

## **Cernek Finds Her Passion in FFA Through Agricultural Communications**

When DeWitt Central FFA member, Heather Cernek, joined FFA as an eighth grade student, she had no idea just exactly what she was getting herself into. Cernek joined FFA knowing nothing about the organization, but that didn't stop her from learning about it. Cernek found herself frequently visiting the FFA chapter's website navigating herself through it to learn about the organization and how websites actually were developed. It wasn't until she returned back to her high school agriculture room when one member who was very enthusiastic about FFA convinced her to use agricultural communications as her SAE project and get more involved in the FFA program. Cernek took that advice and never looked back!

Cernek is a current senior at Central DeWitt High School and resides on a small acreage south of DeWitt, Iowa with her parents, Norm and Tricia Kitchen. After mastering how to edit and update her FFA chapter's website, her responsibilities increased to creating newsletters, brochures, and flyers about the chapter's latest activities and projects. Cernek has hosted multiple hands-on activities in her agriculture classroom and utilized all of her chapter's social media accounts, served on numerous FFA committees that helped her promote agriculture, spoke on the radio several times during National Convention about FFA and even expanded her skills by taking on multiple agriculture communications jobs.

As though this wasn't enough, Cernek also created and lead a committee completely focused on teaching other FFA members about agriculture communications and letting them learn, hands-on by taking over the chapter promotional projects that she has been doing for the past five years.

Taking advantage of every opportunity available, Cernek has been able to educate not only her school and community but also her state about the importance of agriculture. Cernek said, "from school-age children to retired seniors, finding a way for everyone to understand and value agriculture is what I strive to do throughout my project."

Contrary to popular belief, Cernek had no prior experience or knowledge in agricultural communications before she started her project. She learned purely through another student coaching her and by self-teaching and researching herself. One aspect that sets Cernek apart from others is her ability to recognize the problem and then use problem solving and critical thinking skills to find a way to solve it herself.

Throughout her project Cernek's responsibilities were anything short of a small list. As she progressed through middle and high school her duties and roles evolved. In the beginning she was primarily focused on learning communication techniques and physically creating the chapter's website and newsletters. Now, Cernek's main focus is to plan ways to help maintain the chapter's promotion and marketing strategies after she graduates high school.

Most of Cernek's time now is spent meeting weekly with other FFA members to teach them the basics of web design, how to create a newsletter, and creating and posting social media posts to all of the chapter's social media platforms. Cernek also values the importance of her own future career and is taking advantage of local communication jobs including: One Mile East Show Goats as their web designer and working as a communications intern at the Clinton County Fair.

Although Cernek loves most everything about her SAE, her favorite part is just simply brainstorming new promotional ideas and designing new projects. This year as part of the FFA chapter's involvement in the Hall of States at the National FFA Convention, Cernek designed six 6x2' agricultural commodity banners that were displayed to over 60,000 people who attended the convention to promote Iowa agriculture.

Throughout her project Cernek has learned many skills that will be useful in her future career including: how to relate agriculture back to people who have no knowledge about the industry, improve her public speaking skills, and how to properly manage time while still being productive and dedicated.

Cernek has put those skills to practice while teaching FFA members during Fire-Up Week and while volunteering her time at the swine farrowing station at the Clinton County Fair. These skills help her plan projects more realistically and help others buy-in to FFA and the agriculture industry. She has also spoken to the school board, interviewed on radio broadcasts and conversed with legislators at the capital sharing her story about the importance of agriculture education and agricultural careers.

Cernek has also competed in many Career and Leadership Development Events throughout high school which have helped her progress with her SAE as well as develop important skills for her future. Cernek has competed in both the Agricultural Communications and Chapter Website at the state level.

With communications becoming more widespread, it is important for people far removed from agriculture to understand it. Cernek works hard to build her chapter's agriculture

education and FFA platform through several communication tactics. This has allowed Cernek to constantly change and adapt to new trends and keep people up-to-date.

Setting goals was never a problem for Cernek. On day one of being an FFA member, her notebook was filled with goals both personal and chapter that she would like to accomplish in her time in FFA. Although Cernek has accomplished many goals throughout the last five years, she is still eager to set more!

Cernek said, “one goal that I always have is to continue to spread the message of FFA and agriculture to more people. A few years ago an educational FFA video that I helped create was shown on the first ever FFA Today episode. A lot of people viewed this, especially since it was their first episode.” She is eager for more and doesn’t let anything get in the way of her dreams.

The National FFA Organization is a student run, youth organization, specifically focusing on improving career, technical and leadership skills of students through agricultural education. Visit [www.dewittcentralffa.com](http://www.dewittcentralffa.com) for more information about Cernek’s SAE and The National FFA Organization.