A Summer of Reflection Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Part I: The COVID-19 Montana FFA State Officer Team

The National FFA Organization has been a key component of rural life in America for over 90 years. The National FFA Organization is a youth-led organization that fosters personal growth, career success and premier leadership through agriculture education. There are over 700,000 members across the United States, making it the largest youth organization in the nation.

The Montana FFA Association, which is an affiliate of the National FFA Organization, has been a cornerstone of Montana culture since the 1930s. Over 5000 middle school and high school agriculture education students are members of the Montana FFA and each year, eight graduating seniors from across the state are selected to lead the organization as the Montana FFA State Officer team. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected both the role of the Montana FFA, and the Montana FFA State Officers in the lives of students across the state. Here I am chronicling my experience as the 2020-2021 Montana FFA State Secretary, and as a member of the “COVID-19 State Officer Team.”

Below is a photograph of the 2020-2021 Montana FFA State Officer Team. This photograph was taken by Clark Marten, a photographer in Billings, Montana.

Our team is facing many unique challenges, as are the state officer teams for other career and technical organizations like Business Professionals of America (BPA) and Family Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA). Our story is one of adaptation.
I began the process of running for a Montana FFA State Office in March. After submitting my state officer application at the beginning of the month, I began to prep for the interview process and the extensive test that we would need to take as a part of the election process.

Each year, at the Montana FFA State Convention, a nominating committee interviews 25 to 30 state officer candidates over four days. After two days of interviews, the candidate pool is cut to 16 candidates, that then go through a final round of interviews over the next two days. At the end of the final session of the Montana FFA State Convention, these 16 candidates huddle in a circle in the back of the convention hall, and the members of the nominating committee read off the names of the next Montana FFA State Officers with the Top Gun Anthem echoing throughout the hall.

Many believe that it was this year’s state officer candidates that were most devastated when the 2020 Montana FFA State Convention was cancelled due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Candidates like Max Andres and Gracie Smith, who’s entire FFA career centered on the dream of running for a Montana FFA State Office, were crushed. I, on the other hand, had been trying to decide if I should run for a Montana FFA State Office for only a few months. I had no idea if I should go out of state for college, or if I should run for a State Office and stay in Montana for college. I truly only decided to run in February, a few weeks before the application was due.

When the officer election process began in the last week of March, it looked very different than previous years. We were interviewed through the program Google Hangouts, and took our general FFA and agriculture knowledge test through Google forms. We did have a few group interviews in which we were given a project or a scenario that we addressed as a team, but not nearly as many as we would have been given in person. There was still a cut after the first two interview rounds, leaving 16 candidates in the mix. Our final interview was a five-minute Google Hangouts call with the nominating committee members. We then waited two weeks to hear the results of the selection process.

The 2020-2021 State Officer team was announced on April 1st over a Facebook Live video by the 2019-2020 National FFA Central Region Vice President, from Montana, Mamie Hertel. While the Top Gun Anthem still played in the background of the video, having only my chapter advisor and a few of my friends on Facetime with me during the announcement while I sat at the kitchen table felt very odd. All I wanted was to be able to see my teammates in person. They did not announce which offices we would hold during the year, as the state association wanted to announce those at a state-convention-like event so that our team would potentially get to have a moment where we would run up on stage. This is the first photograph that was released of our team.

You’ll notice that two of us are from the same local FFA chapter. Max and I have known each other for years and were already on an officer team together in Missoula. It is very rare that the nominating committee picks two or more state officers from the same
chapter. I remember calling him after our team was announced. My name had been called before his on the video, and when my name was called, he said that he was completely heartbroken and was about to leave the room when he heard his name called! His sister sent me a video of his reaction, and he was so happy and excited. We both were crying on the phone when we called each other after the announcement. It’s so special that we get to be on a team together for a third year in a row.

I can’t help but imagine what my reaction would have been like if we had been elected in person. Of course, I would have been crying already after I was announced, and if I had been announced first, and Max after me, I would have been so happy that I would have started crying even harder and as he ran up on the stage I would have mauled him in a huge hug and not have let go for at least two hours after the session had ended. I am so proud of everyone on my team and I can’t wait for the year ahead of us.

April 3rd, 2020

Tonight was the first time I got to talk to my team! We all downloaded the app Houseparty, which is best described as a group facetime app. We were all so excited to finally talk to one another! We all had so much to discuss and share that we stayed up until 3:00am talking on Houseparty.

One of the great things about Houseparty is that you can play Pictionary and other games on the app. So not only did we all get to see each other and talk to each other, we also had the chance to play a few games and have some fun.

Many of us have known each other for many years already through various FFA events and competitions. For example, Gracie Smith, Gracie Tooke and I were all in the final round for the Montana State FFA Creed Speaking LDE our freshman year, and we have been friends ever since. I am so excited to see how our year plays out!

One of the things we did while talking was, of course, make some memes! Memes are such a unique part of our generation’s humor, so I wanted to include one of them here. Photos of our team have been pasted on a “coronavirus” and our advisor, Mr. Rose, is featured in the bottom left corner in his “Christmas Suit” (as past teams call it).

April 6th, 2020

Today we had the opportunity to meet with Chase Rose, a past National FFA State Officer from Montana, for our state officer orientation. We had a zoom meeting with him, and I officially learned how to share a screen on zoom!
It was clear at this point that our year was going to be very unique and that we may get approached by various news outlets in Montana to be featured, so media training was prioritized during this opening orientation session.

