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SONYA ROBERTS: MASTER TEACHER

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Fort Hays State University

CHAPTER II: SONYA ROBERTS AND AGRICULTURE EDUCATION

Life in the United States and throughout the world is changing every moment of our lives. The things we need to know and the resources we have to use are constantly shifting as the world turns around us. The world as we know it could not exist without fruitful agriculture. Sonya Joan Schweer Roberts is committed the task of helping remind all people of their individual responsibilities to care for our soil, water and livestock resources. Through agriscience, Sonya strives to open the minds of those around her to programs that bring life and prosperity to the land and its people.

If it can be said, "one is born to be an agriculture teacher," it can be said of Sonya Roberts. Sonya's transformation into an agriculture teacher began at birth. She was born to a father who taught agriculture education to secondary students in Kingman, Kansas.

The death of Sonya's Grandfather Schweer motivated Sonya's father to resign his teaching position and take over the family farm located near Garden City, Kansas. These childhood years spent on the farm created a bond between Sonya and the land and the livestock, particular sheep, that inhabit it. This bond was also cultivated by her parents, 4-H Club, FFA, and her freshman high school agriculture teacher, Mr. Les McNally

By the time Sonya entered her freshman year at Seward County Junior College (SCCC) she had determined what it was that she wanted to do with her life and what contribution she wanted to make to the world around her. She wanted to have a lasting relationship with

agriculture that would produce a lasting emotional appreciation for agriculture by others.

As Sonya continued down the path of agriculture education, she never considered the fact that she was entering into a male dominated field a deterring factor. She simply "went for it and never looked back." The encouragement of her fellow classmates, instructors, parents and family, and friends contributed to her visualization of reaching her chosen vocation.

Sonya's enthusiasm for agriculture bubbles out when ever you engage her in a conversation. This enthusiasm landed her smack dab in the middle of her first teaching position.

Sonya began her teaching career in August of 1992 in the USD 102 school system with the belief that the changing needs of the workforce requires highly skilled agricultural technicians with the academic foundations in mathematics, science, and communications to be able to adapt to the rapidly changing agricultural world. Sonya believes that through creative planning and the maintenance of an academic classroom and laboratory atmosphere, students can achieve the skills necessary to meet these changing needs. Sonya arrived in Cimarron in early July of 1992 to commit herself to the task of creatively preparing classroom and laboratory activities that would engage her students in an academic curriculum that would prepare them to meet the changing needs of the agriculture world.

Sonya's first year at Cimarron High School was successful due to the facts that she exudes an enthusiasm for her curriculum that is contagious. She maintains classroom and laboratory control through effective control strategies. Sonya captures her student's attention with

creative classroom and laboratory projects. In the classroom, effective instruction is demonstrated through captivating presentations and creative activities. In the laboratory atmosphere, Sonya assists students effectively, maintains a productive environment, and demonstrates the flexibility required to elude common laboratory problems. Sonya stated, "That it is particularly necessary for a female agriculture teacher to demonstrate various skills and techniques indicative to farm tasks to maintain a controlled environment." She feels, with respect, that "a male agriculture teacher may teach the entire school year without demonstrating a single welding technique."

Sonya undertook the monumental task of revamping USD 102's agricultural curriculum to meet the requirements for qualifying for Kansas State Vocational Educational-Phase Two (VE-2) Funds during the 1992-93 school year. Organized education programs offer a sequence of courses which are directly related to the preparation of individuals in paid or unpaid employment in current or emerging occupations requiring other than a baccalaureate or advanced degree. Such programs include competency-based applied learning which contributes to an individual's academic knowledge, higher-order reasoning, and problem-solving skills, work attitudes, general employability skills, and the occupational-specific skills necessary for economic independence as a productive and contributing member of society.

Sonya implemented changes that would up-date her curriculum from one that emphasized agriculture mechanics to one that would encompass a range of occupations for a program that would prepare individuals to apply scientific knowledge and methods, and technical skills in support of agribusiness and agricultural activities concerned

with the management of agricultural enterprises, production and propagation of crops and animals, supplies and services, mechanics, products processing and marketing, and horticulture.

In addition to the changes made to adhere to the curriculum guides mandated by the Kansas State Board of Education to receive VE-2 funds, Sonya seized the opportunity to marry the past with the present, agriculture and agriscience. Sonya stated, "Skills of the past can not be replaced but should be enhanced by the technology of future." This insight is the motivation for Sonya's implementation of the aquaculture innovations of hydroponics and the developmental research of Tilapia fish.

