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Abstract: Kaitlin Weitekamp was born on October 14, 1988 in Springfield, Illinois. She has spent her whole life living with her parents in Raymond, Illinois. Kaitlin is not a farm kid but to be different she decided to join FFA. Her projects all consisted of managing a turf business she inherited from her older brother. After many years in the FFA she ran for the state president position and won. She has spent the last year as the State FFA President attending FFA meetings all over the state of Illinois, traveling to Washington DC, and even taking a trip to Spain. Kaitlin's main goal while being president was to show that a woman could do the same thing as a man in the male dominated industry of agriculture. Kaitlin is looking forward to attending the University of Illinois in the fall for agribusiness.

Keywords: Springfield, IL; Raymond, IL; FFA; Turf Business; Inherited Business; State FFA President; Agriculture; Male Dominated Industry; Agribusiness

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Interview with Kaitlin Weitekamp

ISM_44_WeitekampKai

August 12, 2008

Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco

Maniscalco: Today is August 12, 2008. We are in the Illinois State Fair in the FFA barn, I guess is what it's called. We're sitting here with Kaitlin Weitekamp. How are you doing, Kaitlin?

Weitekamp: Just fine.

Maniscalco: So we're going to do this oral history interview. I'm going to start with some very easy questions, first. So let's start with your age, date of birth, and where you were born.

Weitekamp: I'm nineteen years old, and I was born on October 14, 1988 in Springfield, and now I live in Raymond, Illinois.

Maniscalco: Great. Now, do you have a lot of family around Raymond, Illinois?

Weitekamp: Actually, I'm the youngest of seven children, and four of them are adopted from other countries, so it's quite a diverse family. And they live in Bloomington, Champaign, Peoria, Springfield, and then I live in Raymond.

Maniscalco: Wow, very cool. So what about like grandparents, aunts and uncles—are they all—?

Weitekamp: My grandparents are deceased except for one grandma. She lives over in Pike County, Illinois, in Kinderhook.

Maniscalco: Now, I think I saw that your farmer is a father, right?

Weitekamp: Well, he actually used to farm, and then he went into the business part of it, so he's now a farm manager and a real estate broker. So he and six of his partners own and operate a farm management firm here in Springfield—it's called Agrivest Incorporated. And so they used to work through the banks, and now they just own their own firm.

Maniscalco: So as a child, did you have a lot of experience kind of on the farm?

Weitekamp: Not really. My uncle still has cattle and the hogs that my dad used to raise with him, but now he's kind of gotten out of that. So I had a chance to kind of experience that as a child, but not your typical farm FFA kid, if you want to say that. So when I was little, I would tag along with my dad, and we would go visit his farms that he operates, manages, as a farm manager. And so we were everywhere. And I didn't do a whole lot of it, but... My FFA experience kind of started when I actually found his jacket in the closet, and he told me about FFA. And I started as a freshman. So I've come a long way since then.

Maniscalco: Really?

Weitekamp: Yes.

Maniscalco: Wow. So did you seek out FFA in your high school, or...?

Weitekamp: Right. I come from a small school. My class graduated with thirty-three students. So Lincolnwood High School was quite a bit smaller than most, but the ag program was so very important to us, and it's a very ag-based community. And so when I was in junior high, we

actually found the jacket, and I asked my mom what it was, and she said, "Why don't you talk to your dad? You should talk to him." And so he told me a little bit about FFA, and I decided that along with the sports—I played soccer and softball and basketball—that I would try a little bit of a different twist with agriculture. And I loved what I did following along with my dad, so it was pretty natural for me. And after I got my first taste, there was no stopping me.

Maniscalco: Really? That's great. So kind of just breaking right into the FFA topic, I mean, you have all these projects you're supposed to be doing and everything. What were some of your projects?

Weitekamp: Actually, I did ag education / ag communications. So it mainly started as an officer. I was a reporter for the chapter and for the old section nineteen. They did some re-sectioning these past couple of years. I put together newsletters, and I sent out news releases and wrote articles and did all kinds of things, and so that got me started in the ag communications part of things. And then I also have a turf grass management business that's kind of been passed down along the lines of my family, and I took over for my brother in 2003. And it keeps me busy. People think they know how to mow a yard, but once you research it and you do all the lawn care know-how, it's a big job, so I really enjoy it. That's what got me interested in agribusiness.

Maniscalco: So the turf grass management business was passed down through your brother?

Weitekamp: Yes.

Maniscalco: Were they doing that through FFA?

