



Clarkston High School agriculture teacher Cami Browne and her children, from left, Cady, 12, Caylie, 14 and Carly, 9, live on the family farm near Anatone.

Not Your Average Agriculture Teacher

Clarkston High School graduate returns to teach the next generation in agriculture

By Lori Mai

It's the first lab of the school year in Cami Browne's animal and plant biotechnology class at Clarkston High School. The students are scraping their cheek cells for DNA. They will separate the strands through a process called gel electrophoresis to analyze them for all kinds of agricultural applications.

This is not your parents' agriculture education.

"Some kids think ag is all about farming, but it's not," Cami says. "There's so much science and technology involved. What I love about teaching ag is that it's always changing to meet new demands."

In the late 1990s, as a CHS student in Steve Smith's agriculture classes and FFA, Cami never dreamed that one day

she would be at the helm of the program. That's exactly what happened. Sixteen years ago, at age 22, fresh out of college with a degree in ag education and a minor in ag business from Washington State University, Cami was hired to replace her mentor at CHS following his retirement.

Newly married, Cami and her husband, Dustin, had just settled in as the fourth generation on the Browne family farm near Anatone. Cami was looking for a job in her field that was close to home. The CHS position was the only opening of its kind in the area.

"I was super fortunate to get this job and go back to my own high school program," she says.

Although Cami says it was stressful being only a few years older than her

students at the time, she says it was also a benefit to draw upon her recent education at CHS from a teacher she greatly admired.

Through the years, Cami has continued to hone Steve's legacy. She now boasts one of the most successful and popular ag and FFA programs in the region.

She has about 120 students in five ag classes at CHS. Some earn college credits.

Freshmen begin with agriculture foods and natural resources, which covers a broad scope of food, earth, animal and plant sciences.

If students enjoy learning about plants, they can take horticulture as a sophomore. CHS has a 20-foot-by-60-foot greenhouse where students grow plants and get hands-on experience.

"Every spring we have a plant sale with



Cami cares for eight sows and two boars at the Clarkston FFA barn as part of the rotational sow program, which is a breeding program involving rotating sows amongst the boars to achieve desired genetic results.

all of the plants the kids raise, and they enter them in the Asotin County Fair as well,” Cami says. “They’re always winning the top of class and best horticulture display for the plants they enter.”

Another option for sophomores is animal science, which is a lab-intensive class that involves dissections.

For upperclassmen, in addition to animal and plant biotechnology, Cami teaches an ag business class that covers the practical side of agriculture, such as the types of jobs available, sales and service, taxes and life skills.

“Less than 2 percent of the population actually farms and ranches, so there are a lot of other ag-related jobs that support this industry,” Cami says.

Floral design—a non-traditional ag class Cami teaches—qualifies for an art credit. Students learn about the floral industry and how to grow and care for flowers. They create and sell arrangements for the holidays, flowers for homecoming royalty, boutonnieres and corsages for dances, and Christmas wreaths.

Students enrolled in Cami’s agriculture classes complete a supervised agriculture

experience, such as caring for a livestock animal. They also have the opportunity to be involved in FFA, which is the national extracurricular agricultural student leadership organization founded in Kansas City in 1928. Approximately half of Cami’s students chose to participate.

Cami says Clarkston is fortunate because it has a school-owned barn off campus, as well as its own hog barn, grain bins and grinder, shaving storage, tractor, livestock trailer and school-owned herd of pigs.

Built by students in 1980, the FFA barn has 16 pig pens, clipping pens and birthing stalls.

Eight sows and two boars reside at the barn year-round. As part of their supervised agriculture experience, students can care for them, farrow out the sows—assist birthing—and follow the process from start to finish.

Sows average five to 12 babies per litter. Once the babies are born, students can choose a piglet to raise as their own during the school year. They have the option to keep it at the barn, since most don’t have a suitable place at home.

In the process, they learn how to care for the piglets, including weaning, feeding and grooming. They show and sell their pigs at the Asotin County Fair in the spring.

In addition to pigs, there are steers, sheep, goats and a chapter cow/calf project at the barn.

Students are assigned facility maintenance duties throughout the school year and summer.

“The community is very supportive of the kids with those livestock projects,” Cami says. “It’s such a good experience. It teaches them responsibility, time and money management, and that if you put in hard work, you get rewarded in the end.”

Though as many as 60 kids show livestock as part of FFA, it is not required by the program. Other students choose to participate in leadership contests, such as public speaking. This past year, the Conduct of Chapter Meetings team placed in the top 16 in Washington state.

Cami’s FFA students are also asked to participate in community service activities. At Thanksgiving, they “Stock the Trailer” with food donations for the food bank. They host a toy drive for foster children at Christmastime. This year, they held the first Dodging for MS Dodgeball Tournament to raise money for multiple sclerosis—a disease that greatly affected Steve.

Cami says the goal is to create a well-rounded student, so even if they don’t choose a career or hobby in agriculture, they learn why it is important.

“Many people take ag for granted and don’t realize how important and necessary it truly is,” she says.

Spending so much time inside and outside of the classroom with her students has allowed Cami to create close bonds with them, too.

“They’re such good kids,” she says. “They’re fun to be around, and it makes you want to be around them. By the time they graduate, you feel like they’re part of your family.” ■