

FARMTIMES

A FIELD OF OPPORTUNITY

BVU'S AG PROGRAM ON THE RISE

New director Ben Pullen leads the charge in cultivating growth

BY MEGAN MOLSEED

Buena Vista University's agriculture program is rapidly becoming a leader in hands-on, experiential learning, thanks in part to the efforts of Ben Pullen, Director of the Institute of Agriculture.

A Spencer native and BVU graduate, Pullen returned to campus as a staff member in November and has been actively working to expand the program ever since. His goal is simple: to give students real-world experience that sets them up for careers in modern agriculture.

A GROWING LEGACY

BVU introduced its agriculture program in 2018, starting with just 11 students the following year. Since then, it has expanded to 73 students pursuing degrees in agricultural business, agricultural science and agricultural education, with opportunities to specialize in animal science, agronomy and pre-veterinary studies.

One of the hallmarks of BVU's ag program is its commitment to bridging the gap between classroom learning and hands-on experience.

As Pullen quotes one of his mentors, "We have a generation of students who are long on knowledge and short on experience." Since then, he's made it his mission to ensure BVU's agriculture programs provide the resources necessary to fully prepare students. Pullen highlights the importance of offering opportunities for "student-directed research, agribusiness ventures and internships, all supported by strong partnerships with local agricultural businesses."

BVU has established strong industry partnerships that provide students with valuable hands-on learning. One standout collaboration is with Mike Christan and Circle C Cattle, which serves as the university's Agricultural Experiment Station (AES). This partnership allows students in animal science courses to conduct labs in a working



Ben Pullen of the BVU Institute of Agriculture speaks about the program at the BV County Pork Producers banquet Feb. 7. TIMES PILOT photo by DOLORES CULLEN

farm setting, giving them firsthand exposure to livestock management. Christan also serves as the coach for BVU's livestock show team, offering students a unique way to develop their skills in competitive livestock evaluation.

"This collaboration allows students in animal science courses to conduct labs in a real-life farm setting, giving them invaluable firsthand experience," Pullen says.

PERSONALIZED EDUCATION AND STRONG INDUSTRY TIES

Key aspects of BVU's agriculture program, according to Pullen, include small class sizes and close-knit faculty-student relationships.

"Faculty take the time to truly get to know each student, which allows us to personalize their learning experiences based on their interests and career goals," Pullen says. "Whether a student is passionate about livestock, crop production, agribusiness or agricultural policy, BVU faculty work directly with them to create meaningful, real-world learning experiences."

ENGAGING COMMUNITY AND INSPIRING FUTURE GENERATIONS

Community outreach is another pillar of BVU's agriculture program. The university actively collaborates with local schools, FFA chapters and 4-H programs to promote agricultural education. Through classroom visits, career fairs and hands-on workshops, BVU faculty and students work to increase ag literacy and spark interest in agricultural careers.

Students in BVU's ag education program are particularly involved, serving as judges for FFA competitions and volunteering for a variety of events.

"Education students support local FFA chapters by serving as judges at competitions and chaperones for local, state and national FFA events," Pullen explains.

"The BVU Ag Club organizes ag literacy days, farm visits and interactive demonstrations," Pullen continues. Other students, the director adds, volunteer with 4-H, leading activities related to animal science, agronomy and agricultural business.

A unique connection comes through BVU Choir Director Chris Phalen, who also directs the State FFA Choir, something that further strengthens BVU's presence at major FFA events and strengthens the ties between the university and the FFA.

Pullen emphasized that



Dr. Jeffrey Ecker, a horticulture professor at BVU, leads a group of students through a cornfield as part of a hands-on learning experience in agricultural studies.

the outreach efforts made by the ag program at BVU are about more than just recruitment — they're about building a strong agricultural future.

"We're not just teaching students; we're helping shape the next generation of agricultural leaders," he said. "The more we can engage young people early on, the stronger the industry will be."

LOOKING AHEAD

As BVU's agriculture program continues to grow, Pullen is grateful for the support of the local agricultural community. Their contributions — whether through internships, mentorship, scholarships or donations — have been instrumental in making the program a success.

"The generosity and commitment of our ag partners have played a huge role in shaping this program," Pullen said.

"We couldn't do what we do without them, and we're excited to keep building these relationships to provide even more opportunities for our students."

BVU's partnerships with local agricultural businesses allow students to work directly in the industry, gaining insights that go far beyond what a textbook can provide. The goal, the program director adds, is that the students graduate not just with knowledge but with the confidence and experience to step into leadership roles in agriculture.

"As a growing program, we are laying the foundation for long-term impact, inspiring the next generation of agricultural professionals while promoting ag literacy in the broader community," notes Pullen.



BVU ag students participate in a hands-on learning activity as part of their agricultural studies coursework.



Dr. Leigh Meyer, BVU animal science professor, discusses livestock management with freshman Jeramiah Rediske while working with a steer.



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Welcome to Afton Prairie Farm



A basket of freshly gathered eggs.

Small scale farming is satisfying lifestyle for Nelson family

BY DOLORES CULLEN

A rural Aurelia couple is keeping the family farm alive. At Afton Prairie Farm “our boys are the seventh generation of Nelsons to reside on our homestead,” says Raquel Nelson.

Raquel always knew she’d work with animals in some capacity: “Originally I thought it would be zoology and big cats. Instead it’s small scale farming.”

The Nelsons sell eggs, goats, garden produce (fresh



Strawberries, mulberries and raspberries



The hens are fed on a sunny morning.

herbs, apples and veggies), refrigerator pickles and occasionally baked goods. They hatch and sell chicks. They plan to add fresh cut flowers this summer.