Weitekamp: No. Actually, I'm the only one in my family besides my father to be involved in FFA. They were all either sports or art or cheerleading or whatever else interested them. So FFA was kind of my thing to do to be a little bit different, and I took a hold of it and really went with it. So.

Maniscalco: (laughs) Well, that's great. So how did the turf business get started, then?

Weitekamp: My oldest brother—I have three brothers and three sisters, all older than me—he started it as a little summer job—you know, five yards here and there. And they're neighbors. I don't know how good of a job he did because I don't think he took it seriously. And then it passed down my brothers, and we all just kind of worked at it, with the exception of my oldest sister, who was already in college by that time. But when I was in junior high, I was old enough to go out on the mower. And we would always take my brother lunch when I was little, and so I got to kind of see it. (laughs) And I really couldn't escape it; it was something that's going to happen. And I shouldn't make it sound that way because I actually do enjoy it. And somebody made the comment that when I get married, the husband is going to be the one inside taking care of the kids, and I'll be the one taking care of the lawn. (both laugh) So we'll see if that happens or not.

But the turf grass management project actually let me to be what's called Star in Agribusiness. There are four different categories: Placement, a Star in Farm, a Star in Agriscience, and then Ag Business. And so I went to the state level in that competition, and I got my state FFA degree, which you have to complete so many hours of work or earn so much money, and now I'm getting my American degree. So it's taken me a long ways.

Maniscalco: So kind of explain to me, what's this turf business? What is it, exactly, that you're doing?

Weitekamp: Well, I mow lawns. (laughs)

Maniscalco: You're mowing lawns?

Weitekamp: Yes. And it's just lawn care. I don't have a license to actually spray fertilizer or seed their yard, so I just give them some tips. I watch for lawn diseases. There are some very common ones that tend to take a hold of lawns. Right now, we have a big problem with crabgrass and clover because of all the rain, so I'm trying to advise my customers on how they can make their yards a little bit better and obviously a little bit more full of grass instead of all the weeds. I'll be selling the business this fall when I go to the University of Illinois, because I won't be able to maintain it.

Maniscalco: How many customers do you have?

Weitekamp: When my brother and I were doing it, we used to have around twenty, and so we'd tag-team that. But when I got into high school and got into sports, there was no way, so we cut back to about ten. That's what I have about now.

Maniscalco: So you said you were thinking about selling the business. Are you going to advertise to sell it, or...?

Weitekamp: Well, I think that the best way is to kind of—there are a lot of local people who are starting to get involved, and we're obviously from a small town—less than 1,000 people—it's not like there is an extreme amount of competition. And the people are so nice that I work for, and they're extremely helpful. They know that it's going towards my FFA project and for educational experience. And that's what got me started, like I said, in agribusiness. So I think just kind of contracting it out to other people in the community is going to be the starting point for that.

Maniscalco: That's great. Now you've mentioned that you did sports in school. Which sports did you do?

Weitekamp: I did boys' soccer, (laughs) and there were two of us on a team of about thirty-six.

Maniscalco: Oh my gosh.

Weitekamp: We had two girls and thirty-four boys. And then I did girls' basketball for three years, and I played softball for four years.

Maniscalco: Wow. And the fact that you did boys' soccer and you're in FFA is kind of leading me to a question of—you know, agriculture is very male-oriented and very man based. What's special about you that's letting you break through those boundaries?

Weitekamp: Well, I was a big tomboy (laughs) in grade school, and so I always bought my clothes in the boys' department, I played sports with the boys, I played dodge ball with them at recess. I've just always had a lot more guy friends than I have girl friends, and so when I got into agriculture... I have to say it was really challenging for a girl because they don't think that you can obtain a leadership position and be as successful as males. It's just a predominantly male field. And so that was probably the biggest challenge that I ran into. And so trying to break the mold of the typical farm girl, farm wife. You know, when you think about the farm, the male runs the farm and the female is the farm wife. And yes, sometimes it's like that, and other times it's more even. It just depends on the situation, really. So overcoming the stereotypical farm girl, I think, is kind of where I had to work at it because people don't understand that over half of the leadership positions in FFA are carried by females now.

Maniscalco: So what did you do to overcome that?

Weitekamp: Well, obviously, working to promote FFA at the chapter level and then the section level and eventually the state level was a big deal for me. And I am one of five state presidents who are females out of the last eighty years. So. (laughs) It's not everything to be the president, obviously, but just to kind of step out there and show that girls can also be leaders as well is something that's very important to me.

Maniscalco: That's great. That's really cool.

Weitekamp: Thanks.