While we did discuss some of the travelling policies that we as a team would have to adhere to, I couldn’t help but think that this year, travelling the state of Montana and visiting FFA members may not be something that we get to do.

The COVID-19 pandemic is already affecting middle and high school operations a great deal. For example, we state officers were not asked to attend any end-of-year chapter banquets in our districts because they were cancelled due to the pandemic. Even though I would like to hope otherwise, I think that schools are probably not going to open back up fully this fall, and that we will not be allowed to travel to visit chapters and ag-ed programs. My team and I are going to have to get very good at using Zoom and other virtual meeting platforms.

We know for sure that most of our summer plans as a team have been cancelled. The Alumni Leadership Camp, the State Officer Summit in Washington DC, the Ag Commodities Tour in the Pacific Northwest, and the Montana State Fair are all cancelled already, just to name a few. We hope that we may still get to have some of these experiences virtually, but all we can do is wait and see.

We have a few more meetings with Chase Rose, and then we’ll have the chance to speak with a few other past state officers, so we have that to look forward to.

April 21st, 2020

Lane Nordlund had a Zoom meeting with us today, and spoke to us about media training again. Lane is a past Montana State Officer and is a reporter who works with the Montana Ag Network, and also runs his own communications company for the agricultural industry. Not only did he drill us on interview skills, but he filmed us over Zoom for a segment he was doing the next morning on the air! I have a screenshot of the clip pasted below.
May 23rd, 2020

We found out what our offices are today! Unfortunately, the 2020 Montana FFA State Convention was officially cancelled, so the state association decided to announce our offices through another Facebook livestream. The official photo of our team, including our offices, is pasted to the right. Since we have met a few times as a team, we all had a guess about who was going to hold which office, and many of our speculations were confirmed after the livestream!

As the team’s compulsive note-taker, I was pegged to be the Montana FFA State Secretary this year. Already through our Zoom meetings and Facetimes about our Monumental Members project, I have established myself as the “agenda gal” and secretary for our team. It was really fun to see my role solidified on the livestream today!

One very unique aspect of our year of service so far is that we are serving as state officers at the same time that the 2019-2020 team is finishing off their year. The 2019-2020 team has technically not retired from office as they are still in charge of putting together a virtual state convention. They have asked us to help them with a project that will hopefully keep members inspired and engaged during this time leading up to state convention, and that is the Monumental Members project I mentioned earlier. We asked advisors to nominate one of their students through an online application to be featured on Montana FFA social media platforms as a “Monumental Member.” The selected members were interviewed by a state officer about their experiences and projects in FFA and we will share that interview online with our members. We have already selected our “Monumental Members” and released their names on social media through the above photo.

MONTANA FFA
Monumental Members

Amber Johnson
Choteau FFA
Hannah LaBree
Carter County FFA
Rylan Signalness
Fairfield FFA
Colton Young
Stillwater Valley FFA
Jacquelyn Stratton
Shelby FFA

Hailey Weible
Mission Valley FFA
Dacey Robertson
Fromberg FFA
Hailee Varner
Wibaux FFA
Ashley Karst
Fairview FFA

President
Vice President
Vice President
Secretary
Treasurer
Vice President
Vice President
Vice President
June 3rd, 2020

We were tasked with our second project today - the Montana FFA State Talent Contest! And we had our first team workshop with National FFA facilitators!

The Montana FFA State Talent Contest is a staple of state convention, and because our contestants worked so hard on their performances this year, we wanted to be sure to feature them in some way during our Convention. Our team reached out and contacted the members who had signed up for the talent contest this year to see if they would be willing to send in a video of their performances instead. Most of them agreed, but we had a group act decide that they couldn't safely rehearse as a group, or film their video submission, so they had to drop out. For the first time we had members vote during the talent contest! We posted the videos of the contestants performing on our Instagram story and had members vote based on a sliding scale feature on Instagram for each contestant. The top three (based on the vote) then competed in a final round judged by a committee. The contest was a success, but we did have a couple parents reach out to us wondering how to vote.

Today was also the beginning of Base Camp, a workshop led by National FFA staff for state officers as a part of a leadership learning continuum that we will be following throughout our year of service. We will have Zoom meetings with our facilitators from 8:00am to 6:00pm until June 6th! I am worried that I am going to get too tired of Zoom to want to participate in any more virtual events after this - so we'll see how this goes. I am excited to meet our facilitators, because they will be a great resource for our team this year as one of them is a past state officer from Tennessee, and the other is a past National Officer. I have some pictures from our first session here.

June 4th, 2020

Today was an unprecedented day for the National FFA Organization. In light of racist and insensitive posts on social media made by Lyle Logemann, this year's National FFA Western Region Vice President, Lyle has been removed from office.

No national officer has ever been removed from office. But after these social media posts came to light, including one made on May 31st, I am glad that they had removed him from office. Many members, state officers, and past national officers were calling for his removal after these posts were made public, and I am so glad that National FFA responded and responded so appropriately.

After the murder of George Floyd, many school organizations have been making statements regarding the importance of diversity and voicing their support for members of color in their organizations. FFA was one of the last to do so, and as a state officer, I was getting private messages from members and past state officers on social media criticizing FFA’s response to this crisis.
personally, after getting those messages, put together an explicit statement in support of members of color in the National FFA and in the Montana FFA, but my team shot me down about some of the wording. While we did release a statement, it was not as explicit as I believe it should have been.

