

County Line FFA member Jake Sholtzman shows a lamb at the county fair.



DIFFERENTLY ABLED, SIMILARLY INVOLVED

Two FFA advisors share how they cultivated classrooms and experiences for students with disabilities. – By Lauren Denton

December 3 marks the 20th annual International Day of Persons with Disabilities. The observance is threefold: raise awareness, establish support and celebrate all individuals' impact. These goals include advocacy and inclusion, which positions FFA as a model where all students not only belong but also thrive. "Agriculture is so broad. There are so many

diverse opportunities to find something students with disabilities want to be involved in," says Ron Koch, advisor for the County Line FFA Chapter in Branch, Ark. He taught Jake Sholtzman, a 2017 graduate with cerebral palsy who uses a motorized wheelchair and a speaking device.

Koch knew Sholtzman loved livestock, so he researched assistive technology and constructed a wheelchair attachment for leading lambs around a show ring — some of which went on to win county fair grand champion. "He was just so appreciative to be able to participate," Koch says.

Harrisburg FFA advisor Levi Jones of Arkansas, whose chapter vice president, Sadey Bowen, uses a wheelchair, shares a similar sentiment: "It's really an opportunity more than a disability," he says. "Sadey has found things to do that others haven't."

While Jones updated the ag building's entrance and provided a custom stool for welding, Bowen built her own shop table, and she can farm her own plot of soybeans after assistance into the cab.

Despite separate experiences, the two advisors' takeaways fall right in line.

COMMUNICATE OPENLY. Koch interviewed Sholtzman's parents about the wheelchair's mechanics. Jones communicates directly with Bowen to learn what she needs.

OFFER THE SAME OPPORTUNITIES. "Jake just wanted to do the same things as his classmates," Koch says. Jones adds, "If Sadey can't do something, none of us are going to do it."

KEEP YOUR MIND AND EYES OPEN. "Sometimes it's fly by the seat of your pants," says Jones, referring to the time Bowen's classmates carried her down flights of stairs to watch the rodeo at the National FFA Convention. Similarly, Koch didn't consider that wood shavings might interfere with Sholtzman's wheelchair. "His brother cleared them out of the way as they piled up in the show ring," he says.

HELP STUDENTS FIND THEIR PASSIONS AND SOURCE THE RESOURCES

THEY NEED. "Any educator would understand that we do our job for the students," Koch says. "If that's our philosophy, we need to do our best."

Let them teach you. Says Jones: "Sadey has taught me more in three years than I could have taught her in 40."

"Sadey has taught me more in three years than I could have taught her in 40."
– Levi Jones



Harrisburg FFA ensures all opportunities are accessible for all members.