

# Filling the Gap

With passion and opportunity youth can become ambassadors for the agriculture industry.

by *Meghan Richey*

One of the biggest challenges facing the agriculture industry is simply awareness by the public, says National FFA President Zach Kinne, a former member of the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) from Eagleville, Mo.

“There’s a huge gap between a consumer buying a product in a grocery store or at a restaurant and the production side of the agriculture industry,” he says. “That gap is why they don’t understand what it takes to produce a product and don’t understand why we need to have a thriving agriculture industry within our borders. That gap is why agriculture needs ambassadors.”

Elected in October 2007 at the National FFA Convention in Indianapolis, Ind., to represent the more than 560,000 high school FFA members in 50 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, Kinne says that serving as a national FFA officer is the perfect opportunity to be an ambassador for agriculture and help fill that information gap.

“While we strive to be humble, we do recognize that as national officers we are put in the limelight, and our position makes us very visible. So we aim to use this opportunity to be effective ambassadors, to be the ones who tell agriculture’s story,” he says. “We try to put a face on the agriculture industry, because all too often the industry is misrepresented. But if we can make a connection with people, we can tell them agriculture’s story, build their relationship with agriculture, and hopefully make them a supporter and friend of the agriculture industry.”

Kinne is quick to mention that he believes you don’t need a leadership title or elected position to be an ambassador — you simply need passion and the ability to recognize and take advantage of opportunity. You might only have 30 seconds with someone in an elevator, but he encourages youth



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somehow use my experiences and the things I’d learned from the FFA in a way that would help other people experience that same growth and personal development, then I’d be more than willing to dedicate a year of my life to do that.”

And he certainly has dedicated himself. National FFA officers are on the road about 330 days a year and travel about 120,000 miles during their one-year term.

“It’s a huge commitment and sometimes difficult to be away from our family, friends and school,” Kinne says. “But when you look at what we’re able to do and the impact that we’re hoping to make on young lives and the agriculture industry as a whole, it’s definitely worth it.”

Giving keynote addresses at state conventions, putting on workshops, visiting with members one-on-one and serving on multiple boards, including the National FFA Board of Directors and the National FFA Foundation Board of Trustees, keeps their schedules jam-packed. The officers also visit with state-level and national

government leaders, aiming to build awareness about agricultural education and issues that affect the agriculture industry. And, of course, planning the national convention held each October and attended by more than 50,000 FFA members supplies them with an endless list of other responsibilities.

“One of the other interesting things that we do is something called partnership visits. Working with the National FFA Foundation, we identify and visit with partners in industry and business to raise awareness about what the FFA is doing and hopefully build partnerships with them so that we can receive the support and funding needed to create more opportunities for our student members,” Kinne explains.

in particular to take advantage of those 30 seconds and make them count.

## Dedicated to serving

“Never be afraid to stand up for agriculture and tell our story, because we have a great story to tell,” Kinne says. “We have the safest, cheapest food supply in the world, and that’s something consumers need to know. And if they can connect that to individual people they’ve met, such as FFA members and junior Angus members, then that makes a big difference in their perception of our industry.”

“It may sound cheesy, but the FFA really changed my life and the course I followed,” Kinne says. “The reason I decided to run for national office was that if I could

“We can conceptually develop as many opportunities as we want to, but we have to have the funds to fulfill those opportunities so our members can benefit from them. So partnership visits are really a critical component of what we do to serve our membership.”

### Growth experiences

The job of a national officer is demanding, but Kinne credits his high school FFA activities and experience in the NJAA with helping to develop his leadership abilities.

Attending the NJAA’s Leaders Engaged in Angus Development (LEAD) Conference was “a key moment of leadership development in my life,” he says, noting that he first attended the conference when he was 13. While at the time he recognized that it was an important personal-growth experience for him, he now looks back on his interaction with then-chairman of the junior Board Sonya Smith as a model for how he now strives to interact with younger FFA members.

