Mending the Disconnect: Teaching the Next Generation About Agriculture

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Who taught you about agriculture? A parent or grandparent? Your high school agriculture teacher? For some of you, agriculture may have been part of your life since you were born. Others of you perhaps learned about agriculture later in life. I was 12 years old when I began working on Ms. Fannie Mae Smith’s small farm in an Atlanta suburb.

I don’t recall learning about agriculture in school. And although we were only an hour away from the apple orchards of North Georgia and the pecan groves of South Georgia, my family was completely removed from agriculture when I was growing up 30 years ago.

I learned more about agriculture from Ms. Smith than any other person to date. And now, I not only continue to learn about and appreciate agriculture; I also have the opportunity to share my appreciation and knowledge of agriculture with students.

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I consider myself lucky to have had the opportunity to work on Ms. Smith’s farm. During my time there, I learned to appreciate agriculture; the taste of a freshly picked pear, fig or tomato; and the value of hard work. I learned to appreciate all that goes into the meals we so often take for granted. We also somehow managed to squeeze in a lifetime’s worth of Sunday school classes as I worked and Ms. Smith taught.

As I moved on through college, I eventually stopped working with Ms. Smith. Unable to keep up the farm on her own, she sold. But every time I go home, all I have to do is look out the kitchen window to where the farm once was and I’m immediately taken back. I never thought I’d appreciate those times as much as I do today.

I learned more about agriculture from Ms. Smith than any other person to date. And now, at the Noble Research Institute, I not only continue to learn about and appreciate agriculture; I also have the opportunity to share my appreciation and knowledge of agriculture with students who are the age I was when I began working on the farm.

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Today, I lead the Noble Research Institute’s youth education program and, in a way, am following in Ms. Smith’s footsteps. I am teaching today’s youth about the value of agriculture and the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) behind it.

Inundated with mobile phones, computers, tablets and gaming consoles, today’s youth are more removed from agriculture than ever. These students are our future policymakers, educators and decision-makers. If we don’t do something to mend this disconnect, agriculture will suffer consequences in the future.

To help solve this challenge, our program targets sixth through 12th graders and introduces them to agriculture and ag careers via a variety of programs, including hands-on science experiments, robotics programs, internships, youth hunts and teacher workshops. We deliver our message to more than 7,000 recipients per year with the hope that they learn to appreciate agriculture a little more than they did before we walked in the room.

To Ms. Smith, I want to say “thank you” for teaching me about agriculture. We are working to make sure other young people have the opportunity to understand and appreciate agriculture’s importance to society.