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A Change of Heart

By Sawyer Johnston

My reserved personality was screaming for me to turn around, grab my bags, and race back to the car. I was about to embark on a journey thousands of miles away to Washington D.C. with hundreds of rowdy teenagers I had never met. This was most definitely not my small town, country girl cup of tea! I convinced myself to go anyway, thinking that since it was only a little over a week, it couldn't be that bad.

This scene took place the summer before my senior year, and, little did I know, it would be the time of my life. It all started a few months earlier when my FFA advisor shoved an application in my face and told me I was going to this conference whether I liked the idea or not. Assuming there was not even a chance of being accepted, I filled the papers out, mailed them off, and never gave it a second thought. I had forgotten all about it when one day, a few weeks later, I received my acceptance letter.

Determined to find an excuse for not going, I mapped out every single event, big and small, that I

(Continued on next page)

had planned for the summer. After double checking at least five times, I did not have a single thing that would interfere with the conference. On the verge of going to share the news with my advisor, I found a way out. The trip would cost over three thousand dollars! The next day I marched my smug self into his office and explained, "Hey, I got accepted to the Washington D.C. conference, but I have looked it over, and there is no way I can afford that. You need to call to tell them I cannot go." He looked at me, gave me a knowing smile, and replied, "No worries! Someone has already paid for you to go."

Astonished, I left school that day having decided that this must be something pretty great for someone to pay my way. Once I finally arrived at the bus stop, I gathered up my courage, put a smile on my face, and climbed aboard. My attitude was instantly changed as I was met with an incredible amount of energy from many fellow FFA members. I had seen many FFA events and knew they were fun, but I had never seen anything like this.

A couple fast-food stops and twenty-seven hours later, we finally arrived in Washington D.C. We had all become great friends as we sang karaoke, complained about not having phone chargers, and mapped out crazy plans for when the old Greyhound bus broke down. Even after the seemingly endless bus ride, all the energy from the beginning of the trip was still very much alive as we checked in at the hotel.

The trip I initially assumed would just be something to suffer through was quickly turning into an unforgettable experience. During the week we not only got to tour the famous monument and memorials, but also had the opportunity to meet many past and present national FFA officers. One highlight of the tour was witnessing a motorcade for the President who even rolled down his window and waved at our group.

Much of our week was spent developing a *Learning to Serve Plan*. These plans allowed us to step back and look at our lives to determine if they were headed in the direction we wanted them to go. Critically examining myself, I realized I was tired of always being reserved and shy; it was like swimming upstream and would never allow me to reach my goal. Throughout the week I realized I wanted to be the person that lit a room up with energy when I walked in, rather than simply going unnoticed. I would no longer shy away from opportunity. Instead, I would seek it out every day. Watching the group leaders and listening to their advice, I realized that my goal was certainly achievable and vowed to see it through.

At the end of the week, I found myself hesitant to climb on the bus once again. This time it was for a very different reason. I did not want to go back home. That week had been a blast as I built lasting friendships and discovered I could be anyone I wanted to be.