While National FFA does work to improve diversity in the organization, Lyle Logemann is evidence that we need to do more. National FFA has pledged to vet national officer candidates with greater intensity and rigor, using private firms to comb through social media posts and all public information about national officer candidates. But I know that we can do more.

As a state officer this year I have made it a goal of mine to find ways that we can make our organization better and more inclusive. I am a delegate representing the Montana FFA this year during the review of National FFA practices and policies and, after doing extensive research, I plan on presenting new policies and legislation that will drive inclusivity in National FFA.

I love FFA and I know that there are leaders in this organization that can lift us up and bring our organization forward. I hope I am one of those leaders, but I want to reach out to other state officers, like the 2020-2021 California FFA State Officers (who are already putting together a board that will oversee diversity and inclusion in the California FFA), to hear their plans to improve FFA.

June 25th, 2020 through June 28th, 2020

We were so incredibly happy to find out that the Montana FFA Agricultural Opportunities Tour was not cancelled this summer and that we would finally have a chance to do what our team has been most excited about since we were selected: interacting with FFA members! The Ag Opportunities Tour (otherwise known as Ag Tour) is an annual FFA event for FFA members interested in learning more about Montana agriculture. Each year the tour happens in a different region of Montana, and students spend about four days touring various agricultural facilities, including everything from sugar beet fields to local meat processing labs. This year the tour was in northeastern Montana.

With Montana opening up from lockdown, the Montana FFA Foundation chose not to cancel this year’s Ag Tour, as the number of students that would be on the tour was lower than 50, which I believe was the new parameters set by Governor Bullock for this stage of reopening.

My dad is a doctor, and he almost decided that I shouldn’t go on the trip the night before I left. He was very nervous that I would be exposed to COVID-19, or worse, that I and the kids on the tour would be super-spreaders of COVID-19 as we travelled through eastern Montana.

Before we left, everyone was required to send in health records proving that we did not have any symptoms of COVID-19, and that we had not been in contact with anyone who was known to have COVID-19. Once we arrived on the fairgrounds in Terry, Montana we were supplied with a health kit that included a mask, multiple bottles of hand sanitizer, lotion and more that we were required to have with us throughout the tour. The tour was great and we did get to see many aspects of Montana agriculture that were new to me and had the chance to share some great bonding moments with members.

However, I found as the trip went on that students were becoming less and less inclined to social distance or wear masks. As we state officers were simply along for the ride and were not the folks in charge of “wrangling” these students, I did not feel like I had the place or the power to get these kids to start wearing masks. As the tour went on, it became increasingly clear as well that many of these kids did not believe masks were necessary, and neither did the tour guides that we visited with on the trip.

Most, if not all, of our activities and such were outside, and we were all required to wear masks when we were in non-ventilated buildings, so at least we were being safe in that aspect. But we
were not being cautious enough. What was extremely difficult for me was that on the bus, no one was asked to wear a mask and only one or two students did. I found that kids did not talk to me as much if I was wearing a mask, and I regret letting that peer pressure get to me. I know I should have set a better example to those kids, but at the time I really just wanted those kids to like me. One thing I am learning due to this COVID-19 pandemic is that peer pressure can truly be dangerous, and that I need to learn to stand my ground. I need to learn to brush off the side glances and judgements of other people and live my life safely during this pandemic. That is my goal from now on.

While on this trip we did choose our theme for this year, and it is.... CONNECTED BY CORDUROY! We were all excited about it, because it emphasizes that we can still reach out to one another for support and advice in our FFA networks, even though we can’t see each other in person. We will all always be connected by corduroy.

June 30th, 2020

We took our official team pictures, and our official individual state officer pictures today! We had such a wonderful time. It is a Montana FFA State Officer tradition to get team photos taken in Billings by Clark Marten. Clark was a Montana FFA State Officer fifty years ago, and would have been celebrating his fiftieth team reunion at this year’s state convention. He was so excited about sharing this with us - he had his team photograph with him in his studio, as well as his state degree pin and his American degree pin. The American degree is the highest award that an FFA member can earn, and he shared some inspiring words with us, encouraging us to continue our FFA experience and apply to receive our American degrees. I included the team picture on the first page of this journal, and my individual picture is here.

July 18th, 2020 through July 22nd, 2020

Over the past few days our team was back in Bozeman participating virtually in the State Officer Summit, a national leadership conference focused on developing agriculture advocacy tools for FFA State Officers that normally takes place in Washington DC. This was the trip that I was the most excited about this year, and I was heartbroken when I found out it was cancelled. State Officer Summit is such an amazing opportunity to meet state officers from other areas of the country and share ideas about how to engage with members and improve our associations together. Not to mention that I was excited to meet some new and inspiring friends while in DC, my absolute favorite city in the world. And we were going to meet with our representatives and probably take the underground subway to get around Capitol Hill. I really can’t understate how excited I was.
We knew we wanted to be together for this experience, so we travelled to Bozeman and the Montana Farm Bureau was generous enough to let us use their conference room so that we could tune in to the Zoom conference sessions together. We still got to meet with one of our representatives, Senator Steve Daines, who shows a great deal of support for Montana FFA. Our team took this as an opportunity to ask for his support for the National FFA Organization as we move forward into the next year and work to develop online programs and events, such as the virtual National FFA Convention and Expo coming up this fall, that still cater to the needs to students across the country. I have copied a photograph of our Zoom meeting with him above. I also have a photo of our team with the National FFA Central Region Vice President, Mamie Hertel, who is from Montana (see right)! She was a state officer for the Montana FFA Association a little over a year ago, and is the first national officer Montana has had in over a decade! She is amazing, and I am super lucky to call her a mentor and a friend.

