

Kaitlyn Harlow

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

“Teachers affect eternity; no one can tell where their influence stops.” - Henry Brooks Adams

Let's go to the Great Lakes Floral Expo in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The top winner has been named in the professional division of the floral arrangement competition. This winner not only has ties to rural Kansas, she is an example of the deep positive influence of a good teacher. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Kaitlyn Harlow is a young woman from rural Illinois. Her family farms in the north central region of the state. Kaitlyn was active in 4-H and FFA. She enrolled in 4-H every year that she could. She decided that she would like a career working with youth through Extension. As a high school student, Kaitlyn took various kinds of projects and ag classes including horticulture, although she wasn't especially interested in horticulture at the time.

Kaitlyn went on to Joliet Junior College. She decided to take an Introduction to Horticulture class which would count as a basic science credit.

“Since the first day that I walked in that classroom, I knew this was where I was meant to be,” Kaitlyn said. Professor Donna Theimer was the instructor, and she became Kaitlyn's mentor. Kaitlyn received her associate's degree in Floral Design and Interior Plantscape.

Meanwhile, Kaitlyn's best childhood friend chose to attend K-State in Manhattan. “I came out for a visit and fell in love with the (Manhattan) community,” Kaitlyn said. “It was just the right size, and the people were so welcoming,” she said.

Kaitlyn decided to continue her education at K-State. “A big influence was my advisors: Brandie Disberger, Steve Harbstreit, and Shannon Washburn,” Kaitlyn said. She earned her degree in Agricultural Education and Communications.

One requirement of that degree is a student teaching experience. “I went into Ag Ed (as a major) thinking I would go the Extension route,” Kaitlyn said. Extension youth development positions typically do not involve formal teaching in the public school classroom. Kaitlyn was not looking forward to classroom teaching.

“I'm going to hate this,” Kaitlyn said to herself as she considered student teaching. For her student teaching assignment, she was placed with ag teacher David Holliday at Rock Creek High School. Rock Creek is a regional school which draws from the rural communities of Westmoreland, population 628; St. George, population 442; and Olsburg, population 189. Now, that's rural.

“I had the best experience of my life,” Kaitlyn said. She found it highly rewarding. She has high praise for Mr. Holliday. “He is the best,” Kaitlyn said.

After completing her degree, she returned to her hometown in Illinois. Until budget cuts hit, Kaitlyn worked in her dream job as an Extension 4-H coordinator. Meanwhile, her mentor Donna Theimer retired from Joliet Junior College and Kaitlyn took over the teaching assignment for Donna's floral design class.

When it was time for the annual Great Lakes Floral Expo, four of Kaitlyn's students had the opportunity to enter the floral design student competition. Kaitlyn decided to enter in the professional category. In these contests, contestants are presented

with a scenario and a price list, and challenged to design and produce the best possible floral arrangement. Winners are selected by a panel of judges. Kaitlyn traveled to the competition with her students and retired professor Donna Theimer.

When the competition was over, two of Kaitlyn's students had placed first and third in the student division. In the professional division, Kaitlyn won first place. "I'm still shocked," Kaitlyn said. "Six years ago, I wouldn't have tried to make a centerpiece, but now I jump at the chance," she said.

The influence of a teacher never stops. In this case, professor Donna Theimer was a mentor who encouraged Kaitlyn's interest in floral design. Kaitlyn's professors at K-State and her supervising teacher for her student teaching experience also had a profound impact on her. Now she is helping influence the next generation of students. We commend Kaitlyn Harlow for making a difference with her interest in floral design and in educating youth.

What are the influences of a teacher? Just like the flowers themselves – they are growing.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.