Maniscalco: So you went through high school in your local high school, and now you're going on to college?

Weitekamp: Yes. At the U of I. (laughs)

Maniscalco: And what are you going for?

Weitekamp: I'm going for ag business management and markets. So I actually considered doing ag education because with the FFA and everything, I got very involved in that. And during the fall, we did what's called chapter visits, so I visited nearly 100 chapters out of 300 in Illinois. So it's an eye-opening experience when you set foot in that classroom. And there's a shortage of ag teachers, and we really need people going into agriculture education right now. So I considered that, but I think I decided that I'll be a lot safer and a little bit happier with the agribusiness, especially with the economy now and trying to find a job. It's very flexible. So hopefully I figure out what I want to do when I get to college. We'll see.

Maniscalco: You mentioned ag education a bunch of times, and in talking to other people like Sam, he mentioned that as well. What's the appeal to doing ag education?

Weitekamp: Well, that's the problem, is that right now, because of the economy, there aren't a lot of perks to ag education compared to other things. And I know that Sam's considering going into ag education, and kudos to him because it's a very difficult career unless you're meant to be an ag teacher. So if you have a passion for it, and you're able to work with the kids and balance everything—it is a balancing act because you have to balance FFA and agriculture education and also help the kids with their Supervised Agricultural Experience Projects. So it's a commitment, and I think a lot of people are afraid to make that commitment, because teaching, let's face it, isn't the best salary out there. And so that's part of the problem, but we really need that, especially with the growing agricultural world today.

Maniscalco: Now to talk a little bit about the fact that you were an officer—and you said you got to go to 100 chapters out of 300?

Weitekamp: Nearly, yes.

Maniscalco: Nearly. What sorts of things did you do besides visiting other FFA chapters?

Weitekamp: We are elected in June by a popular vote. They narrow it down by selection process to ten candidates, and then we go to the convention, and you're elected by popular vote after giving a speech, all the way down the line—five officers. And then we travel together during the summer. The first three or four weeks is basically training, and you train on public speaking, teamwork skills, leadership skills, everything you can imagine, also through the national FFA organization. And then we did a little bit of traveling. Sam and I spent two weeks total in

Washington, D.C., and so that was a really fun experience. We got to meet the president of the United States, and it was a good time.

And then in the fall, we do chapter visits. So we spend forty-five minutes, roughly, at each chapter, putting on a presentation. We did what's called FFA Feud, so it was kind of a spin-off of *Family Feud*, and we taught about FFA and agriculture education. And then in the winter, it's kind of down time. We start to plan our convention for the next June. In the spring, we travel around to a lot of the chapters and visit at banquets, and then we end with convention. We also got to take a two-week trip to Spain with other state officers from across the United States, so that was a great experience.

Maniscalco: What did you do in Spain while you were there?

Weitekamp: Well, (laughs) we started out on a bus, and we traveled around to various cities. And we just kind of experienced the heritage. It's a very historically rich country, and so it was important to Spaniards that we learn about their history, and then we moved more to the agricultural side of things, so we visited a vineyard and an olive oil factory and a lot of other different agricultural places around Spain.

Maniscalco: You've seen a lot of agricultural business and ag activities in the United States, and then you saw them in Spain. What was your opinion? Where are similarities and differences?

Weitekamp: (laughs) It's so different.

Maniscalco: Really?

Weitekamp: Yes. It's not as advanced over there, yet in other parts of agriculture, it's much more advanced. So for instance, I never saw a bean plant over there, never saw a stalk of corn, but you find the olive oil, you find the vineyards. I think 35 percent of the entire world's olive oil production comes from Spain. Everywhere you go, there are olive trees. And they do a lot of research over there on fruits and vegetables, because it's so close the Mediterranean, it's a prime spot for growing those commodities. And so it's a very big deal over there. They have to import a lot more of their grain, though, because they don't have the soil for it. It's very dry over there, and sandy. So that was probably the biggest difference. When you drive along on the highway, you see a lot of rundown farms that just aren't... It's not a priority so much over there, compared to the United States, where you see these big mega farms, as they're called, that are taking over everything. You don't see so much of that over there. And I think in Spain, they have much more of an appreciation for what they are receiving through agriculture. We take a lot of things for granted here in the United States.

Maniscalco: You mentioned these mega-farms that are popping up. How do you feel about them?