In regards to COVID-19, when we were all in the room together, we did not wear masks, however, when we met with folks outside of our “bubble” a few of us did wear masks. It is difficult to gauge how some of the members of my team feel about wearing masks - they all wear them in public places like grocery stores or on campus at Montana State, but when we are in smaller group settings like a lunch with board members for the Foundation and situations like that, some members of my team do not wear masks. I am going to talk to them once we get to campus at Montana State about the mask policy for our team. - I think we should be wearing masks at all FFA events and I am confident that we will be implementing that policy in the coming weeks.

July 29th, 2020 through July 31st, 2020

We had our next state officer leadership continuum workshop with National FFA over the past few days. This workshop is called Checkpoint One, and it is led by National FFA staff to help state officers develop leadership workshops for their members.

The state officer team, during a normal year, would travel across the state leading these workshops in eight districts as a part of a leadership development training for FFA members known as District Leadership Seminar (otherwise known as DLS). However, this year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, DLS will be entirely virtual.

Our plan is to pre-record our workshops and send the videos to FFA advisors. The students will then watch those interactive videos either at home, or as a part of their class time, and afterwards, will set up a Zoom conference with two of the members of our state officer team to reflect on and discuss what they learned in the workshop. Our plan is going to have to be flexible though, because we still need to figure out how we can make this workshop experience impactful and interactive for all students, whether they are completing their schoolwork at home, or in some sort of in-person/online blend.

I have learned a lot about Zoom, and about how to run a successful workshop on Zoom, so hopefully those skills will come in handy and we will be able to have a lot of virtual meetings with chapters across the state.
Part II: How do I graduate high school in a pandemic?

March 16th, 2020

It is the first official day of spring break. I know that I should be excited, and that I should be looking forward to a week of relaxation, a week of riding horses, a week of some spring skiing if the weather holds up. But all I can think about is what my teachers told me before we left for break: that I may never get to see them again.

Our orchestra, teacher, Mr. Davis, looked out across the class last week and said: “You know, this could be the last time we ever play together.” I have known Mr. Davis for many years, and have played in the Hellgate Advanced Orchestra and the Missoula Youth Symphony under his guidance for the past four years. I know he can get sentimental and anxious, especially when our schedule starts picking up in the spring with final concerts, District Music Festival, All State Auditions, and more. I initially brushed off his gloomy comment and focused on the music and playing with my stand partner Maddy. She was the concertmaster, and I was the assistant concertmaster.

I now wish I had taken a moment to let it sink in. That was the last time that I played with Mr. Davis. It was the last time that I played with my dear friends Maddy, Grace, and Maia. It was the last time I played in an orchestra in my high school career. And I didn’t even turn around when I left the orchestra room, eager to get to my next class. I didn’t turn around to thank Mr. Davis for all he had done for me over the four years I had been his student. I didn’t get to tell him that without orchestra, I would have been lost at Hellgate. Orchestra gave me a home, it gave me a place to express myself, and a place to challenge myself. It’s uncanny to me that I am not going to banter with the cello section leaders next year, that I’m not going to reminisce with Mr. Davis about that one year he insisted on playing a keytar for the Pops Concert, and that I’m only going to see Maddy and Maia at graduation and not for our final orchestra concert. If there is one thing, I am going to miss most about high school, it is the Hellgate Advanced Orchestra.

May 23rd, 2020

We’ve been doing classes online now for about two months. I turned in my final for pre-calculus a few days ago, and I have officially kept an A in IB biology HL for four semesters! Yay for two-year long classes and at least fifty concept maps! My final IB History essay is turned in, my project for my Ag class is finished, and IB English is over. The last final I need to turn in is for orchestra.

Mr. Davis asked for us to learn and perform a solo piece for our last orchestra assignment. Taking orchestra online has been particularly challenging, because our grades are normally based off of our rehearsal skills - so Mr. Davis has been getting creative with his assignments. From playing on virtual music performance platforms, to taking theory quizzes and listening to lectures on music history, we have been doing every assignment imaginable for an orchestra class. Today I recorded my final solo piece that Mr. Davis will ever hear me play. It still breaks my heart that we
were not able to have our final orchestra concert. My mom and I had a “prank” planned for the last concert. Each year, as a finale, we play Con te Partiro to bid the graduating seniors farewell. My mom and I were going to plant bubble machines in the concert hall, and the concert hall would fill with bubbles while we were playing Con te Partiro. Then, as per tradition, Mr. Davis would say a few words about each senior, hand us a rose, and our career in high school orchestra would officially be over.

Now, to finish my career, instead of a bubble machine and roses, Mr. Davis will be listening to a low-quality recording of my chosen solo piece: Sicilienne by Maria Theresia von Paradis. I won’t get to say “thank you for everything” in person, but hopefully the bittersweet mood of Sicilienne will get my sentiments across. I took pictures of the sheet music and pasted them here.
June 6th, 2020

Today was the day that I graduated from high school.

