

Small-town boy with BIG Dreams

Blaze Currie was your typical small-town kid in Texas. He was active in school activities, played football, and participated in many organizations at Wellman-Union High School. However, during his freshman year, Currie found a true passion in the FFA.

"He loved it and was gifted for it," said Bruce Yeager, Currie's high school superintendent.

Dennis Pate, Currie's agricultural education instructor, noticed Currie's energy and leadership ability as a freshman, Yeager said. Currie became a district FFA president after Pate encouraged him to run for a district office as a sophomore.

As a district officer, Currie was on the Courtesy Corps at the Texas State FFA Convention. Yeager accompanied the chapter that summer to Fort Worth for convention when Pate could not attend.

The incoming state officers' speeches and the process for running for a state office sparked a blue and gold fire in Currie, Yeager said.

"He took the bait and swallowed it hook, line and sinker," Yeager said.

Instead of catching up on much-needed sleep like the rest of his chapter, Currie used napkins stuck in the console and wrote speech notes the entire 300 miles home, Yeager said.

"I don't know if he ever used any of them," Yeager said, "but he was that interested and excited about the opportunities FFA had to offer."

Currie became an area FFA officer in 2003 and served as a state FFA officer in 2004.

During his sophomore year in college, Currie worked for the Borlaug Institute for International Agriculture, formerly known as the Office of International Agriculture at Texas A&M, as a tour guide for visiting scientists from throughout the world.

"For a sophomore in college, it was a big job," Currie said. "They knew I had been involved in FFA so they knew they could trust me."

This job also opened up an internship for Currie in Rwanda through the Borlaug Institute. He lived there for two-and-a-half months as he worked on a coffee project called Spread.

"Rwanda was probably the most challenging since it was my first experience," Currie said.

Little challenges arose, such as the language barrier or being so far from home for the first time, Currie said, but nothing compared to what Currie saw.

Here Currie experienced extreme poverty for the first time.

"You see the pictures and videos on TV of children with swollen bellies," Currie said. "I had kind of prepared myself for that."

What Currie had not been prepared for was the personnel connection he could have with it, he said.

One day walking to the office where he worked, a little boy's eyes caught Currie's attention, he said. The boy had an extreme case of malaria, was paper thin and only carrying an old feed sack made into clothes, Currie said. He was a beggar on the street.

"I remember his eyes were real yellow," Currie said. "You could tell he was very, very sick, but you couldn't give him food because there were so many others."

Eventually, Currie and his teammates used the other side of the street because they knew they were not able to help, he said.

"The biggest moment for me was when we walked by and he wasn't there," Currie said. "At that moment, we realized he had died."

“What I couldn't get over is not that he had died, because children were dying over there all the time,” Currie said. “What I couldn't get over is how long he had been there. No one knew if he was alive or dead.”

Currie said he had to overcome the guilt he felt to be an effective teammate and not feel superior.

“Basically, I fell in love with international people,” Currie said.

“My first experience was meeting international people on U.S. soil,” he said. “My next was living in a foreign country for two-and-a-half months. After that, I had the bug for international development.”

After he graduated from Texas A&M University with a degree in agricultural leadership, Currie worked in Iraq for the Borlaug Institute to interview youth and report his research to the military.

In Rwanda and Iraq, Currie found the desperate need for a youth program, he said. He pushed for FFA curriculum to be provided to youth in developing countries after visiting Rwanda. Although he was rejected the first time, Currie said he still went back to ask for help after visiting Iraq.

“They needed vocational agriculture of some sort,” Currie said, “but on top of that, they also needed a leadership program.”

This passion for international agriculture kept growing inside Currie throughout his time of working for the Texas FFA Association and National FFA Association as a state officer and national officer team coach, he said. He worked his way on to the Global Task Force where he had the opportunity to explore different agricultural practices world-wide, went on a joint trip with FFA and 4-H to Tanzania to train youth, and played a key role in the start of

AgriCorps, an organization that teaches agricultural development practices to youth of developing countries.

