

MINTED A FARMER

HOW AN AMERICAN FFA DEGREE RECIPIENT WITH LITTLE AG BACKGROUND FORGED A SUCCESSFUL SAE AND CAREER IN THE FIELD. – By Lauren Denton



Brock Ashley's mint harvesting and oil extraction SAE won him the 2021 Wisconsin FFA Fiber and Oil Crop Production Proficiency Award.



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Brock Ashley didn't grow up on a farm, but he found his place – or rather, agricultural placement – on one. In 2017, at the end of his freshman year, he joined a morning farmhand program for high school students at Gumz Farms in Endeavor, Wis., and with the exception of a semester at college in fall 2021, he has been there since.

"I knew I wanted to do something in ag, and that was the closest opportunity that worked for me," Ashley says. "My parents just had to drop me off at school, and the bus took us there."

While Gumz is a 6,000-acre diversified-crop farm "with something different to do every day," the former Portage FFA president carved his niche among the specialty crop mint. His harvesting and oil extraction supervised agricultural experience (SAE) won him the 2021 Wisconsin FFA Fiber and Oil Crop Production Proficiency Award and the spot as Wisconsin's finalist for the 2022 American Star in Agricultural Placement.

"I was really shocked [by the accolades]," Ashley says. "A lot of other kids have been working their farm jobs their entire lives, and I thought I was a nobody."

Clearly not. So how did Ashley, who professes he "paved his own way in ag," steer himself to a standout SAE? First, he points to FFA, which he joined in middle

school. "My aunt was an FFA advisor at another high school, so I always joked that I didn't have a choice," he adds. He credits her and his other advisors, which includes his cousin, for pushing him to submit his SAE.

He also acknowledges that FFA "prepared me for what to expect" and introduced him to industry connections, which opened the doors for conversations. "Don't be afraid to talk to people about what you're interested in," he advises. "A lot of farmers want to see young people get involved. My employer was always really interested in my FFA journey and growth."

Ashley also had a willingness to learn. "I couldn't have worked my way up without it," he says. "It may mean picking rocks for about a year or so, but everybody's got to pick rocks."

Ashley's commitment to the task at hand – whether it was clearing fields, harvesting mint, learning to drive tractors or changing tires in the shop during the winter – has led the way to more responsibilities and opportunities at Gumz Farms. The latest, working in the agronomy department and experiencing seed sales, has sparked his interest for the future, where the field remains wide open.

"I don't really plan on finding a different career," he says.

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