Right now, I’m imaging someone reading this in the far-off future, and I want to make sure that I get the details right.

We had our graduation ceremony at the Washington-Grizzly Stadium at 9:00am on the University of Montana campus. About a week before, I had gone to Hellgate High School to pick up my cap and gown, and drop off my textbooks. My mom and dad insisted on driving me in our minivan to the ceremony – and being a little late – I was frantically putting my cap and gown on in the back of the car. My parents were the only people that I could bring to the ceremony.

When we arrived, I checked in at a small triage site that the school administrators had put together, and was handed a red bandana with “HK” (short for “Hellgate Knights”) stamped on the front in gold letters. I quickly found my friends, and while we probably should have been social distancing, we were just so excited to finally see each other that we hugged and helped each other put our bandanas on.

We had each been assigned a number based on where we would be in the alphabetical line-up to be announced for the ceremony. When we were asked to line up in numerical order, we really should have been able to line up in just a few minutes. But 20 minutes later, we still had kids trying to find their spot in line. It seemed fitting that the last time our school administrators asked us to do something we made it too complicated, and pure dysfunction ensued. I feel like now it’s important to note that at this point, we were still not social distancing.

While we were getting lined up outside of the east entrance to the stadium, a few of our teachers started to line the sidewalk next to the parking lot. Teachers were not allowed to attend the graduation ceremony, and none of us were expecting to see them at all. But there they were, supporting us to the last minute, waving signs covered in red and gold glitter, wearing masks, and social distancing along the sidewalk. I had a chance to say hello/wave a final goodbye to my history teacher, my English teacher, and my orchestra director. It was truly so wonderful to see them all.

We filed in for our graduation ceremony, this time maintaining social distancing guidelines, and were asked to put our red bandanas up and over our mouths and nose.

Normally, when we filed in, we would have seen packed stands filled with our friends and family, with shouts and whistles filling up the Adams Center (an indoor basketball court on the University of Montana campus where graduation is usually hosted). Instead, our pairs of parents sat in isolated pods, scattered throughout the grandstands, and whistling and cheering sounded eerily echo-y and quiet as it floated off into the morning air. Many parents were wearing facemasks, and chose only to clap while we all walked onto the football field and to our designated chairs.

When we sat down, many of us pulled our bandanas down. Our chairs were each six feet apart from one another. The ceremony started with the singing of the National Anthem. Our principal and superintendent gave opening remarks, and our student body presidents gave short and poignant speeches about the world we were graduating into. Before the administrators started rattling off our names, they showed a video of the graduating seniors in the choir program singing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” They had all called in to a zoom meeting and recorded themselves performing the song, and then had the zoom meeting footage edited to highlight the soloists.

When we walked across the stage and received our diploma, there was a camera across from us that was recording the live-stream of the ceremony. I smiled and gave a small wave, knowing my grandparents and extended family was watching in Massachusetts and California.
To manage crowd size, groups of us were asked to leave through separate exits in the stadium, but that didn't keep me from running off to find my friends and take a few pictures with them to commemorate the moment.

The whole experience was truly perspective altering. In that massive football stadium, our class of 250 looked so small, so insignificant. The Missoula streets were so quiet. There were no sirens, no cars on the road, no groups of college kids playing ultimate frisbee on the lawn. It felt like the world was too big. There were too many problems to fix, too many sick people in the world, too many starving people, too many kids who would never get the chance to graduate high school, too many kids that wouldn't have a graduation ceremony. The world didn't care about us. We were supposed to be graduating with hope in our hearts, not tears in our eyes and fear in our stomachs. The world didn't care about us that day. But we did have people who cared about us. We had administrators, teachers, parents, siblings, grandparents, and friends that through that ceremony showed that they cared. The world itself may be a cruel place, but that is why we have communities to lift us up and push us forward when the world insists on pushing us back. I am truly thankful that I was able to see each of my friends at this ceremony and tell them how much I love them and how proud I am of them for all they have accomplished. Thank you to my community for all that you’ve done for me over the years, I don’t know how I’ll every repay you.

The graduating seniors in the Hellgate High School choir program sing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” on the big screen.
There I am walking across the stage at graduation!

The view from the grandstands!
This photograph was taken by a Missoulian photographer (I have attached the link below). I honestly thought more people would decorate their caps, so it’s pretty easy to spot me in the crowd. My cap said “No one achieves anything alone,” which is a lovely quote by Leslie Knope, a fictional character in the show Parks and Recreation.


June 8th, 2020

There are many traditions that our class missed as a result of the pandemic, but our graduation ceremony made me consider just how special our class bond is. Many high school seniors grow tired of their classmates by the end of the year, and simply move on to their new college crew once they graduate. But our class never got the chance to get tired of one another.

During a normal year, by the time the graduating seniors were standing on one of the many staircases in Hellgate High School, throwing class papers in the air as they celebrate the last week of school (one of the most fun traditions for seniors at Hellgate), many would go their separate ways even before the graduation ceremony.

But our class is different. Each time I happen to run into one of my classmates while I am in town, we always make a point to stop and check in with one another. We are still staying in touch through social media, and I think that in the future, we will all want to attend our high school reunions rather than feeling like it is a chore.

