

A temporary change of color

For a moment, the 10,000 people inside Freedom Hall were silent. It was Saturday of the 73rd National FFA Convention in Louisville, Ky., and on stage were five newly announced 2000-2001 national FFA officers. With suspense draping the arena, these five waited in tears of awe and excitement for the last member of their team to be called. Only the one position remained, and Trent McKnight of Throckmorton, Texas, was still in his chair.

“And your new 2000-2001 National FFA President ...”

“At that point I just had to rely on my faith, and I felt completely at peace. It wasn’t a feeling of ‘I know that I’m going to get this so it’s okay,’ but more of accepting that there’s a place where God wants me. Whatever happens is the best thing for me and for him. Yeah, I was nervous, but I was at peace.”

“... from the state of Texas ...”

“It was like someone punched me in the stomach. Did they really say Texas?”

“... TRENT MCKNIGHT!”

“Then they grab you and run you up on stage, and you’re pinching yourself wondering if this is real.”

It was real, and for McKnight, his junior year at Oklahoma State University would be postponed as he began a year serving as national president of the organization he loves.

This opportunity is a capstone achievement for McKnight, who has put his heart and his work into FFA in many ways. He served as Texas state vice-president his freshman year of college and as Throckmorton FFA president his senior year of high school. In addition, from the time he joined FFA, he was involved in almost every event his chapter offered, including public speaking, livestock judging, horse judging, parliamentary procedure, public relations and his supervised agricultural experience program — beef and sheep production.

“My ag teacher, Leslie Harris, was one of those individuals who would take the time out to work with students on a one-on-one basis. I know there are a lot of supportive ag teachers, but I still feel very

lucky to have someone like him backing me and always believing in me.

“I think all good FFA chapters stem from a good ag teacher. That’s what can make or break a chapter.”

The respect McKnight has for his adviser is a mutual one, however.

“Over the years, I have had several state FFA presidents come to Throckmorton to talk to classes, and I would always introduce them to Trent, even when he was a freshman. When Trent was a sophomore, I told one of the visiting presidents, ‘This kid is good enough to be a national president.’ He said, ‘Are you sure?’ and I said, ‘I’m dead sure,’” Harris said.

“Trent was capable of being a national officer when he was a sophomore in high school. He just knows that much about it and has that special something about him,” he said.

“He just has the most amazing people skills,” said Dustin Kinder, 2000-2001 Texas FFA president, who has known and worked with McKnight through the FFA for the past four years.

“When you’re around him, he makes you feel like you’re on top of the world,” Kinder said.

Although he has always been very active in FFA, it wasn’t until the 1999 national convention, a year prior to getting elected, that McKnight set the concrete goal of becoming a national officer.

“I think that all FFA members, from the time they’re freshmen in high school or see the national officers for the first time, think, ‘Man, I want to



do that.' And I had that perception from the beginning, but it's not realistic until you reach a certain point where it starts to become something more tangible."

After serving as Texas FFA vice-president his freshman year at OSU, McKnight decided to take a year off and not be involved with the FFA.

"Many people tend to think, 'Well, I've been a state officer, so I guess the next step is running for national office.' But I wanted to see if my intentions were correct, to see if I really wanted to change members' lives, or if I was just taking the next step."

His year of thinking brought him to the conclusion that FFA was not yet out of his system, so McKnight declared his desire to be Texas' candidate for national office. He was nominated, and then the work began.

"I started preparing about three months in advance, for three hours every day, five days a week, leading up to the convention."

Then began the "most stressful week" of his life, as he went through a process of seven interviews and a test over the FFA, parliamentary procedure, agriculture, and education issues.

"When you work so hard for something, and put three intensive months into training and preparing, it's hard because you begin playing the 'I wish' and 'what if' games. 'I wish I could have studied more for this,' or 'What if I could have prepared a little more in this area.' Everything that you have done for the last three months is behind you, and it all comes down to one week.

"There was tremendous pressure, not just to succeed for myself, but also I didn't want to let my state association or anyone else who had supported me along the way down."

Support was something that McKnight definitely had.

"We always knew Trent was very intelligent and could make it through the nominating committee," said Kinder. "You can sometimes expect it, but you just don't know for sure. When he was announced, we just went crazy."

But for all the glory of being named to a national office, there was a moment for McKnight that made it "just a little more memorable."