Sonya introduces her students to a concept that hydroponics is growing in importance as a means of producing vegetables and other high-income plants. In areas where soil is lacking or unsuitable for growth, hydroponics offers an alternative production system. Equally good crops can generally be produced in a greenhouse in conventional soil or bench systems.

Through the use of tomato, green pepper, lettuce and marigold plants in laboratory activities conducted throughout the school year, Sonya demonstrates to her students that when plants are grown hydroponically, their roots are either immersed in or coated by a carefully controlled nutrient solution. The nutrients and water are supplied by the solution alone and not by aggregates or other inert material that support the roots.

Sonya relates to her students that hydroponically grown plants have the same general requirements for good growth as soil-grown

plants. The major difference is the method by which the plants are supported and the nutrients supplied for growth and development.

Sonya stresses to her students that hydroponics is increasing in use commercially and will undoubtedly become increasingly important in the future. Sonya also emphasizes to her students that the use of nutrient solutions as a media for growing plants will be an important part of agriscience in the future. Research is expanding and new techniques are being developed. Students must develop a skill in these new techniques to be successful in the changing world of agriculture.

It has been Sonya's dream to add a greenhouse to her laboratory facilities since implementing hydroponics research to her curriculum in 1994. The greenhouse is in its final states of completion and will be in operational condition for the school year 1997-98.

The greenhouse will also provide Sonya a means of stressing to students who have less agriculture background than her "farm raised" students that growing flowers and vegetables in a greenhouse can be enjoyable as well as profitable. She plans to stress that the conventional greenhouse is designed primarily to capture light and control temperatures. It can be free standing, as is USD 102's, but most often it is attached to a building to provide convenient access, simplified construction, and a potential source of supplemental heat if needed. The greenhouse can provide an environment for starting plants, hardening them off, or completely growing the plants such in Sonya's hydroponics simulation.

Sonya's promotion of aquaculture is further achieved through class research involving Tilapia fish. Sonya stresses to her students that aquaculture is the only way to satisfy an increasing demand for fish and

seafood products. Aquaculture is now considered a significant part of US agricultural food production. Several factors suggest the role of aquaculture will continue to grow: Increased demand, new marketing and processing, and the culture of new species. Continual research on the problems facing aquaculture will ensure its future.

Sonya's students learn that aquaculture is the only mode of increasing domestic fish production. Although aquaculture is generally successful, it is still several decades behind traditional livestock husbandry in research and development. Virtually every aspect of aquaculture can still be improved. Hundreds of thousands of acres of land are still available for expansion of fish farming. The water supply, if properly used, is adequate. The cooperative efforts of federal and state governments, private agencies, universities, and industry will be necessary to overcome the barriers that prevent the development of that acreage.

Sonya emphasizes to her students that a thriving and developing aquaculture industry is important for several reasons. Aquaculture supplies a quality, healthy food source to a growing human population and does so through the efficient use of resources. Aquaculture creates jobs and stimulates economic activity. It provides valuable nonfood items such as eel skins, alligator hides, and by-products from the processing of fish and shellfish. The feed demand of aquaculture increases the demand for other agricultural products such as corn, soybeans, wheat, oats, and barley. Finally aquaculture contributes to recreation by providing fish to stock lakes, streams, and ponds for sport and fee-fishing.

For US aquaculture producers, the future markets will grow, but producers will be faced with increased environmental regulations, the need for new and better technology through research, and competition from foreign producers as aquaculture expands worldwide. The preparation of USD 102 students for this future market is a responsibility that Sonya seizes with enthusiasm.

Tilapia, introduced in the United States in the early 1950's, are extremely hardy animals and can tolerate relatively poor water quality conditions. Tilapia can withstand high water temperatures and tolerate extremely low levels of dissolved oxygen in ponds. Pond culture is the most popular method of growing Tilapia. These growing conditions make the Tilapia ideal for growing in the water pits of southwestern Kansas feedlots. Through a laboratory research simulation, USD 102 students actively participate in the development of Tilapia as a valuable by-product of Kansas feedlots.

Each September Sonya obtains the Tilapia from a Garden City, Kansas feedlot, which provides them free of charge to educational institutes. Sonya's students care for, observe and document their changes during the school year. Through the Tilapia simulation, Sonya effectively promotes the potential aquaculture career choices of research and development, and marketing and processing. At the end of the year the Tilapia are butchered, fried and eaten by the students at a fish fry. Their research is complete to the consumer stage, tasting!

With these innovative changes and other curriculum update, Sonya has developed a curriculum that engages even the least of eager students.

Sonya's updated course offerings consist of an Introduction to Agriculture Science, for ninth graders. This course offers the beginning agriculture student an introductory look at soil science, plant science, animal science, agriculture mechanics, SAEP and FFA.

