

He lived to serve

Students, friends and colleagues remember Keith Gundlach

By AMANDA LUTEY

RANDOLPH — Learning to Do, Doing to Learn, Earning to Live, Living to Serve.

That is the FFA motto, and no one exemplified those ideals more than Keith Gundlach.

The beloved, longtime agriculture educator and FFA advisor passed away on March 29, five years after retiring due to ALS.

Gundlach's career in education began in 1977, after graduating from the University of Platteville with degrees in social studies and agriculture education. Known respectfully and affectionately by his students as "Sir" or "Gundy," he spent more than 42 years at Randolph High School as the agriculture teacher for students in both the Randolph and Cambria-Friesland school districts, and also served as the FFA advisor for those schools.

Ben Syvertson was one of Gundlach's students until he graduated from high school in 2010.

"He had a special way of seeing potential in students that other people didn't see," Syvertson said. "He never talked down to students. He treated you with respect and demanded the same. He held you to a high standard but one you could live up to and maximize your potential by doing so."

Syvertson belonged to the RCF FFA chapter, serving as an officer during his junior and senior years. He said he got to know Gundlach better while serving as RCF FFA chapter president.

"I worked for him at the FFA land lab, in the greenhouse and animal lab," Syvertson said.

He said he spent 12 hours or more a day with Gundlach, meeting him for breakfast and then working at the land lab. Syvertson continued to work for Gundlach after high school and came back to help in 2012 when Gundlach missed several months of school due to health problems.

"I helped out running the garden and the greenhouse with the kids who went to work there," Syvertson said.

What started as a student-teacher mentorship turned into a friendship. When Syvertson moved to Arizona for work after college, he and Gundlach stayed in contact- exchanging emails weekly.

"He was providing guidance as he always did, while also just being there as a friend," Syvertson said.

Keith Medema has served on the Randolph School Board since 2008. He works as a counselor at Sun Prairie West High School.

"KG was a true educator," Medema said. "The foundation of his teaching style was built on relationships and high expectations. His uncanny ability to help students laugh and learn at the same time is a skill that was extremely special. That foundation oftentimes led to relationships beyond the classroom to mentor and support students in their educational and career endeavors."

Medema met Gundlach while attending Randolph High School in the 1990s, and said the relationship continued while he was in college and as “colleagues in education.”

“KG did so much for so many,” Medema said. “Keith was highly intelligent and was a visionary for our school and community.”

Medema said Gundlach’s vision was displayed in his award-winning FFA program in his fundraising efforts and design of Randolph’s athletic fields and numerous foundations.

“He was able to raise funds because the community trusted that their financial support would be used for a good cause,” Medema said.

Medema said Gundlach wrote literally thousands of letters of recommendation.

“He knew his students’ strengths and weaknesses,” Medema said. “His letter writing was amazing and he was a strong advocate for his students. He assisted students in being admitted to college even when they didn’t meet the prerequisites. Most of those students excelled because he believed in them and was willing to put his reputation on the line to support them.”

Abigail Quinlan, the executive director of the Wisconsin FFA Foundation, said she first met Gundlach when she was a student.

“It was very clear that he was a fun advisor,” Quinlan said. “An absolutely amazing man. He helped us raise funds, but also demonstrated his willingness to give. He was a Blue & Gold Society Member and had his own endowment.”

Members of the Wisconsin FFA Blue & Gold Society are individuals or families who give more than \$15,000 over a three-year period.

Quinlan said the last time she spoke to Gundlach, he was helping with scholarship application reviews and she remembers him speaking highly of students.

“He was an advocate for his kids,” Quinlan said.

Gary Vander Galien, another former student of Gundlach’s, is a member of the RCF FFA Alumni group, which helps organize Randolph’s annual Labor Day event- the Corn Carnival.

“He was instrumental in the Corn Carnival,” Vander Galien said, “He got the FFA kids involved, got them engaged. We could not have had the Corn Carnival without them.”

“He loved kids,” said Kathy Nehmer, who worked with Gundlach on print projects like the FFA newsletter and athletic programs. Nehmer’s three sons all had Gundlach as a teacher. “It was so very clear that nothing he did was to benefit himself in any way, shape or form. He was all for the betterment of the kids, school and community.”

Cheryl Zimmerman serves as the executive director of the Wisconsin FFA Center.

