

Ag teachers file stellar careers in New York

By **LESLIE SHELDON**

LSHELDON@WDT.NET

John Kriese did not set out to teach agriculture.

But during college he learned he had a special gift for connecting with people.

Mary-Lou Genaway knew early on she wanted to be an ag teacher. And Pat Ploetz realized when she went to the national FFA convention as a sophomore in high school that she wanted to teach ag.



The trio retired from outstanding careers in New York state at the end of the school year in June.

Kriese and Genaway each taught for 33 years. Ploetz logged 30 years at the same school.

Kriese retired from Penn Yan Academy in Penn Yan, Yates County.

Genaway finished her teaching career at Pioneer Central School in Yorkshire, a town in



PHOTO PROVIDED

Pat Ploetz and two of her students in the advanced animal science class this spring were trying to determine if the calves raised in hutches or in a conventional barn had a higher average weight of gain. Kaylee Eddy, left, is taping a calf named Netflix, and Paige Peterson stands ready to get the calf's height at the withers. The calves raised inside had a slightly higher daily rate of gain, 2.7 pounds compared to 2.60.

THE GENAWAY FILE

Hometown: Foster, R.I.

Residence: Darien Center, N.Y.

Ag-teaching career: 33 years: Rushford Central (5 years), Pioneer Central (28).

Family: Husband, Barry; son, Matthew, 19.

Retirement plans: Undecided. Interested in mentoring new teachers.

THE PLOETZ FILE

Hometown: Near Cuba, N.Y.

Residence: Cuba, N.Y.

Ag-teaching career: 30 years at Cuba-Rushford High School, Cuba, N.Y.

Family: Husband Gary; son and daughter-in-law William and Cassandra; daughter and son-in-law Jackie and John Boerman; and five grandchildren.

Retirement plans: Dairy farming with husband.

THE KRIESE FILE

Hometown: Baldwinsville, N.Y.

Residence: Branchport, N.Y.

Ag-teaching career: 33 years: Wells-ville Central (5 years), Penn Yan Academy (28).

Family: Wife, Anita; Children, Clayton, 24, Katie, 20.

Retirement plans: Beef farming, spending more time with family, motor-sports, tractor pulls.

JOHN KRIESE

A few years into Kriese's career, he gave a test after teaching a dairy unit, and one of his students defined pasteurization as the process of putting cows out to pasture.



Kriese

"And you wanna know what?" Kriese said. "I gave him full credit for it."

Even though Kriese was confident in his presentation of the information, somehow he didn't get through.

"Obviously it wasn't his fault," Kriese said. "I failed to connect. It made me realize that communication still is the hardest thing that we do."

Kriese also had a student come to him and tell him there was something wrong with the

welder. It turned out he was trying to weld with the battery charger.

"There have been so many things like that with kids," Kriese said. "They're just tiny humans trying to figure it all out."

Kriese grew up on a beef operation in Baldwinsville where his family raised about 20 registered Hereford cows. They also grew enough crops to feed their livestock.

"Nothing really major, but it was a good sustainable farm and taught me the agrarian work ethic," Kriese said.

He was involved in 4-H growing up, but didn't know anything about FFA.

Kriese dabbled with raising some market pigs and lambs and also spent a summer on a Simmental ranch in Interlaken, N.Y.

"I got to learn about the hector grazing area and a whole new breed of cattle and really involved in the whole show ring thing there for quite a time of my

life," Kriese said.

He majored in animal husbandry, specializing in beef cattle, at SUNY Cobleskill for two years. His primary goal at that stage was only to be involved in beef cattle.

At Kansas State University he majored in agricultural education but never had the goal to teach.

"I just took ag ed because I was pretty clueless and it was a program that it looked like it was going to offer a whole bunch of options for me to explore and to play and to just continue to learn about fields in ag," Kriese said. "So Kansas was just a powerful, powerful learning experience for me."

He student taught in Natoma, Kan., and that was a turning point for him.

"I had this awesome mentor teacher, I had the most incredible group of kids, and they were the ones that said that I needed to teach," Kriese said. "They em-

powered me, they motivated me, and they were able to help me realize that I had a talent for connecting with people."

