



FUNDING THE FUTURE

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| PHOTOGRAPHY BY BOB STEFKO

When Warrenton FFA faced major budget cuts in 2020, its community stepped up in support of agricultural education. Today, the chapter thrives by giving back.



Mary Schleuter was in science class when she first heard the rumblings.

Students came to the senior Warrenton FFA member asking, “Is it true they’re shutting down the ag program?” Schleuter just brushed it off. Surely that could not be happening, the chapter parliamentary thought, but she texted the chapter president, Dawn Sherman, and other officers to see if they had heard the same rumors. They had.

Two days later, Missouri’s Warren County R-III School Board posted its agenda for a special session to be held Nov. 18, 2020. The focus was discussion on \$1 million in budget cuts across the district.

One of the two Warrenton FFA advisors was on the chopping block. In effect, so were the

agricultural construction classes, an agricultural business leadership and communication course and the entire middle school program, which at the time enrolled 92 students.

Growing Support

Sherman, who was serving on the Area V FFA officer team in addition to her role as chapter president, recalls the look of panic in the faces of freshmen and sophomores.

Students were finally back in school after the COVID-19 pandemic shut down activities at the end of spring 2020, and underclassmen, especially, were pumped for all the opportunities older FFA members had told them were coming — even if they had to wear masks and follow precautionary rules.



This photo: Former Warrenton FFA President Dawn Sherman proudly shows her blue-and-gold jacket at Warrenton High School. Below (left to right): A trailer built by Warrenton High School metal fabrication students; Downtown Warrenton, Mo.; Teresa Lee, Warrenton FFA alumni treasurer.

Now they were asking questions such as, “Am I only going to have one year of FFA?”

“We were just trying to make FFA normal again, and then, bam, this happened,” Sherman says. “It was a stressful time. I was trying to find as much information as I could to relay what was happening and give them the facts, which was hard because there were a lot of emotions in it and none of us knew what was happening.”

Warrenton FFA Alumni and Supporters, many of whom are parents of active members, were also hearing the news. Schleuter started a Change.org petition that gained nearly 8,000 signatures in a few days and, with alumni support, the students started a social media campaign using the hashtag #WarrentonAgImpact to raise awareness for the situation in their small (8,388 people in 2020) but expanding community on the outskirts of the St. Louis suburbs.

Alumni and community leaders also wrote emails to board members.

They wanted to help the school board realize “how important agriculture is to our community and to our students, and how important it was to keep the ag program intact,” Warrenton FFA Alumni Treasurer Teresa Lee says.

The Decision

The meeting had to be moved to a different location to accommodate the number of community members





Former Warrenton FFA chapter officer Mary Schleuter advocated to the school board to keep the Warrenton agricultural education program intact.



Warrenton FFA advisor Diane Miederhoff also maintains the school's greenhouse.



Warrenton FFA alumni President Denise Dent takes a break at her hair salon.

anticipated to attend the night the school board was slated to make a final decision. Among them, Schleuter says, was a sea of blue FFA jackets.

Schleuter and Sherman were selected to speak on behalf of the FFA members. They had done their research and brought facts to the conversation: Agriculture represented

about 35% of Warrenton's economy, and agricultural fabrication — supported by the courses specifically being cut — made up 45%.

Their speeches captivated the audience in a way that “grown adults over the age of 40 could not have,” says Diane Miederhoff who serves with Dan Burkemper as a Warrenton FFA advisor.

However, the board had

to make cuts. With a 6-to-1 vote, Warrenton FFA lost half its program.

Sherman says the FFA advisors and officers tried to remain positive throughout the process.

“We told each other, ‘We’re going to try our best [to keep our full program], but if we can’t do it, we’re going to make this year the best year possible,’”

Sherman says.

Above all, they would represent themselves with integrity, even in a difficult time.

But alumni members were not satisfied. They could not accept the decision without doing more, so a group got together and proposed that the community fund the second ag teacher. Group members took their proposal

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to the superintendent, and at a December 2020 meeting the school board agreed. The community had until April 1, 2021, to raise \$78,000.

A Night to Remember

The Warrenton FFA Alumni and Supporters have been around for decades. The group has not always been very active, Lee says,

but alumni members were always willing to raise funds to help chapter members with trips, FFA Official Dress and college or trade school scholarships.

Now they were fired up. The group, led by Denise Dent, alumni group president, at one point met weekly on Lee’s farm to discuss plans and progress. Their numbers increased over time.

In coordination with the FFA chapter, the alumni tried everything they could think of to raise money, from selling T-shirts to hosting a trapshooting event. In total, the community raised more than \$78,000, which was enough to fully fund the agriculture department.

“There were lots of tears,” Sherman says. “We just realized how much our

community cares for us, how much they see the impact that ag classes had on them, and how much they wanted to continue it for us and future generations.”

Giving Back

Since 2020, the Warrenton agriculture department has seen steady increases in student enrollment. Miederhoff does not anticipate future funding

Advice for FFA chapters in Jeopardy

After nearly losing an agriculture teacher and programming, Warrenton FFA advisors and alumni recommend building relationships with school administration and the community before issues arise. One way to prevent problems is to advocate now for agricultural education and the value it brings to the community.

If you do encounter a difficult situation with the school board, Warrenton FFA suggests the following tips.

- Understand the board's position. Crack down on rumors and negative talk. Model outstanding citizenship as FFA members, and realize you are responsible for bringing good to your community, not harm.
- Focus on coming together as a community. There is strength in numbers.
- Find the facts, not just the feelings, of the situation. Both are important in the conversation.
- Consider applying for an alumni grant, such as those sponsored by Tractor Supply Co. and Nutrien Ag Solutions, that can help with a variety of financial needs. Visit [FFA.org/alumnigrants](https://www.ffa.org/alumnigrants).
- Stay positive, respectful and flexible.
- Recognize you may not always get the outcome you want, even after doing everything you can. Don't take it personally. Just do your best.

opposite, bottom (left to right): Warrenton FFA advisor Dan Burkemper teaches metal fabrication: Warrenton has a proud FFA history: FFA members aren't afraid of hard work: Members packaged more than 10,000 meals for Meals of Hope. This photo: Metal fabrication students constructed single-axle trailers.



concerns, but the alumni group continues to receive donations from people wanting to support FFA.

Additional donations from community members helped create a metal fabrication class and purchase supplies to build five single-axle trailers, the first of which received grand champion in its division at the Missouri State Fair. The goal is to auction trailers to buy supplies for future projects.

More support helped create a Meals of Hope program, in which students packed more than 10,000 meals for community

members in need. This year, the chapter plans to expand Meals of Hope and continue serving Warrenton and surrounding areas with traditional activities such as food drives and trash pickup days.

"There's no way you can ever truly give back for what the community did for us," Burkemper says, "but, in as many ways as we can, we want to."