Animal Science, offered to tenth graders, covers the impact of health, reproduction, nutrition and management of animal production. Students participate in such activities as livestock judging, FFA contests and the establishment of future SAEP goals.

Agricultural Mechanics and Power and Technology is offered to eleventh graders. FFA and SAEP activities are continued. Competencies in welding, electricity, engine construction and principles of operation are stressed.

For those students that continue in the agriculture program for four years, the course Agribusiness Management is offered their senior year. The financial aspects of agriculture are stressed in this course. FFA and SAEP competencies enhance the curriculum.

Sonya also offers a semester Introduction to Agriculture class to USD 102 seventh and eight graders. This class provides these younger students the opportunity to sample the agriculture program and make decisions about future course offerings once they enter senior high.

In addition to the awareness class offered to junior high students, Sonya offers "A Day On The Farm," sponsored and organized by USD 102's local chapter of FFA, to area day-care centers and Gray County grade school students. The local John Deere Dealership and various local farmers provide a variety of farm equipment. Area farmers provide a variety of livestock for the observation and enjoyment of the youngsters. This activity provides many students the opportunity to sample farm life

that otherwise might not have been obtainable. This activity also provides Sonya the opportunity to promote her curriculum and the value of agriculture to the world.

Sonya's dedication to students and their achievement prompts her to offer an independent study program to grades eleven and twelve. This independent study is offered during Sonya's preparation period and time slots scheduled for other class. Many times she manages three classes during one class period. The true flexibility and sacrifice of a dedicated master teacher! Through these independent study programs, she can offer classes to those who would not be able to finish their four year agriculture program due to scheduling conflicts.

Students that complete their senior year in the agriculture program, developed a closeness to the land, livestock and the teacher that provided them with the insight into the world of agriculture. A bond has developed between the three that cannot be broken. Sonya has a deep appreciation for the student who has established a regard for agriscience. It is a bond between two people who have the same appreciation of what exists around them. Sonya does not consider the departure of a student who has completed the four year program an end, but rather a beginning. Sonya feels her students have worked hard to achieve the goals set for them. Sonya receives great satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment when students apply the knowledge they gained from the USD 102 agriculture classes.

Sonya's FFA Chapter contributes to the academic success of her students by providing agriculture students with a club atmosphere that focuses on the scholastics of agriculture, as well as, the building of leadership skills and rewards that provide incentives for success in these

areas. The chapter's success can be attributed to the Sonya's contagious enthusiasm. She reorganized an inactive chapter into one that is very active by stressing to her students that FFA represents work, labor, and effort. These qualities are needed to cause things to happen and to get results. FFA promotes the need for workers to cooperate and work toward common goals. Sonya effectively uses the approach of mentoring a younger, initiate member with an older, mature, accomplished member. She gives new members effective orientation to the club's purposes and reorients all members continually through traditional ceremonies and other appropriate activities. She chooses projects that engage all members--they work together. She encourages shared leadership using a team approach, encouraging everyone to be an active part of a committee. She gets new initiates involved in award projects immediately. She invites potential members to club meeting so that they might get hooked. She encourages members to appreciate the value of their attendance and participation in the local organization, and district, state and national meetings. Sonya plans and promotes activities that will enhance self-esteem. Sonya gives her chapter the "personal touch."

Sonya promotes increased participation in FFA, by selecting an additional contest activity each year. During the 1996-97 school year, FFA students have been developing their parliamentary procedures. Sonya emphasizes to her students that most Americans who are influential in their communities are familiar with these guidelines for conducting meetings.

Sonya's FFA success can also be assessed by the amount of district offices her students have obtained during the years 1993-1997. The USD 102 FFA Chapter captured the Southwest Kansas Districts offices of

Secretary, Reporter, and Sentinel. The FFA Chapter in USD 102 is truly at work promoting personal development.

Sonya's hard work as an agriculture educator was culminated by the nomination and eventual securing of KAVTA's New Vocational Teacher of the Year-1996 award. This award is open to agriculture teachers who have taught for a minimum of three years but not more than five. Candidates for the honor must be nominated by another agriculture teacher, and a selection committee then makes the final decision based on the nominee's program description, continued education, participation in professional organization, and letters of support. Roberts was then eligible for New Vocation Teacher of the Year, an award sponsored by Kansas Vocation Association, the parent organization of the KVATA.

Sonya's love for agriculture goes beyond her job. Each year brings a new crop of minds to share with the joy of agriculture. Sonya takes pleasure from helping inspire and create in others a lasting emotional appreciation of agriculture.