The Kansas experience made Kriese realize that family was pretty important, and he came back to New York.

"Kansas was great, but there's this thing called diversification in New York," Kriese said. "Diversity is not what you get in Kansas. There's a lot of wheat. I realized how much I loved all aspects of agriculture, from cabbage to cows."

Kriese taught at Wellsville Central School for five years and at Penn Yan Academy for the last 28 years.

He completed his master's degree in ag education at Cornell University while teaching at Wellsville.

"Highlights have focused around watching kids grow, come in as really timid and shy freshmen and watching kids develop, watching kids that maybe

powered and maybe there was so much stuff in their lives that they couldn't learn," Kriese said. "It's just this continuum of development of leaders and people coming back and saying thank you and saying, 'Wow, you helped me.' That's always so rewarding."

Integration of technology in agriculture has been huge over the course of Kriese's career.

"(It used to be) if you had a cow that produced 12,000 pounds in a lactation she was super," Kriese said. "And of course now if they're not producing a hundred pounds a day, then you just don't keep them. We've seen milk production at least double, if not in some cases, triple."

"We used to admire a farm to get 75 or 80 bushels of corn and now that would be a disaster," Kriese said. "You'd get insurance premiums if a crop was that bad. Today's yields are absolutely phenomenal with yields of 150 to 200, so we've seen the doubling of that."

TEACHERS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

"I always said, 'Look boys, there's always going to be a job milking cows. There's no way they're ever going to get a robot to milk a cow. There's no way you can replace a human hand on an udder,'" Kriese said. "Well, eat my words. So who would have ever guessed that a robot today would milk a cow? That was kind of a blow-me-away thing."

Kriese said there isn't an element of agriculture that hasn't changed.

"Everything is way more productive and efficient and micro-managed," had said. "Integration of technology has been huge."

One thing that hasn't changed during Kriese's career is the challenge to help kids understand the scope and complexity of agriculture.

"We only want to think that agriculture is farming," Kriese said. "We just have an awful hard time expanding our vocabulary and to realize that the word agriculture encompasses farming, but it's not farming."

Kriese said he will miss the developmental process of "watching a young person come in as that meek and meager ninth grader and then exit as hopefully a confident person that's both college and

career ready.

"I'm going to miss the opportunity to shape people's minds and to expose them to experiential education," he said.

Carlie Bossard is the new ag teacher and FFA advisor at Penn Yan. She was one of Kriese's former student teachers.

MARY-LOU GENAWAY

Genaway, whose maiden name is Tourtellotte, spent her first 13 years growing up on a poultry farm in Rhode Island.

"As a young teenager growing up in New England, there were private agricultural high schools," Genaway said. "This sparked my interest in teaching agriculture at the high school level, and I never strayed from that path."

Her family moved to a dairy farm in North Bangor, N.Y., outside of Malone in Franklin County, where she was involved in 4-H, showing dairy cattle, and was involved in FFA her senior year.

She majored in agricultural education, specializing in animal science, at Cornell University where she received a master's degree.

"My goal from the start was to become

an agriculture teacher," Genaway said.

Genaway taught agriculture for five years at Rushford Central School where she was the only ag teacher in a district of about 300 K-12 students.

She taught classes in general agriculture, farm production and management, farm business, animal production, including dairy and livestock, forestry and wildlife and agricultural mechanics (welding and farm carpentry). She also taught technology to seventh and eighth graders.

She has been at Pioneer Central School for the last 28 years. Courses were traditional agriculture classes in the 1980s and have evolved from traditional farm management to agribusiness and animal science. She also teaches veterinary science classes.

Pioneer had two ag teachers when Genaway began teaching there. It added a third ag teacher in 1997.

The other two ag teachers at Pioneer are Jon Clayson and Katie Mitrowski.

Tanya Nickerson, a 2003 Pioneer graduate, was one of many students impacted by Genaway.

"Mrs. Genaway was really a huge part of the ag program, I would say probably the backbone of the ag program," Nickerson said. "Her classes were always fun,

we always learned a lot. She was really knowledgeable, she's very patient and kind and calm teacher."

