



THE GOLDEN SLATE

The official newsletter of the California
Agricultural Teachers' Association

The SAE Effect: Learning from Failure and Success

By Shay Williams-Hopper, San Joaquin Regional Supervisor

Seventeen years ago, I walked into the Tulare Joint Union District boardroom and plopped myself down in front of the interview committee. I felt confident with the questions posed to me by the committee until I was asked one question, “Which of the three circles of agriculture is the most important?” Of course, being fresh out of college, my answer was simple. All three are EQUALLY valuable, and off I went into my explanation of why. Suddenly, I was stopped by Max Corbett, who said, “Meh...Stop. You didn’t answer my question. Which one is the MOST important?” At that moment, I was a bit dumbfounded and fumbled with my thoughts until I blurted out, “SAE” as my final answer. As a first-year teacher, we had been instructed to always say “classroom,” but the classroom, while I did fine there, was not my favorite component—SAE was always my driving force. SAE gives students the chance to practice their employment skills and allows them to fail and succeed in a supportive environment.

Growing up in San Diego County, our “agriculture” looks vastly different from the rest of the state. Nursery products, avocados, and citrus are the top commodities produced in San Diego County. Agriculture production was not part of my childhood. My dad was a firefighter, and my mom worked for the San Diego Zoo as a Registered Vet Technician (RVT). My exposure to agriculture was confined to the glimpses I caught at the county fair during my childhood and the veterinary insights gleaned from my mother's career. When we moved to San Marcos during middle school, and I heard I could join FFA and show an animal, it sparked my interest in production agriculture.

I started my first SAE project by purchasing ten laying hens that I kept at the high school farm. Ten chickens quickly became 150 hens and a turkey. Soon after, I bought my first

CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURAL TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

CALAGTEACHERS.ORG



market hog, “Cricket,” from Escondido FFA, and from there, I began breeding and selling my own show pigs. I ran an agriscience fair feed trial in the off-season with my piglets, before agriscience projects were popular. Fun fact: The San Diego Zoo houses a “frozen zoo,” storing DNA from diverse animal species, including some endangered and extinct ones. Included in this genetic archive is DNA from my piglets' ear notches that I processed in high school! I worked for a mobile veterinary clinic, learning about veterinary medicine. I raised and showed sheep, veal, beef cattle, nursery plants, and baby alligators in my bathtub; if only wildlife management had been a proficiency area back then! I spent four summers working in the livestock barns at the Del Mar Fair. The summer before my senior year of high school, I flew to Iowa to spend six weeks with a family I had only met by ordering semen for my breeding sows. I ended up working in a boar stud in Eldora, Iowa, and a farrowing barn in Southern Iowa, and a hobby emu farm. I learned collection, evaluation, marketing, husbandry, and my favorite activity from that summer: how to “show” an emu at the Iowa State Fair.

Things I learned from my SAE projects:

- How to apply skills I learned in the classroom to a real-world project
- The value of hard work, time management, fiscal management, and inventory control
- The ins and outs of small-scale production agriculture
- How to win and lose
- How to drive a manual transmission car
- That pigs really can and will eat your homework...and your French teacher will excuse you from the assignment
- A love of learning new skills
- How to listen, think critically, and make decisions based on research
- How to collect data
- How to be flexible and adapt
- An outlet to be competitive and a desire to be better
- Marketing skills
- How to communicate clearly
- How to say thank you
- An appreciation for the support of my parents and my ag teacher
- How to make personal connections with industry professionals



Thank you to those who helped me in my SAE projects, either as a breeder, judge, or mentor. Most of you probably don't remember me, but I will forever remember the kindness shown to a city kid to help me learn production agriculture.

As agriculture teachers, we have the opportunity and responsibility to teach students career skills that will make them employable. We get to train future employees what it means and looks like to be employable. I know SAE is one more thing on our already busy plates, but this might be the piece that connects an otherwise uninterested student in your class.

It is funny how much more I appreciate these experiences now as I am starting to experience it from the other side of the fence as a parent. Wyatt will be showing his fifth market goat this year and Luke his first. I can't wait for the lessons we will continue to learn together.