“Keith Gundlach was one of the legends of Wisconsin Agricultural Education and FFA,” Zimmerman said.

"Keith was a leader among leaders. He was so well-respected in his school and community as well as throughout the entire agricultural education profession and FFA organization."

She said he built an "outstanding" agricultural education program and that the RCF FFA chapter has been recognized on both the state and national levels.

"He was always one who would be willing to help in any way he could," Zimmerman said. "A true servant leader."

She said he helped students develop outstanding supervised agricultural experiences that provided opportunities for young people to set their path for future careers. Zimmerman called Gundlach the "go-to guy" when one needed questions answered.

"Keith will be greatly missed as a colleague, mentor, teacher and friend. We would also have a good laugh when Keith was around with his quick wit and humor. He dedicated his life to the service of others and I can say he positively impacted my life in so many ways."

Glenda Crook is the managing director of Chapter and Member Programming for the Wisconsin State FFA.

"Every young teacher in Wisconsin learned quickly that if you needed help with a proficiency application you talked to Keith," Crook said. "This is how I first met Keith and when he became my mentor."

Crook said Gundlach knew the application by heart and had a complete understanding of the accounting and financial records part of the application. When Crook became the SAE Committee chair about 20 years ago, she worked with Gundlach to better understand the application and presented workshops with him for teachers to train them on proficiency applications, State FFA Degrees and American Degrees.

"During this time with Keith, I learned of his wonderful sense of humor and his devotion to his students. Keith wasn't just an agriculture teacher and FFA advisor, he lived his whole life for his profession and his students. This can easily be recognized by a visit to Randolph where everyone knows him as "Sir." which Keith explained started when a student was having a particularly difficult time pronouncing his last name. He asked Keith, "Is it alright if I just call you, Sir?" and thus began the tradition."

Even after officially retiring in 2019, Gundlach stayed active with the FFA, helping kids with their applications from his apartment, judging proficiencies from other schools, and advising other FFA advisors.

"He was still very active and involved," Syvertson said, although Gundlach's health continued to slowly decline and he was beginning to lose his voice and have mobility issues. "He still wanted to be in the conversation and help students as much as he could."

Colton Alsum, who graduated in 2022, had Gundlach as a teacher for one semester in 2018 before Gundlach retired, but their relationship continued, and grew when Alsum was elected to be the president of the RCF FFA chapter during his senior year, and began spending more time with Gundlach.

“I looked up to him for the selfless man he was,” Alsum said.

Gundlach was known for gently roasting his officer teams during the RCF FFA’s annual banquet recognizing the accomplishments of students and thanking those who support the FFA and its programs.

“He loved doing the roasts,” Alsum said. “But when people told him that was their favorite part of the banquet, he dialed it back. He didn’t want any attention for himself. He wanted the focus on his students.”

Gundlach was also known for wearing short-sleeved shirts with double breast pockets, often bulging with notes. Alsum said Gundlach’s seamstress lives near him, and that Gundlach would buy long sleeved shirts and have the sleeves cut off to be used for reinforced double pockets.

“Those pockets were loaded to the max,” Alsum said.

After Gundlach’s condition required him to have more care, Alsum said he would visit to help pay “Sir’s” bills.

“I enjoyed spending time with him,” Alsum said. “He was a true friend. He cared about you. He was a genuine man; you knew you could trust him.”

“The school was his life to the end,” said Syvertson. “That was his family.”

A visitation for Keith Gundlach is set for Friday, April 5, from 5 to 9 p.m. at Randolph High School, 115 E. Meadowood Drive. Gundlach’s family has asked Syvertson and Alsum to join them in the receiving line.

Amanda Lutey worked as a staff reporter and then features editor for the Daily Citizen from 2003 until 2017.

SUGGESTED PULL QUOTES:

“He had a special way of seeing potential in students that other people didn’t see,” Ben Syvertson, about mentor and friend Keith Gundlach.

“Keith Gundlach was one of the legends of Wisconsin Agricultural Education and FFA,” Cheryl Zimmerman, executive director of the Wisconsin FFA Center.

SUGGESTED PHOTO: Crop the April 2014 image used in the wiscnews.com/bdc story: “RCF FFA celebrates its successes and honors supporters” to just Keith Gundlach.