

NEVER TOO TALL



To some, education ends the moment a diploma is in hand, but to a number of exceptional agricultural leaders in West Texas, complacency is not an option when it comes to promoting the necessity and importance of the industry in which they serve.

Texas Agricultural Lifetime Leadership was established in 1986 and has since aimed to develop more efficient leaders in the agricultural industry. TALL utilizes available opportunities to share a greater appreciation of agriculture with society in Texas, the United States, and the world.

Nominees for the TALL program must complete an application and interview process in order to be selected. Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz, Leadership Program Director and Professor with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, said in the past 14 years of leading the program he continuously looks for individuals who are involved with and are passionate about agriculture.

“We want someone who shows potential for leadership development,” Mazurkiewicz said, “Someone with a positive can-do attitude, someone who can manage their time, and someone who has a community spirit of education.”

Typically a TALL class will contain 20-30 leaders who will participate in eight seminars, including cross-country trips to Washington D.C., New York and California, as well as an international trip. The sessions are held at various regional agricultural hubs so that members will have a better understanding of issues facing different people groups and agricultural entities. Aside from tours, on-site visits, receptions and discussions with experts in various agricultural and political fields, TALL students have the opportunity to learn from one another.

They will have over 300 speakers throughout the two years,” Mazurkiewicz said, “but there are also 25 other classmates who are experts. There is someone on that bus who is just as good, as informed, as much a leader as the one we had on the program who can verify and continue the discussion.”

Mike Metzger is currently the Regional Vice President with Ag Texas Farm Credit in Lubbock, Texas, and has been in ag lending for 17 years. Metzger was a member of the TALL XII class and said one of the most invaluable qualities gained throughout the journey was public speaking.



“You just got to where you had more confidence,” Metzsig said. “We all matured, I don’t care if it was some of our classmates who were 50 years old or 25, we each matured in our relationships, with each other, and with the public.”

Mary Jane Buerkle is one of 13 from the West Texas area in the current 2012-2014 TALL XIII class, which includes a total of 26 industry leaders. Buerkle, director of communications and public affairs at Plains Cotton Growers, said her desire is to become a well-rounded leader and communicator in order to effectively advocate for agriculture and her organization.

“The opportunity to see different aspects of agriculture,” Buerkle said, “not only in Texas but the rest of the United States and the world is just an absolutely invaluable experience.”

Each year, the urban population becomes further removed from the farm, making it increasingly more important to connect with the general public. Statistics show about one percent of the population is still involved in production agriculture, yet more than 300 million people are needing to be fed across the United States. TALL incorporates individuals in all aspects of agriculture to use the commonalities, as well as differences, to reach a common goal; feeding and clothing the world.

“We are all in this together,” Buerkle said. “As we continue to face the challenges in communicating our message to the public, programs like TALL are going to make us so much better equipped, knowledgeable and prepared to do so.”

Although Metzsig has graduated from the program, he said he will forever be associated with the organization and rely on the skills developed through it.

“That maturity, experience and exposure over and over,” Metzsig said, “makes it like your duty now to go out and do a better job of educating and promoting agriculture and what it does for our country.”

TALL helps individuals realize their potential as leaders and then utilize what they have learned within their sphere of influence. Buerkle said above all, being chosen to be a part of TALL has been an honor and privilege, but it does not come without weighty expectation.

“You know the saying,” Buerkle said, “to him who much is given, much is expected.” 

Holly Harrison
Feeding, Not Feeding



2012-2014 TALL XIII class visiting a drip irrigation cotton field in West Texas