



Herald photo/Colleen Carroll

From left, FFA students Carly Lange and Amanda Lee, with advisor Rusty Finch, serve Linda Slatta during an Oct. 9 fundraiser barbecue. The barbecue raised money to send 27 qualifying FFA students to the late-October national competition in Indianapolis.

# 'Every single one of them will be consumers'

## Sumner High School FFA goes from farm-based to life-based lessons — and sends 27 students to national competition

BY AVANI NADKARNI  
of The Herald

Twenty-seven Sumner High School FFA members are heading to a national FFA competition next week after placing exceptionally well at the state level in their respective fields. It's the largest delegation the school has ever sent to the country's agricultural contest and not one of them dreams of growing up to be a farmer.

Instead, said SHS agriculture teacher and FFA advisor Rusty Finch, they'll use the skills they learned in their dream careers as veterinarians, scientists, teachers and — in the case of one student — a chef.

"The skills we're teaching and working on can be used anywhere," Finch said. "That's our biggest (concern) in an urban setting."

The students are traveling to the national contest, held in Indianapolis, in various teams — dairy foods, meat evaluation, livestock, food science — and picking up life skills along the way.

"For us, it's all about the dairy food industry," said senior Tristan Hanon, who is FFA president this year and competing on the dairy foods team. "We taste milk samples, identify cheeses."

Hanon's team, which includes Alexis Brendible, Eric Larson, Caitlin Quensenberry and Kevin Warren, is the first dairy foods team from Sumner to qualify for national competition. Brendible is the first person from Sumner to place first in dairy foods at the state level. It's a huge honor, she said, but it puts the team at a bit of a disadvantage.

"We're going into this without prior knowledge of what's going to be asked of us," Hanon said.

The group has been practicing twice a week after school, refining their dairy palates to be able to tell the differences between milks and cheeses from samples Finch makes them. None of the group members

plans to go directly into agricultural

### SUMNER FFA TIDBITS

The students are packing their bags for the FFA national competition, which takes place Oct. 21-24 in Indianapolis. Here are some fun facts about FFA:

- ▶ The whole trip costs each child \$600, said Sumner School District Communications Director Ann Cook. The group has been holding fundraisers and an anonymous benefactor donated \$3,000 to the program, meaning each student will receive about \$100 to defray the cost.
- ▶ There will be 27 students traveling to

nationals this year, much larger than most years. Out of those, four placed first individually in their respective fields, four placed second and three placed third. Five teams placed fifth as a team.

- ▶ Tristan Hanon, who is on the dairy foods team, is also competing in public speaking. His topic: "On the Road to a Fuel Solution."
- ▶ Advisor Rusty Finch has high expectations for his 2009 team. "Every one of those teams has a legitimate shot at getting into the top five," he said. "That's pretty impressive."

"The skills we're teaching ... can be used anywhere."

#### RUSTY FINCH

Sumner High School agriculture teacher and FFA advisor

ture after graduation. They all sort of fell into FFA accidentally: Brendible joined on a whim as a freshman and was encouraged when she placed well at state, even while competing as an alternate. Warren decided to join the dairy foods team "because I like cheese a lot."

An unexpected by product of competing on teams such as dairy foods or, in Amanda Lee's case, food science, is changing bad eating habits. To qualify for nationals, Lee and her teammates, Natasha Moffitt, Carly Lange, Chase Barrus and Annie Elias, had to go through the steps that a food product goes through, from creation to grocery store shelves. This gave them an in-depth look at the nutritional value of foods, Barrus said.

"For our state team competition, we had to make an organic pizza product," sophomore Barrus said, adding that they ended up choosing a turkey pineapple pizza. "It had to sell really well and (the company's) best-seller was Canadian bacon pineapple, so we decided to make it healthier."

The steps, from researching nutritional content to figuring out product

pricing, are crucial life skills, the girls said.

"It helps us to know how to eat healthier," added Lee, a sophomore who wants to be a math teacher.

Lee and Barrus, who both described themselves as shy, said the portion of the contest where they had to explain their decisions to a panel of judges also helped them overcome that.

"We were so nervous, but we got through it," Barrus said. "I'm nervous (for nationals) but I'm really excited. The pressure's really on for us."

Ann Cook, Sumner School District's communications director, said overcoming that anxiety is instrumental for FFA students.

"FFA kids have the highest skills in public speaking, in communication," she explained. "They're poised, they're polished. FFA continues to move away from just farm management."

Finch agreed. Some Sumner High School FFA alumni have gone on to as varying jobs as working as a firefighter or working for Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, but they've all been praised for their work ethic.

"What makes our program so successful is the connection to science is huge (but) they learn in the classroom and they can apply it out of the classroom," he said. "They learn a lot of those indirect skills (like) work ethic. They may not be ranchers, but every single one of them will be consumers."