"Chris Vitelli, last year's national president, grabbed me, and we were running up to the stage together. How-



Courtesy of National FFA Organization

Above: Emotions overflow as Angela Browning, Trent McKnight, Doug Kueker, and Ronnie Simmons are named to the 2000-2001 National FFA Officer team. Other officers are Katy Poth and Jennifer Edwards.

Left: Trent McKnight, at home in front of OSU's Agricultural Hall, comes from a town where national FFA presidents are somewhat legendary. Ten years ago, Donnell Brown of Throckmorton, Texas, was national president. He then married another former national president, Kelly Evans, so there were two in town. McKnight now makes three — unique for a town of only 1,000 people.

Then they grab you and run you up on stage, and you're pinching yourself wondering if this is real.

— Trent McKnight
National FFA President

ever the arena used for the FFA convention is also used for hockey. All they do is cover the ice with boards. These boards had developed condensation that made it really slippery — especially if you're wearing leather-bottomed shoes!

So right as we get to the stairs going up on stage, we bust it big time. At that point though, I really didn't care. It was like, 'Hey, I'm here and there is nothing that can

embarrass me now.'"

McKnight's year as president began by taking fall semester finals early, then jumping into a month of intensive officer training at the National FFA Center in Indianapolis. February brought a two-week tour of Japan for the national officers to better understand the agriculture industry and culture.

"I stayed with a Japanese family for two days. They didn't speak English, and I didn't speak Japanese. It was amazing, though, to realize how much you can communicate without speaking," said McKnight.

Following their international trip, the team of six spent several days at the U.S. Department of Agriculture job shadowing. From there, business and industry tours to promote partnerships and learn more about the industry followed. Then speaking engagements began at state FFA conventions and leadership camps.

"Between the six of us, we'll hit all 50 states at least once. It's great to see how different ag education programs and agriculture industries differ from state to state," McKnight said.

Taking a year off to serve the FFA has given McKnight what he said is a "second gift."

"You hear so many people, once they graduate, say there are things they regret not doing, and they wish they had the chance to go back. For me, it's almost like I have been given this chance to go back and do those things."

During his two years at OSU, McKnight has been active in organizations such as Agriculture Ambassadors, Student Alumni Board, President's Leadership Council, Overflow praise and worship, Sunnybrook Christian Church and The Fraternity of Phi Gamma Delta.

Though it's unlikely that he won't stay involved on campus, McKnight said the most important one of "those things" for him will be just hanging out and spending more time with his friends. "I really look forward to coming back to school and focusing on just building those relationships and making college the best years of my life," he said.

McKnight's "little brother" in his fraternity, Robert Rademeyer, put it simply: "We miss him, but when he comes back, it'll just be like he never left."

After graduating with his degree in agricultural economics, McKnight plans

(Continued on page 45)

Change of color

(Continued from page 29)

to someday return to his hometown and his family business.

“I want to stay involved in rural banking and keep in touch with the agricultural way of life,” he said.

McKnight’s agricultural and leadership roots run deep. His parents, Ross and Billie McKnight, raised him and his younger sister Meggan in the small West Texas town of Throckmorton. The McKnight’s run an oil and gas company and are involved in rural banking, as well as have a family ranching operation, where Trent gained experience with cattle, sheep, and horses.

Although they call Texas home, both of his parents attended OSU, and from the time he was a little kid, McKnight never planned on going to school anywhere else.

“I’ve always had a connection with their love for the university and the campus,” said McKnight.

During his high school years, this loyalty grew as he spent “a lot of time” at OSU practicing with his horse judging team, said Harris.

“He’s always wanted to go to OSU, nowhere else. It has such a strong ag program, and although it’s a college that may not be the biggest in numbers, it’s one of the highest quality programs, and that’s what he’s interested in.”

McKnight said he has people all over the nation tell him what a great ag program OSU has, and it really speaks well for the college.

“But I do catch a lot of flack from my Texan friends about coming here,” he said.

For McKnight, the biggest reward of serving as a national FFA officer is the chance to interact and connect with the students.

“It’s the neatest thing to see that light come on in their eyes,” he said. “And to think that through the FFA maybe I’ve had a part in making a difference in that person’s life.”

He has and will make a difference, not only in FFA members’ lives, but also in making OSU a better place.

Which is why we’re proud to say that although the national FFA president wears blue and gold this year—deep down, he still bleeds orange. *ej*

*By Tamara Beardsley
Miles City, Mont.*