In many ways, I think we will all bring that same sense of community onto our college campuses. I am excited to see where we go.
Part III: How do I come to terms with my future?

June 10th, 2020

My high school career is officially over. With everything going on, it definitely did not give me enough time to truly process my future.

After graduation, I took a moment to reflect. The extenuating global circumstances had so much to do with the direction of my future, and it has truly affected what many of my classmates are planning on doing moving forward in college.

For me personally, my high school career had been about ensuring that I had as many options for college as possible. I applied for anything and everything under the sun, whether it was scholarships that I found online, scholarships through an institution I was applying to, leadership institutes in a university I applied to, and more. I was honored to be asked to interview for a Presidential Scholarship with Montana State University this past February, and was thrilled to hear the news that I had been offered one of the 23 Presidential Scholarships. While I didn't realize it at the time, in many ways, the scholarship offer was a sign. I received the scholarship offer before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down, causing schools to close in Missoula County.

When May 1st, college decision day, rolled around, my parents and I felt like I had an easy decision to make. With the economic effects of the pandemic, having the option to graduate college with little to no debt would ensure that I would be able to save money to attend graduate school in the future. The more I think about it, the more I suspect that the COVID-19 pandemic was a blessing in disguise. If the pandemic had not hit when it did, I probably would have accepted an offer at a college that would leave my family in extreme debt.

But of course, I can't help but wonder what my future would have been like if COVID-19 never happened. I have fantasized about accepting the offer to ride on the Division I Equestrian Team at UC Davis, deciding to attend Bowdoin College in Maine.... it's fascinating to think about the nudges that the universe gives you towards different decisions. My path is night and day compared to my classmates. I have classmates that will be attending Yale and Harvard next year, that have no idea what their educational experience will be like. It is exciting to by “leaping into the unknown” but with something as important as one's education, I have no idea how I would be handling attending an out-of-state university during these unprecedented times.

June 18th, 2020

This is the week that my college experience finally started!

My online orientation session started, and it has been very interesting. We have been assigned to an orientation session that is similar to an online class, in which we watch various videos about the different aspects of attending MSU.

I have been sitting at my kitchen table, watching these videos, sometimes in my pajamas, feeling in many ways like it is a chore rather than an exciting beginning to my college experience. I have been learning a lot, and I do feel very prepared to get to campus and take advantage of the various resources there, but I feel like I am missing a large part of the orientation experience: meeting new people.

Part of the orientation videos showed the various events like dances, and club activities that involved large groups of people. Looking at the world now it seems like we may never get back to that
place. That place where we will be able to take group camping trips together for college orientation, or have a welcome party in the Bobcat Stadium. It all seems so impossible at this point.

July 10th, 2020

I got the best birthday present today. After waiting to hear back for months, I finally found out that I got off the wait list at Dartmouth College. This was an amazing surprise, because Dartmouth is the only Ivy League school that I got into, and I was able to prove to myself that I was Ivy League material. My entire family attended either Ivy League schools, or universities that are considered as exclusive as the Ivy League, and it meant so much to me and my family that I was able to accomplish this goal that I have had since freshman year.

Of course, I will not be attending Dartmouth College, but I will know that it will always be there and I’ll always have that knowledge that I was able to get in!

My family on the east coast was truly so thrilled to hear the news, they all called me and congratulated me. My aunt, who went to UPenn and Columbia, was so proud that she actually started crying when I was talking to her on the phone. My grandfather and mom, who both went to Bowdoin, found it pretty funny that I got into both Bowdoin and Dartmouth, which are in a way rival colleges, at least according to them. I am really proud and so excited that I was able to accomplish that, but I have my heart set on attending Montana State. (GO BOBCATS! 😊) The more I think about it, the happier I am that I will be staying in Montana for college. It is, as many Montanans already know, the last best place, and I am so glad that I get to stay here, not only for the great skiing (although that’s definitely a factor), but for the people and the western way of life that I love so much. Plus, with the travelling that I have done so far, I have found that nothing can beat Montana’s big sky. I’ve realized that I will probably be a Montanan for life.

Part III: How do I go about my daily life?

July 14th, 2020

Today I rode a new horse named Chewy, a 20-year-old Hanoverian dressage horse. Now that I am home more due to the pandemic, I am taking some time to try new things. I have always wanted to learn how to ride dressage, and luckily, the trainer in Florence who owns Chewy has some time in her schedule to fit in a few lessons with me this summer. I am super excited about this “quarantine project.” We do have to wear masks in the barn, but if we are riding in the outdoor arena, we don’t have to wear masks. Chewy and I are pictured on the left.

I started an online class yesterday with the MSU Honors college called Taking the Pulse of Montana (aka HONR 200). I had my last 4-H horse interview tonight. It was a bittersweet moment. I have been riding in 4-H for 10 years now, and I am so grateful for all I have been able to accomplish through the 4-H horse program. I honestly wish I could go back to being 6 years old, going to my first club meeting. I am going to miss 4-H so much.
July 15th, 2020

Over the summer I have been taking care of my market lamb, Hansel, and my breeding ewe, Bonnie. I will be showing Hansel at the Western Montana Fair this August, as Missoula County decided not to cancel the fair. I took Hansel to the MCPS Ag Center tonight to get weighed, and to attend a showmanship clinic led by the best sheep showman in our chapter, Colin Cox. Hansel weighed in at 125 pounds and behaved really well during the showmanship clinic. Hansel and I are pictured on the left.

