

Falk looks back at career, forward to jobs of the future

By JOHN FROEHLING
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Cuba High School teacher Doug Falk has taught kids about agriculture and the building trades for more than three decades. He's also been the long-time Cuba FFA Chapter Advisor. Falk will be wrapping up his teaching and advising career at the end of this school year.

"It's just been a tremendous career. I have enjoyed every day coming to work. It's been a fun 34 years. There have been 700 to 800 kids who have gone through my program and been successful or learned a little bit. I'd like to think so anyway," Falk said.

Falk grew up in Hillsdale near the Quad Cities. After graduating from the University of Illinois in 1984, he had 20 job interviews that summer. He said he kept coming back to Cuba and was fortunate to be one of the finalists. In the end, it came down to him and one other guy.

Falk said he got a job offer from another school district, where the other guy actually wanted to work. When Falk was offered and accepted the position at Cuba, and the other fellow got that job at the other district, so everything worked out for the best.

"It was a great community. I loved the livestock at the fair. My father, grandfather and great-grandfather all farmed. I planned to buy some land, but the job overtook me. I got to the point where I couldn't go home on weekends. I gave up farming and became a full-time teacher. My brother still farms on the family farm. It's expanded," he said.

"We're a busy (FFA) chapter. I like doing hands-on agriculture, marketing, agronomy and doing food contests. So I'm still heavily connected in agriculture," Falk said.

He said five areas he's concentrated on over the years are production agriculture, agricultural business angles, agricultural mechanics and conservation of the soil, water and air.

"Crops and livestock – cattle, hogs, sheep, horses, goats – we have all those things. A lot of the kids have had that exposure from big cattle and big sheep farms," Falk said. However, he noted fewer kids have as much experience as in the past.

"I've seen a big change from the 20th century to the 21st century," he said. The skills and exposure to farming has greatly decreased, so he makes sure the fundamentals of production are covered.

He applies a similar approach to agricultural mechanics.

"We are involved in the trades, learning the basics: how to use a tape measure, surveying, small engines, electricity," Falk said.

He added he has received assistance from a master welder, Tom Brown of Smithfield, who volunteers to help Cuba students with their welding skills. "He's been taking kids to competitions with us for 10 years," Falk said.

'Careers of the future'

"I try to look at careers of the future," Falk said. "Cuba is the first 'green school' in Illinois. We do geothermal, photovoltaic (panels for solar power), and then we have a windmill by the baseball diamond. I'm really into the alternative energies. We take some time trying to be futuristic."

He said renewable energy is beginning to offer more career opportunities.

"It's all about getting a job. Is there passion? If you want to be a plumber, do geothermal. An electrician? Photovoltaic. Cuba is very fortunate to have all these systems that



■ Outgoing Cuba High School agriculture teacher Doug Falk stands before a 400-foot solar panel that spans the length of the school. Falk is very interested in alternative energy and teaches his students about geothermal heating and cooling, solar power and other technology that may open doors to jobs of the future.

we can demonstrate to kids," Falk said.

FFA leadership, job experience

Today's FFA provides benefits for all students, not just those with farming backgrounds.

Falk said leadership is a big part of FFA. Kids get to be officers at the chapter level and in Section 12. He takes them to a lot of state and national FFA conventions and about five leadership conferences across the state.

FFA kids learn skills in public speaking, parliamentary procedures and interviewing. They gain self-confidence and poise as they acquire those skills, setting them apart from others who don't have them. FFA builds leaders who serve on church boards and school boards and in government positions.

"Those are great skills kids are learning," Falk said.

FFA skills also apply to business. The supervised agricultural experience, formerly known as keeping record books, involves keeping records of what they do on a job. Most get compensated in some way, he said.

"I've got non-farm kids working on farms, kids in the construction trades, a kid work-

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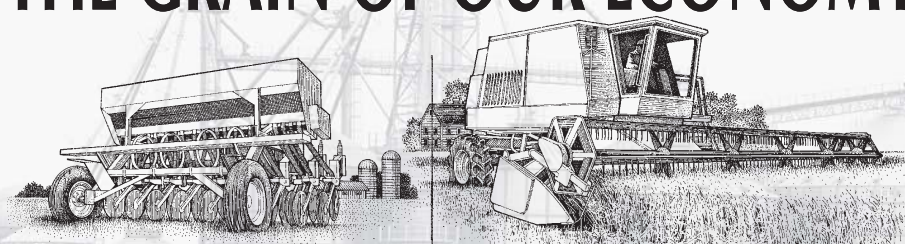
ing at Brown's Zoo and learning all kinds of specialty-animal activities, horticulture kids working at Hart's Nursery – that's in Bushnell – traditional cattle, horse, sheep, goats projects along with showing at the fairs – the traditional agricultural experience," he said.

Falk said he spent his entire teaching career at Cuba. "I started here and finished here," he said.

He stressed he could not do what he has all by himself. Falk said he has been fortunate to have support from the School Board, other teachers, local businesses, parents and other volunteers.

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