"Blaze probably got me involved with AgriCorps," said Trent McKnight, founder of AgriCorps. "In many ways, he was the one who laid the ground work for it to happen. He set up all the tee balls to be hit."

McKnight said Currie was his connection to the main people who are a part of AgriCorps, including many people at Texas A&M, the executive director of 4-H Liberia and members of the National 4-H Council.

In November, Currie helped lead the first AgriCorps group to teach agricultural development and leadership skills for a month to some of the youth in Liberia.

While there, Currie would not seclude himself after a day's work of teaching. He would sit on the porch and wait for people to come by so he could get to know them, said Kalie Hall, Currie's co-teaching partner and AgriCorps volunteer.

"He was always available to students," Hall said. "He didn't just come to do his job and leave. He really cared about the students."

One night, a student named Mishel came by. Mishel said he did not have a garden row in the school garden because he had not been a 4-H member before, but he would like to have one, Hall said.

Currie talked to Mishel about why he wanted it. When Currie told Mishel they could make him his own row at school the next day, Mishel reacted like a child on Christmas morning, Hall said.

Mishel was so excited he rushed off to get his tools. He finished his row that night so it would be ready to go in class for Currie the following morning, Hall said.

Currie continued to pour into Mishel and the other students on a daily basis, Hall said.

One day, Currie and Hall taught about seed germination testing. The seeds yielded a little more than 40 percent, Currie said.

When asked what could improve the yield, little Mishel raised his hand, Currie said. Mishel said to get seed from somewhere else.

Currie said he applauded Mishel for a right answer but continued to ask the class what to do in the absence of other seed. Another boy in the back of the class raised his hand. He said wherever they planted one seed, they needed to plant two because where one did not grow, the other one would, Currie said.

"Two weeks earlier no one would answer our questions," Currie said. "They were too scared to get it wrong, so this was a major breakthrough."

Currie went out of his way to get to know the farmers so he could help them or learn from them, Hall said.

Currie built a relationship with Mr. Gray, their Liberian neighbor, by talking with him on the porch each night, Hall said.

One night, Gray's farm became the subject of conversation. Currie took the initiative and set up a time where they could go visit and teach him some development practices, Hall said.

"I appreciated how Mr. Currie was willing to go above and beyond," Hall said.

"He didn't just come to check off a list," Hall added. "He tried to understand the people and find out what agriculture meant to them so we could make a bigger impact than that."

Currie did not just bring his work ethic, zeal and compassion to AgriCorps and Liberia, but also his wit and humor, Hall said.

"He loves old school rap, like '80s rap," Hall said. "He's always dropping random lyrics in the middle of conversation in hopes you pick them up."

The students got a taste of this humor, too. One day, Hall and Currie taught their students the chicken dance. From that day on, when the students wanted to dance and they did not know the words, they simply started doing the movements — accompanied by Currie, Hall said.

"There was no shame," Hall said. "Whatever made people laugh and made them happy Mr. Currie would do."

After the pilot trip to Liberia for AgriCorps, Currie accepted the position of executive director, he said.

"Blaze has a tremendous passion for agricultural development, for AgriCorps and for making a difference in the world," McKnight said.

Currie was not directly introduced to international agriculture through his FFA preparation, but looking back, he said he can see the skills he uses today were taught during his FFA career.

"Knowing how to talk to people from different places was the most valuable skill set I learned," Currie said. "I use it every day."

Currie's time in the Wellman-Union chapter also taught him leadership skills, keeping calm in tough situations and the confidence needed to go after his goals, he said.

Currie said he never felt limited in his small town. He traveled the state for school activities and the thought that international agriculture was impossible never entered his mind, Currie said.

"I never remember Blaze not being confident," Yeager said. "There are people in your life along the way who are going to encourage you and try to give you the tools to be successful. Blaze grabbed the tools himself and went to work with it."