Raquel keeps a steady stream of photos coming on social media, whether it be newborn baby goats or fresh-picked strawberries.

Customers are attracted through word of mouth and the Facebook page “Afton Prairie Farm.”

The farm’s hottest commodity now, little wonder, is eggs. “I deliver our eggs weekly but currently have a waiting list for customers,” says Raquel. Priority goes to her longtime supporters.

At any given time Afton Prairie Farm has around 70-80 layers.

The flock has not been struck by avian flu, and Raquel aims to keep it that way. She discourages visitors to the farm. “Remember, all it takes is shoes that have



Michael has time for one of the new goats.

stepped in an infected wild bird’s feces to be worn here to spread the disease,” she says.

AURELIA IS HOME

Raquel and Michael are both Aurelia natives. “We

both grew up in Aurelia and met after my husband returned from deployment in 2007,” says Raquel. Michael is retired from the National Guard.

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Do you remember?

This photo appeared in a March 1950 issue of the Storm Lake Register with the caption: More than 1,000 persons attended the farm machinery and household sale of the Harold Bulick estate, which brought about \$132,000. Gaffney’s Storm Lake Auction Co. started the sale at 9:45 a.m. and ended nine hours later. A 1928 tractor brought \$500 while a 1972 four wheel drive Case diesel tractor brought about \$20,000. The sale had one of the largest collections of farm machinery in the area.

Iowa Master Conservationist Program in April

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach will offer the Iowa Master Conservationist Program on Thursdays starting April 17 at 5:30 p.m. The program will take place throughout Buena Vista and Cherokee counties, providing participants with hands-on interaction with the diversity of the state’s natural resources. The program teaches about Iowa’s natural ecosystems and the diversity of conservation challenges and opportunities that exist in the region. Graduates of the course learn to make informed choices for leading and educating others to improve conservation in Iowa.

The program consists of approximately 12 hours of online curriculum and six face-to-face meetings. The online modules will include lessons and resources by Iowa State subject-matter experts to be reviewed at the participants’ own pace at home or at the ISU Extension and Outreach Buena Vista or Cherokee County offices. Module topics include conservation history and science, understanding Iowa ecosystems, implementing conservation practices in human dominated landscapes, and developing skills to help educate others about conservation practices.

Six face-to-face meetings will build on the online lessons and be held at various Buena Vista and Cherokee County locations from 5:30-7:30 p.m. starting April 17 through May 22. Each face-to-face meeting will be led by local subject-matter experts to demonstrate how the principles covered in the online curriculum and play out locally.

Cost for the course is \$50 and is due at the time of registration. To register, contact the Buena Vista County office at 712-732-5056 or shewett@iastate.edu or Cherokee County office at 712-225-6196 or gaydo@iastate.edu. The deadline to register is April 14 at 4:30 p.m.

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Raquel Nelson with her favorite lap dog.

Egg laying flock hasn't contracted avian flu

Farm Times...

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He works for USDA Rural Development in Storm Lake. Also, he is a willing helper on the farm building shelters and running the heavy equipment. "I'm technically the "farmer" in most capacities," Raquel says. "I do all of the day to day work, clean up and care." The Nelsons' two sons are home schooled and the farm plays a big role in their school days. Between the farm and homeschooling. "I don't have hours for much else," remarks Raquel. She adds, "I grew up bringing home every animal I found. I had a grandpa that fed that curiosity and passion and I'm self-taught through research and hard work."

THE NELSON PIONEERS
Michael's family settled on the plot north of Aurelia over



A cat watches chicks hatch in the incubator.

150 years ago — even before Aurelia was incorporated as a town. Hans and Boleta Nelson arrived via wagon after Boleta birthed twin boys in Carroll. Their first home was a dug-out earthen structure. The Nelsons of the past raised cattle, sheep and pigs. They had a backyard flock of chickens for a time.

Before Michael, Raquel and the boys moved to the farm six years ago, it sat as an inactive homestead for about 40 years after the passing of Michael's grandpa. "Mike's parents resided out here during that time," says Raquel, "but homesteading/farming wasn't in the cards for them."



Fluffy chicks.



The goats have room to roam.

The goal to bring the place back to life has been a success, with the newborn goats skipping around, hens clucking and young garden seedlings popping up indoors. As Raquel says, "It's our favorite adventure."

So much to learn about farming

Ag in the Classroom informs youngest BV Countians

BY DOLORES CULLEN
Buena Vista County's Agriculture in the Classroom program, now in its third year, continues to grow, touching every school district in the county.

Ag in the Classroom Educator Amy Forrette of Sioux Rapids continues to make a difference, with a goal of teaching the next generation about the importance of agriculture and where our food comes from.

Learning comes in the form of hands-on activities. Students got to test drive drones when they learned how drones are used in agriculture. They made their own butter from cream and learned the science behind it. They saw how packing peanuts made of corn starch dissolved in water — unlike Styrofoam packing peanuts.



Albert City-Truesdale and Sioux Central fifth graders spent a day at Jones Dairy in Milford last fall.

The major sponsors of Ag in the Classroom are BV County Farm Bureau, BV County Pork Producers, Valero, Tyson Fresh Meats, Farm Credit Services of America and Iowa Lakes Electric Members Charitable Foundation.

Holding a corn cob, Amy Forrette leads a class at Storm Lake Early Elementary.



Little Hands on the Farm was held at the 2024 BV County Fair. Kids were guided along a path that included a corn field, chicken coop and a garden. New this year is a pig pen added by BV Farm Bureau board member Kris Ehlers.

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