

Brennan Costello takes Nebraska ag to Africa

Written by GotheBrennan Costello & Dawson Co. Extension Office

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Africa—it's a land of extremes and a country of contrasts.

It's a place where exotic wild animals roam and natural wonders create beautiful landscapes.

Africa—it's also a place of brutal civil wars and tyranny. A place where blood has filled the rivers with mass genocide.

Africa—the place former Dawson County 4-H'er Brennan Costello of Gothenburg stepped down from a plane to teach gardening and 4-H. "Brennan Costello is a good example of the impact of 4-H in a young person's life," said Mike Wolff, Extension assistant. "He is one of many Dawson County 4-H'ers who have strengthened life skills and gained hands-on experience by completing 4-H projects and by participating in judging, speech and presentation contests. He is living proof of how 4-H makes the best better."

Costello, 20, recently returned from a three-week stay in Liberia as part of Agri Corps, an organization modeled after Peace Corps with a mission to alleviate poverty by teaching agriculture education.

Costello's adventure was a research and experimental trip for Agri Corps to make connections with other developmental organizations, teach agriculture education in a classroom, start a school garden and establish a 4-H club.

The Gothenburg High School graduate relied heavily on his 12-year Dawson County 4-H career in the gardening and horticulture project as the group started their garden in the rural community of Yarpeh which is surrounded by jungle. Intense hand labor, daily rain showers and 90 degree temperatures presented physical challenges, but Costello notes the most challenging part was coming up with teaching techniques. Songs, pictures, discussions and hands-on activities were all teaching methods they used.

Costello's communication skills were very valuable, but in a way that he did not expect.

"The current education system in Liberia is one of memorize and repeat; a clear understanding of the material is hard to develop and even more difficult to evaluate," Costello said. "This is so prevalent that many students do not know how to read, they simply listen and repeat. Therefore, it was a great challenge to break this model and introduce critical thinking to our students."

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“I found myself having to really work to understand how to breakdown our material into a form that these students will understand. I relate it to Doug Keiser teaching me how to halter break and show feeder calves. I didn’t understand the terms or practices that were required in showing calves, but Doug broke down the concepts and worked with me over and over, until I understood. With our students we had to be very simple, be hands on, and repeat concepts to achieve our understanding.”