Nickerson just finished her first year teaching agriculture at Fillmore Central School in Fillmore, Allegany County.

"When I decided to become an ag teacher I knew that I wanted to be like Mrs. Genaway," Nickerson said.

Nickerson received plenty of help from Genaway during her first year of teaching. Genaway provided curriculum to use and ideas for Nickerson's classes. They also competed against each other during FFA contests.

"She was more than willing to give me all the information so that my kids can be successful," Nickerson said. "Which just shows her character; she's just a wonderful person. She wants everyone to succeed and do well and be really prepared to do that. She really helped me a lot this year."

Genaway has coached approximately 60 national teams. In many cases she has coached two generations from the same family.

"It has been my honor and privilege to coach so many wonderful, hard-working students," Genaway said. "It's nice to see parents who are positive role models and



Genaway

take an active role in their child's success."

Pioneer was named FFA chapter of the year by the New York State Agricultural Society at its annual forum in January.

Genaway said she'd miss watching students come in to the program as shy ninth graders and develop into confident, mature seniors ready to face the world.

"The agriculture program and FFA builds the strong leadership skills and prepares students for the future," Genaway said. "Students who won't stand up in front of a classroom of 15 peers as freshman end up presenting on an FFA state in front of more than a thousand people."

PAT PLOETZ

Ploetz grew up near Cuba and graduated from Cuba-Rushford, where she was involved in FFA.

She did her student teaching there, substituted there, and started teaching full time in 1988.

Ploetz majored in agricultural business at Alfred State, then transferred to Cornell University to study agriculture education. She got her master's degree at St. Bonaventure University.

Ploetz said she enjoyed teaching all agriculture subjects, including welding, animal science, environmental science, food science, plant science, and middle school technology.



Ploetz

"It was always a pleasure to see the students engaged in learning and continue to want to learn," Ploetz said. "It is extremely gratifying when students pursue a career in agriculture."

Ploetz started applying for FFA grants five or six years ago. Through the grants the school was able to acquire three hydroponic systems. The ag program included elementary students in a garden project.

"For three years elementary classes in grades 1-5 helped us with our 'planting day' and then the fourth-grade students helped us with 'harvest day,'" Ploetz said. "The produce over the three years was donated to the Cuba Cultural Center. They received over three tons of fresh produce over three years from these grants."

The hydroponic systems were set up in the ag lab and in the school lobby. The

vertical aeroponic systems were set up in the lobby, which allowed students to monitor the romaine lettuce on a daily basis.

The welding class also has gained momentum and attracts many students.

Ploetz recalled one especially memorable time during her teaching career. She had driven her agronomy team to nationals in Indianapolis for a two-day contest. After the first day they were upbeat about how well they did.

"We decided to run to McDonald's to grab a bite to eat before I drove them in to see the concert that night," Ploetz said. "While we were eating, there was a shooting in the parking lot next to where I parked the school's vehicle. We were so frightened that no one finished their meal."

The students watched the concert while Ploetz called home to talk to the students' parents and the school superintendent. The team ended up placing ninth in the gold division the next day.

Ploetz said they continued to compete at the national level, but she never drove the team to nationals again. They took a chartered bus instead.

Over the past 25 years Ploetz and her

husband, Gary, have leased registered Holstein cows and calves to about 35-40 FFA members who otherwise would not have the opportunity to show registered cattle at the Allegany County Fair. Some students have shown their cattle for five years while others just show one or two years.

"The FFA is the added value to agriculture that allows students to continue to learn, compete and gain confidence in themselves," Ploetz said. "FFA is the reason why I wanted to teach agriculture. It gives students an enormous advantage over other students who do not have that opportunity."

Ploetz said the biggest highlight of teaching is to later see former students who are successful in careers, raising families and engaged in their communities.

Retirement plans for Ploetz include helping her husband on their dairy farm. They milk around 45 to 50 cows and raise 45 young stock. She is active in all aspects of the farm, including plowing, fitting the soil, bailing, feeding, milking and A.I.

Carley Santangelo is the new ag teacher at Cuba-Rushford.