

Learning to Lead

Joining FFA helped Bennett Perez go from shy to self-assured and gave her the confidence to chase her dreams.

— By Jessica Walker Boehm

Bennett Perez found her footing in agricultural education in an unexpected way.

Perez, a John Bowne FFA alumna from John Bowne High School in Flushing, N.Y., felt drawn to FFA because of her love of plants and animals, but her focus changed when she was recruited to join her chapter's agriculture sales team as a freshman.

"One of my advisors said he saw something in me, and even though I was terrified, I trusted him," Perez says. "The team captain and my advisor helped me practice and prepare, and I ended up placing eighth as an individual in the New York FFA Agriculture Sales Career Development Event (CDE) that year, while also helping my chapter place first as a team. I couldn't believe it. It was the biggest confidence boost of my life."

Months later, Perez and her teammates headed to the National FFA Convention & Expo, where she finished sixth as an individual in the agricultural sales CDE and solidified her spot as her chapter's sales team captain.

Perez also launched her chapter's marketing plan team, and she continued competing in CDEs until she graduated in 2014. In that time, Perez gained skills in active listening to build rapport, and she learned to match product features and benefits to a customer's needs and wants — skills that are important in any career.

"Competing in sales and marketing events taught me



leadership skills and gave me so many opportunities to get out of my comfort zone and talk to new people," she says. "I also learned a lot about myself; it turns out I'm

not as shy as I thought I was, and I enjoy being a leader and working with others to achieve a goal."

After high school,

Bennett attended the State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz and earned a bachelor of arts degree in sociology with a concentration in human services and a minor in Asian studies.

Her next step would have sounded shocking to a younger version of Perez, but thanks to the confidence she built in FFA, she was ready to chase her dream of living in Japan. She entered the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program as an assistant language teacher in 2018 and worked alongside Japanese English teachers in rural Japan.

Now back in the United States, Perez plans to explore career opportunities in a variety of areas and find the perfect fit; after all, she now knows the sky is the limit.

"I would not be who I am today without the experiences and adventures I had in FFA," Perez says. "Although the heart of FFA is agriculture, it's about so much more than that. When you join, you become part of a family that helps you grow and become your best self. I'm so lucky to have been part of such an incredible organization."

To connect with inspiring alumni like Perez and fellow members and FFA supporters, check out the FFA Forever Blue Network at **ForeverBlueNetwork.org**.



Interested in learning more about the agricultural sales and marketing plan CDEs? Hover your smartphone's camera over the code.