July 17th, 2020

I rode Chewy again today! He was such a good boy, and I even got a flying lead change on him! It is usually a bit of a challenge to get a horse to do a flying lead change, and that could be my own bias speaking because most of the horses I have ridden have either tried to buck me off during a flying lead change, or have a complicated cue for the lead change. But Chewy was so easy, all I had to do was ride him across the diagonal and switch legs. I am having so much fun riding him.

July 18th, 2020

Today I drove up to Bozeman with Max and Gracie for the State Officer Summit. These road trips with my teammates are one of the only things keeping me sane this summer. Normally I would be on the road non-stop during the summer, so having everything cancelled or virtual has really messed with my head. I am not enjoying spending so much time on Zoom.

We are staying in a hotel, and masks are required at all times except in our room. The staff are packing breakfast bags for the guests that you can pick up in the morning, and then you are required to eat in your room.

We tried to go swimming this afternoon, but we didn’t realize that we actually have to make an appointment to swim in the pool with our group, so we got into a bit of trouble. We made an appointment to swim in the morning. We’ll be in Bozeman for the next couple of days.

July 23rd, 2020

The State Officer Summit has ended, and our team decided that we were going to stay in Gracie Smith’s apartment for a couple days before going home. Gracie was planning on living in the dorms this fall at MSU, but as she has Crohn’s Disease and is therefore in a high-risk category for COVID-19, she decided to rent an apartment instead. She and a past state officer, Emily, will be living the apartment, and Gracie said we are welcome over any time. But I can’t help but wonder if we should really all come over to her apartment very often. We all could get exposed to the coronavirus while on campus. We are going to have to be very careful and mindful of this virus, especially considering that we have a team member who is high-risk.
I finally got home from Bozeman. It has been a long couple of days. Last night, while we were sleeping at Gracie's apartment, I woke up at 3:00am feeling like I was going to throw up. I was so worried that I had contracted COVID-19, because I had just heard earlier in the week that it can be considered a gastrointestinal disease because it can affect your intestines. I called my dad in a panic, and he helped me calm down. As a doctor, he has a lot of knowledge of COVID-19 and he is great resource for me, my immediate family, and my extended family. My grandparents call him every couple of days with questions about the virus and how it's affecting Montana.

I felt better in the morning though, so I am assuming it was the Panda Express that I had eaten the night before that made me feel so sick. I'm home and now I get to spend time with my sheep and hopefully get to ride Chewy again soon.

Today was a completely normal day. I woke up at 8:00am and fed my sheep at 8:30am. After my market lamb was done eating, I sprinted him up and down our driveway four times and then had him jump over a log 15 times for his exercise. We practiced some showmanship after that. He is doing great. I wrote a bunch of thank-you notes today to various folks that supported our team during the State Officer Summit experience in Bozeman. I went to Florence and rode Chewy. Overall, it was a great day. Hansel and I are pictured above on the left.

Our fridge died today. As my dad was leaving for work, he said that he only thought the lights had gone out in the fridge, but as the day went on, it became clear that our fridge was dead. In the morning, my mom and I went down to Florence and I had another lesson with Chewy. But when my mom and I came back, we moved as much as we could to the freezers in the garage and started calling handymen, hoping that they would be able to come by and fix it. We pulled it out of its spot in the wall, making sure that it hadn't somehow just gotten unplugged. One of the wires was broken and frayed, I even shocked myself on it by accident, and we put some electric tape over it to see if that would fix our problem. Unfortunately, it did not. When the pandemic started, we bought some CSA farm shares from our friend's farm, so our fridge was full of perishable vegetables.

We couldn't get someone out to fix the fridge until tomorrow, so we packed it with ice packs and tried to open it as little as possible.

Hansel and I worked a lot today. After feeding him and Bonnie, I exercised him (sprinting him up and down the driveway four times and jumping a log 15 times) and then practiced some
showmanship. I spent a lot of time today filling out my Agricultural Experience Tracker (AET). It is an online record book that FFA members use to track their independent projects, called Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAEs). For my SAE I have always done a market lamb, but I also have a breeding sheep operation and I had a breeding hog.

This evening I took Hansel to the MCPS Ag Center to be weighed and to participate in a showmanship clinic. He weighed in at 135 pounds.

As part of preparing for the Western Montana Fair, I visit businesses around Missoula and invite them to the 4-H and FFA Livestock Sale. I give them information about the sale, and a flyer about my market lamb. By visiting these businesses, they are more inclined to bid up my animal, or “bump” the price after my animal is sold. But, of course, we do have to look presentable on the flyer, so I gave Hansel a bath, and we took some nice pictures for the flyer. One of them is copied on the left, and there is a picture of me drying Hansel off with a blow dryer after his bath on the right (above).

July 30th, 2020

Today I had my final FFA fair interview with my advisor, Cindy Arnott. Again, this was just as bittersweet as my final 4-H interview. These two organizations have meant so much to me over the years, and I honestly have no idea where I would be without them.

Whenever you are at the Ag Center, you are required to check your temperature before entering the building, and you are required to wear a mask.

