, her mom, Anne, says she was hooked.

"She'd come home and talk about FFA, but she was afraid," recalls Anne. "She'd tell me, 'Mom, I don't know if I can do it.'"

Anne gave her a plaque that said, "What if I fall? But my darling, what if you fly?"

Considering Abbey will log an estimated 100,000 miles during her year as National FFA Southern Region vice president, much of

it in the sky, it seems as if her mom was pretty prophetic.

It also seems that Anne and her husband and Abbey's dad, Fred, gave her the perfect flying lessons when they gave her the opportunity to show Angus heifers. The skill sets required for success in the showing and as a national officer are remarkably similar.

For starters, the Lexington, Ga., 20-year-old says, "When you show, you learn to make friends even though you're competing."

This is definitely a skill she has put to use in FFA. First, she competed with two other candidates for Georgia's nomination. Then, 42 states sent candidates for six national offices.

"You learn hard work and a work ethic," says Gretsch. "To do well in showing, you have to work at it. The preparation work is what makes a show success." Ditto for running for a national FFA office. This was especially true for Abbey in June of 2015, when she learned she was Georgia's national candidate, until the election at the end of October.

"All she did was study," says Anne. "Abbey was taking classes at the University of Georgia—Athens (UGA) and studying for the tests and interviews she did for national office."

Anne says Ben Lastly, Georgia FFA executive secretary, gave Abbey a huge box of material to acquaint her with all aspects of agriculture and FFA.

"I took her to Tybee Island for a break," says Anne. "The box, or at least part of it, came with us."

"There is the ability to communicate," says Abbey. As well as being able to answer the judges' questions when she was showing, Abbey honed communication skills in the Georgia and National Junior Angus associations.

Communication is a must have for a national FFA officer. After serving as the Georgia FFA North Region vice president, Abbey gave her retiring address in front of 5,000 state FFA members at the Macon Centreplex.

"Abbey also competed in extemporaneous speaking and was third in the state," says Anne. "We were blown away."

Then, there is the art of being a gracious loser. Says Fred, "Abbey never did like to lose, but she had to learn, because I wasn't very good at showing."

While Abbey hasn't done much losing since she finished her show career, her mom says it taught her empathy.

Before the final vote for the national officers, the top 25 are named from the state's candidates. Anne says, "She knew she needed to be composed because there were other people who didn't make the top 25."

Growing with Angus

Abbey's flight path to her show career, and ultimately a national office, started as a conversation between two fifth graders.

"My friend Kayla Whitehead and I were at the Wilkes County sale together with our

► **Above:** Abbey Gretsch used the skills she learned showing Angus heifers to become a national FFA officer.



► **Left:** Fred and Anne Gretsch have a herd of registered-Angus cattle.

outside the showing. She was Georgia Angus Princess in 2011-2012, which, by the way, has been bested by her younger sister, Jaden, who is the reigning Georgia Angus Queen. Abbey also served as director for the Georgia Junior Angus Association for two years, as well as secretary, vice president and president.

Abbey's involvement in the Angus breed also gave her a chance to attend meetings and conferences.

"Kathryn Throne took me to my first conference, the Raising the Bar conference. Now she's an ag teacher," says Abbey. She also went to the Leaders Engaged in Angus Development (LEAD) conferences in Saint Louis and Denver.

"I had a good group of friends and mentors," says Abbey. There were the Gazdas — David, who is a regional manager for the American Angus Association; Carolyn; and their daughters, Katie and Taylor. There was also Cain Thurmond, who followed his show career by becoming an FFA state and national officer.

"He was a big influence in my involvement in the American Angus Association and FFA, as well," says Abbey.

Premier leadership, personal growth, career success

Among those friends was the same young lady who led Abbey to showing. Kayla Whitehead and her dad, David, also get the credit for her direct

CONTINUED ON PAGE 196

dads, and we were climbing in the rafters," Abbey recalls. "Kayla said there was this thing called showing. I asked her what you had to do. She said you put a halter on a cow and lead it around. I woke up the next morning and said I wanted to show."

The timing was perfect. After having commercial cattle most of their married lives, Fred and Anne had recently started investing in registered-Angus cattle. As a result, when sixth-grader Abbey first walked in the showing in 2008, it was with a registered-Angus heifer. All but two or three of her show heifers were home bred from Gretsch Bros. Angus.

"We did all right. Showmanship was my best part," says Abbey. She showed in 4-H from the sixth through the eighth grade, then with FFA from the ninth grade until she graduated from high school.

Highlights were winning first place at the Madison County Fair with three of her Angus heifers. She was also in the top five showmen at the Southern National in Perry, Ga. While she didn't win any blue ribbons, she also participated in the National Junior Angus Show in Perry in 2009.

"It was fun," she recalls. "I enjoyed being a part of it."

Not a bad record for a young lady and her dad who went to their first show with no leather halter, no show stick and no grooming comb.

