

THE FFA ROOTS OF A GARDEN PARTY



Mary Coombs (left)
and sister Dawn Clark.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY IS CELEBRATED IN HUNDREDS OF COUNTRIES AROUND THE WORLD ONCE A YEAR. THESE SISTERS WILL CELEBRATE WITH THE CONTINUED SUCCESS OF THEIR TWO AGRICULTURAL BUSINESSES.

At age 16, many FFA members celebrate the earning of a driver's license, the transition to becoming an upperclassman, or even the earning of their first college credits. For sisters Mary Coombs and Dawn Clark, 16 was the age they found their passion for floriculture and the beginning of a successful career in horticulture. After enrolling in agriculture classes at Woodstown High School in New Jersey, Coombs and Clark competed in the floral design career development event (CDE). After winning the competition, Coombs was offered a job at a local flower shop where she cultivated her passion for entrepreneurship and floral design for the next three years.

"Without the early exposure to this craft during our agricultural education courses, who knows where we would be," Coombs says. "The real-life experience offered through FFA led us to great opportunities at a young age."

Today, the sisters own a full-service floral and event design company called A Garden Party. Together, their business produces more than 100 events per year, and the sisters are known for their from-the-garden approach. Staying true to their agricultural background, they emphasize the importance of using homegrown and locally produced blooms and foraged materials in all of their designs. Recently, this duo opened a new division of the company by renovating the family milking parlor into an events space.

"During high school, we wrote grants and completed applications to help our FFA chapter grow and develop," Clark says. "While in college, we drafted a business plan, which gave us the confidence to launch our company upon graduation. Thirteen years later, our business is still growing and flourishing because we are dedicated to continuing our education and keeping the business fresh and evolving."

As lifetime members of National FFA Alumni and Supporters, Coombs and Clark attribute much of their success to the solid foundation built as FFA members. Through competing in CDEs, acting as leaders in their chapter and pursuing their agricultural passion, they learned the value of making a plan, saving money, being patient and working hard.

"Success is born from hard work and staying power that comes with experience and education," Coombs advises. "We used our FFA experience to craft a vision for our life's work. This hit us at such an early age that we had a great advantage starting our businesses young. Out of our eight team members, six of them were FFA members. It can be an influential resume builder!"

— By Bev Flatt

A FUTURE IN FLORICULTURE

Teachers, get lesson plans and classroom resources about floriculture in the Educator Resources section of **FFA.org**. Members, visit **AgExplorer.com** to see what careers interest you.