I came back to the Ag Center this afternoon to start Checkpoint One (the second step in the leadership continuum of workshops for State Officers led by National FFA) and hang out with Max, my fellow teammate. I was getting so fed up with sitting on Zoom meetings after Zoom meeting that I finally decided that I needed a change of venue. Our workshops lasted until 5:00pm, after which I went to go pick up our CSA farm shares from our friend’s farm.

August 1st, 2020

Checkpoint One is done! Goodness, I have been on Zoom meetings from 8:00am to 5:00pm for the past three days. Working with my lambs is such a welcome break from all of that. I have been trying to work with my market lamb now twice a day on showmanship to help us prepare for the sheep show coming up.

August 2nd, 2020

Today I took my lamb over to the Ag Center so that I could shear him before the show. He was super well behaved while we were shearing and he turned out really well. I am excited to see how we do in our market class this year. I also helped a younger member with his sheep. I was the only one wearing a mask while shearing. I am not sure, but the member’s family could have something
against masks. I can never seem to tell, so normally I try not to confront folks about it and instead be really careful on my end. His lamb, which is normally a bit of a “wild turd,” actually did very well while shearing. I’m hoping that he does well with his lamb at the fair this year.

August 4th, 2020

Today is the day! Sheep show day!

We are very lucky that we are able to have a fair this year. Many of the surrounding counties have cancelled their fairs entirely due to concerns with COVID-19. But we have worked with our health department very closely to have at least a 4-H and FFA livestock show during the week. The fair is closed to the public, and there are no concessions or carnival rides. (There is a picture of what the barn looked like on the left.) Each species has been assigned one day to show, and everyone will be hauling in and hauling out to show. This past weekend the fair started with a one-day rabbit show. Yesterday all members with goats to show hauled in and showed, and then hauled out. Today is the sheep show day.

I got up at 4:30am to feed my lamb and haul him out to the Ag Center so that I could give him a bath and get some helping “fitting” him (making him look nice) for the show. My mom and I volunteered to haul the FFA lamb kids to the fairgrounds with our trailer this morning, so we hauled nine sheep over while everyone else caravanned behind us on our way to the fairgrounds.

We got checked in by health department employees at the entrance to the fairgrounds near the YMCA, and then were directed to park our trailer on what is normally the carnival grounds. Our sheep were unloaded and put in stalls in the outdoor ice rink area, and we were then asked to leave the barn. Each car that drives in is assigned a “family pod.” No one was allowed to visit other family pods while there. There was one designated person from each club that was allowed to go into the barn and check on animals during the day. Otherwise, we needed to stay in our family pod.

For the show we were allowed to enter the barn and start prepping our sheep once the class ahead of us had entered the show ring. Once our sheep was prepped, we were directed to stand in a socially distanced line and head into the show ring while the class before us left. Once our class was over, we put our sheep back into their stalls and then headed back to our family pod. Two “spectators” per member were able to enter the barn and watch the show. We were required to wear masks at all times, except for when we were in our family pod.

While that does sound like a lot of rules to follow, it was still a really fun show that went very smoothly. Sheep was the first “big” species that were going to be shown at the fair, and if the sheep
show didn’t go well, the health department was planning on cancelling the other show days. Luckily, everyone followed the rules and the show went well, so the fair will go on!

Hansel ended up placing 9th overall in market, which is a great top ten finish that will put us in the ninth slot on the sale order. For showmanship we made the final drive, which is difficult to do at our fair because so many of our kids are so good at sheep showmanship, but we did not place in the top five. However, I feel that our performance was very strong and I am proud to have ended my FFA career with two purple ribbons and two trips into the final drive. Hansel and I are showing in our market class on the left, and we took some cute pictures once we got home after our long day of showing, and one of those is above and to the right.

August 6th, 2020

Today I went around to a few of the biggest buyers that come to the sale each year and gave them a copy of my flyer about my market lamb. I wore a mask and was careful not to touch anything while I was visiting each business, but what I found odd was that a couple of folks working at these businesses were not wearing masks, while many of their coworkers were. This was out of the ordinary because Missoula County requires masks in all public areas, as does the state of Montana. Again, I just had to take more precautions on my end to ensure that we all stayed safe.

I do wish people would just take a moment to reflect on who they might be hurting by not wearing a mask. My brother and my dad are high risk, so I absolutely cannot afford to get COVID-19 and give it to them. Considering that my dad is a doctor, and is going to work every day and has been safe because he wears a mask, does not touch his face, and washes his hands frequently, it goes to show that these measures that we take to protect ourselves and others work! If my dad is fine with going to work in a CLINIC, where people are getting tested for COVID-19 every day, then there must be efficacy behind the measures we are taking. I am lucky in that I can understand and appreciate the science behind COVID-19 and the ways we can protect ourselves from it, and I have my dad to both demonstrate and encourage me to use best practices to protect myself, my family, and my community. I hope that as this pandemic goes on, people realize the value of science, and begin to truly trust their health professionals. My dad still runs into folks who don’t believe wearing a mask works, and even he, a DOCTOR, can’t convince them to wear one! It blows my mind!

August 7th, 2020

Today was the last day of my online class, and this will be the last entry in my journal. I got up and fed my lambs this morning, and spent some quality time with Hansel. He is so great, and I am so lucky to have had him as a market lamb this year.

This project has helped me realize how important it is to journal and keep track of my experiences, especially in unprecedented times like these. I’ll try my best to keep journaling in the future.