Even better, Anne says, "One of the neatest things was the relationship with Abbey and her dad. That was something they could do together. With the boys, Will and Zach, it was sports, but showing was really a bonding thing with them."

Abbey also did well in Angus circles

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE GRETSCH FAMILY



► While she didn't win any blue ribbons, she also participated in the National Junior Angus Show in Perry in 2009.



► Anne and Fred Gretsch started raising purebred Angus cattle about the time their daughter, Abbey, started showing Angus heifers.

involvement in FFA. David and Kayla jump-started an FFA chapter at the school Abbey and Kayla attended, Athens Christian.

"They are movers and shakers," says Abbey. "Ours was the first private school in Georgia to start an FFA chapter. We didn't get any government funding."

"Mrs. Sara Hughes started teaching agriculture at Athens Christian," says Abbey. "She did a phenomenal job. The first year we won a state competition. That is very unusual for a first-year chapter."

"Abbey got the bug when she was in the ninth grade," says Anne. "She would come home and talk about Mrs. Hughes."

Hughes, who now teaches agriculture at Oglethorpe County Middle School, echoes that.

"From the very first class she was hooked and on board," Hughes says. "She was all-in from Day 1. She encouraged all her classmates at Athens Christian to get involved."

Abbey put aside her fears and honed her leadership skills by serving as chapter treasurer, vice president, president and student advisor. She was also a teacher's aide for Hughes.

Abbey's enthusiasm for agriculture and FFA resulted in a decision that demonstrated her focus and commitment early on.

Says Anne, "When Abbey was a sophomore in high school, she told us she knew she didn't have a future in softball, but she did in agriculture." As a result, softball became a part-time hobby.

The high-school student also began to get a glimpse of what life could be with FFA.

"I went to a chapter office leadership conference in Georgia," says Abbey. "Cain



► Abbey Gretsch misses spending time with her family while she is serving as a national FFA officer.

Thurmond was the national officer candidate. I remember thinking I would love to do what he's doing."

That thought was cemented when Abbey graduated and enrolled at UGA.

"Kalie Hall, an ag teacher in Madison County, was the next national officer when I was a freshman in college in 2010. I thought, they are doing something right. I want to be a part of it," Abbey explains.

She also had a career epiphany. She was majoring in ag communications, but says, "I missed FFA. I felt like I have a calling to teach agriculture in middle school. I want to be able to advocate and teach youth. It starts in middle school, when eyes are really opening. I want to impact students like people have impacted me."

Her advisor, Eric Rubenstein, was all-in and did everything he could to help her both with her double major and transition to national FFA office.

Then, of course, there was Ben Lastly. Says

Anne, "He is the best in the nation."

Lastly gives the credit to others.

"I got to know Abbey when she was in FFA at Athens Christian School. Even then, it was obvious she was a good person with a passion for agriculture. She was one of those students that stood out," he says.

"She has a special talent for interacting with other people, both students and adults. When she said she wanted to run for a national office, I made helping her a priority. She is very coachable and willing. When I realized how hard she was willing to work, and how much she wanted the job, I was willing to reciprocate. She is a fantastic young lady, the kind of person we need in office."

"Iron sharpens iron," says Anne.

Once again, Lastly gives the credit to others.

"Abbey had a great ag teacher in middle and high school, Sara Hughes," he shares. "She is a great lady and really brought Abbey out of her shell. She helped Abbey see there were opportunities beyond her local community.

"Abbey also grew up in a good family with a great home situation," he continues. "Her parents have been so supportive of letting her expand her horizons and live her dreams. They have been very trusting of both Abbey and FFA."

On Oct. 31, 2015, at 1:30 p.m., the Gretsch clan and the Georgia delegation filled a skybox at Freedom Hall in Louisville's Kentucky Exposition Center, waiting to hear the results of the national officer election. When Abbey's name was announced as National FFA Southern Region vice president, the residents of the skybox went wild.

Says Anne, "She flew."



Editor's Note: *Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Cuthbert, Ga.*

A Year of Service: Expanding Horizons, Making an Impact

Besides logging hour after hour of air and highway miles, national FFA officers pack a lifetime of experiences and relationships in their year of service.

So far, National FFA Southern Region Vice President Abbey Gretsch met a porcupine at Busch Gardens, went to Japan, saw Jake Owen and Kenny Chesney perform at the Houston Livestock Show, and was bucked off a horse in Montana.

"It was all part of the experience," says Gretsch.

Then of course there are the meetings with legislators and lobbyists at the nation's capital, as well as visiting with top executives at firms like ADM, Tyson, CSX, Bayer and Zoetis.

On the downside, Gretsch only gets to see her home and family every four to six weeks. However, for the 20-year-old, the hardest part is not being able to spend even more time with the 620,000 FFA members across the country.

"We only get to spend three or four days in a state, max. We meet some incredible people, then have to leave." She echoes her thoughts and gives the same reason she wants to be an ag teacher.

"I want to impact other people like they have impacted me," she says.

It's a safe bet to say she's done that.