Weitekamp: (laughs) I don't know if I should get into that because it's kind of a hot topic for me. I think the family farm is extremely important, and if we lose the family farm, I really don't know what's going to happen because it's so important to our history and for generations to learn. Because if everything comes from a mega farm, where is the appreciation for agriculture and the ability to walk into a farm and say, "This is what happens. This is where this goes, to this step, to this step, and then it ends up on your plate." And so that's probably the biggest thing—that and family pride, because I know that a lot of families are being overtaken by the mega-farms. And it's really tough for them because it's been a generational thing. And it's the history of their family. It's where they come from; it's what they're made of.

Maniscalco: Interesting. Now another thing I was thinking of is that you mentioned you want to go into agribusiness, probably. What are some of your ideas of doing. I mean, what are you going to do?

Weitekamp: (laughs) Well, kind of an inspiration to me was I got to meet Patricia Woertz, the CEO of ADM—Archer Daniels Midland—which is an agribusiness company. And it's a big company, and it's based in Decatur, Illinois. And I think she kind of showed me that women can be involved in agribusiness as well as men, which is kind of where I've gone with the FFA things. And so it's been eye-opening for me. I think I'm going to try to get some internships with ADM, Monsanto, John Deere—anything like that—to get my feet wet and see if I really want to be doing this for the rest of my life. And then I've thought about a lawn-care business, obviously, (both laugh) since it's been my passion for the past few years. And I'm not really sure where I'll be going, but hopefully I figure out what I want to do.

Maniscalco: Great. You've traveled all over the state and all over the country. What are some of the special things about Illinois agriculture that you've seen?

Weitekamp: One thing I have to say about Illinois is no part of Illinois is the same. People constantly ask me, "What was your favorite part? What was your favorite place?" I don't have a favorite because every part is different. You go down to southern Illinois where it's obviously very production-based, more cattle because it's hilly. Up in northwestern Illinois, it's mostly cattle because of the hills. In western Illinois, it's flat as a pancake unless you get close to the river, and so... There's everything in Illinois. And you go from Chicago to the smallest town you can find, and it's so different, yet everything is agriculture, and I don't know if everyone understands the importance of that.

Maniscalco: Now, were you able to tell some of your other FFA state officers from other states, were you able to tell them about Illinois?

Weitekamp: Yes. And some of them like Kansas say, "Oh my gosh. (laughs) Don't come to Kansas because we have nothing here except rolling flatlands, and you can see for miles and miles. It's boring." But I've traveled to plenty of places—and I haven't been everywhere, obviously—but I've seen enough to know that Illinois is, I think, where I want to raise a family and end up, because it's such a diverse yet accommodating and... I really can't put it into words because it's just home for me, and they offer everything.

Maniscalco: That's great. I'm basing this off of the fact that you've seen a lot of Illinois agriculture. What do you think the future of Illinois agriculture is?

Weitekamp: Well, obviously, Illinois is a lot of corn and soybeans, and so the GMO products is a future in Illinois. I really don't know what the future holds for Illinois agriculture, but I only see it getting brighter. And as long as we are careful with the technologies that we use—with the GMO corn and soybeans and any other types of cattle or hog advancements—I think that we can really make things a lot better and become one of the top-producing states. We already are a top-producing state, especially in corn and soybeans, and I think that we can increase that even more with technological advancements. So hopefully we get a little bit more awareness about agriculture education and look more to the education side of things. And I know that production is going to thrive anyways. So that's where I'm coming from, is that education part of things.

Maniscalco: Now, along the same lines, since you were an officer of FFA, what do you see for the future of FFA?

Weitekamp: FFA's going to get bigger because the membership keeps increasing, and now we're working to get more into the urban schools. And Chicago has a high school particularly for agriculture—it's called Chicago High School for Ag Sciences—we had a chance to visit there. And I think if we can expand that urban agricultural feeling and education, it's only going to get bigger. FFA is improving every day, and there's so many new things that they offer, from ag science to production to lawn care and landscaping, there's everything.

Maniscalco: Well, great. You know this is going to be an oral history interview, and it's going to be archived in the Illinois State Museum. And one day down the road, maybe a brother or sister or maybe even a child of yours walks in and says, "Hey, look, there's Mom, (Kaitlin laughs) or (inaudible speech)somebody—here's so-and-so's interview." What would you want in this interview for them?

Weitekamp: To never forget where you come from, because no matter where you go or what you do, it always comes back to where your roots are: here in Illinois and in agriculture, too.

Maniscalco: Well, great. Well, thank you very much.

Weitekamp: Thank you. Hopefully I'm not too windy. (laughs)

Maniscalco: No, no, no.

Weitekamp: I like to talk. (laughs)

(end of interview)