“At the time I couldn’t believe a Green Jacket was taking the time to talk to me. I remember that it made such an impact on me that she expressed a sincere interest in getting to know me,” he explains. “It was one of those moments when I realized that in a leadership position you can really

make a difference when you take a genuine interest in people. Now, as I’m serving as a national FFA officer, that’s one of those moments that I always remember, and it prompts me to stop and take the time to talk with younger members and take a genuine interest in them. You never know the impact it could make on their lives.”

Kinne says the FFA was what initially empowered him to become a leader by giving him a safe environment to try new things and develop himself in the process.

“When I walked into the agriculture classroom as a freshman, I had a list of things that I wanted to try — from judging teams to public speaking events. I wanted to try a lot of things that I’d never done before, and it was great because FFA gave me the opportunity to do that,” Kinne says, noting he had been looking forward to his first day as an FFA member for many years, since his dad taught vocational agriculture while he was growing up.

As a freshman, Kinne says that he was the shy and quiet type, but he was willing to take some risk in trying new activities because he wanted to improve his communication skills and self-confidence. He turned to the prepared public speaking contest, knowing it would give him the jolt that he desired. In his first year competing in public speaking, Kinne advanced all the way to the national semifinals with a speech about *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) and his family’s Angus operation.

“It was a topic that I was passionate about, loved talking about and loved answering questions about. I think that’s what really got me into public speaking — picking a topic that I knew about personally and was passionate about,” Kinne explains. “I think all youth need an outlet like that where they can discover what they’re passionate about and develop their skills and grow personally. Once you do that, you’re ready to be an ambassador for our industry.”

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**— Zach Kinne**

### Ambassador in the making

After showing a crossbred heifer as a youngster in 4-H, Zach Kinne and his family began to look into junior programs in the purebred cattle industry.

“We looked into several breeds’ junior programs, and we found that Angus had an excellent junior program with leadership opportunities,” Kinne says. “The more we researched the junior Angus program and talked to people involved with it, the more we wanted to be a part of it.”

After joining the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA), he began raising and showing Angus cattle. Eventually, Kinne’s NJAA cattle activities grew into fulfilling the production portion of his Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) project in the National FFA Organization, as he began raising and merchandising seedstock bulls. His family — parents Shelly and Keith and younger siblings Shane and Sadie — now operate Kinne Stock Farm north of Eagleville, Mo., with about 150 Angus cows.

Even as a youth, Kinne knew that he wanted to put his passion for the beef industry toward a greater use, so he sought opportunities to be an outspoken representative of the beef industry, first serving in high school as a Missouri Beef Ambassador, then in college as an intern for the Missouri Beef Industry Council.

“My roots are in the beef industry. I have a love for it and the agriculture industry in general,” Kinne says, noting that both sets of his grandparents have agrarian ties, one set with a dairy farm and the

other with a diversified farm that includes row crops and livestock.

“I’ve sought out various roles to be an ambassador of the agriculture industry, because it’s a way I feel I can use my personal experiences and leadership experiences to help promote the industry,” he continues. “Agriculture as a whole needs ambassadors and people telling the story of agriculture. I’ve sought out opportunities that allow me to tell the story of our industry and be the young face and voice of an industry that needs its story to be told to the masses.”

As a Missouri Beef Ambassador, Kinne was charged with promoting the national beef checkoff program and educating consumers about the healthy aspects of beef. Interning for the Missouri Beef Industry Council, his duties focused on producer communications and retail promotion, including the Father’s Day Grilling Tour, which took to the road to promote beef on the radio, TV and at sale barns; and the “Lunch and Learn” program, which brought together elected officials, school representatives and other community thought leaders for an educational lunch about the importance of agriculture in local communities.

Kinne encourages youth to take risks in trying new things to improve their self-confidence and to seek out opportunities to improve their communication skills so that they can put their passion for agriculture to its best use by becoming an ambassador for the industry.

