

## THE \$50 SCHOLARSHIP THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

What is your *'Origin Story'* within Grange? Comic book characters often encounter some pivotal event that changes their course in life, sending them down an unforeseen path. Some of you were born into this organization; it's all you've ever known. Others, such as myself, found the Grange at a later point in life. For me, my origin story begins in June, 1991.

As a graduating high school student, I was presented the "Outstanding Senior in Agriculture Education" scholarship. This annual recognition was presented to one student by the members of Elizabethtown Area Grange #2076. My involvement in FFA and dairy farm background did set me apart from my classmates. The Grange spent \$50 to buy a savings bond in my name. It was a simple but meaningful gesture. I sent them a thank you card, expressing my appreciation. But my sights were set on the future, as I was off to college!

While studying at Penn State, I had the opportunity to be involved in several clubs and organizations. I became heavily involved Dairy Science Club and other groups, and joined Alpha Zeta, an agricultural fraternity with a house just off campus. Living there taught me how to work together for a common good, and have respectful discussions with people with whom you don't always agree.

After graduating with a degree in Dairy & Animal Science in 1995, I returned home to the dairy farm, as I had planned. We were able to make a variety of improvements and upgrades on the farm. However, it didn't take long to miss the personal interactions and friendships I had in my college fraternity. Where would I ever find bonds like that again?

I tried to fill the void in my personal life. For example, even though I had never been in 4-H, I became the program's leader of the local dairy club. But no matter what I tried; it didn't fulfil what was missing. In August 1995, I was visiting the Elizabethtown Fair, and I found myself in front of the Elizabethtown Grange booth. Each year they would make hand-spun milkshakes as their fundraiser. I stopped in and introduced myself as a prior scholarship winner. They encouraged me to come to their next meeting in September, which I did. By the end of that first Grange meeting, I was hooked, and I jumped in.

It didn't take long to realize that Grange wasn't just your ordinary club or social group, it was really more like an extended family. I was at least 20 years younger than anyone else, but it didn't matter. A few other members closer to my age soon joined, and I knew this was the place for me.

In January of 1996, I was walking through the Pennsylvania Farm Show with our subordinate Master, and we stopped at the PA State Grange stand. It happened to be the day that the youth department was staffing the area. I had the chance to meet Grange members that were my age from across Pennsylvania. They encouraged me to attend Young Adults Conference in Lancaster in March, which I did. I was welcomed in immediately, and was affectionately called 'The New Guy'. Decades later, they still call me 'New Guy', and the brothers and sisters I met that day remain some of my closest friends.

Youth camps, regional youth conferences and state sessions soon followed. I discovered the amazing history of this organization, its storied past, and optimistic future. Being a farmer, the Grange ritual touched me with its lessons that we shall reap what we sow. I continue to hold deep reverence for it. So

you can imagine my surprise when I learned that Rev. Aaron Grosh, one of the seven founders of the National Grange, lived in Marietta and is buried just 10 miles away from my house.

In June of 1996, less than a year after a visit to the milkshake stand, I was elected Overseer. Four years later, the members of Elizabethtown Grange elected me to serve a Master. Over the past 27 years of membership, these members have been my foundation. I am blessed to have had many wonderful Grange mentors in Elizabethtown, across Pennsylvania, and beyond.

Of course, I would be remiss if I did not mention that through Grange is how I met my wife, Charlene. Many years ago, I received a call from Floyd Buffington, State Youth director. He let me know that a youth member from northern PA had moved to Elizabethtown to take a job at the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. She didn't know anyone in the area, so perhaps I could invite her to our Grange meetings. After several months of invitations, she finally did attend a meeting, and well, let's just say it worked out for me and she is still going to our Elizabethtown Grange meetings. Our sons have been active in the Junior and Youth programs, and I can already see them developing friendships they will have for a lifetime.

But now, as I sit here at the desk of the Master of the State Grange of Pennsylvania, I can't help but think back to how this all started. My local Grange wanted to support a student with ambitions for a career in agriculture. We still present that scholarship, however, now it is a check for \$500.

I still have my savings bond. Earlier this year I considered cashing it in. It's been over 30 years, and it has stopped accruing interest. But at this point, it has more sentimental value than a fist full of dollar bills. And who knows... maybe someday those Elizabethtown Grange members will get their money's worth out of me.