

Agriculture's 'Mr. D' cultivates dedicated students

By Olivia Barker, USA TODAY

WOODBURY, Conn. — Clad in a bright white coat, Morgan Templeton grabs a black-handled saw with both hands and cuts into a 100-pound side of swine — a little, well, sheepishly.



It matters how you slice it: Bill Davenport leads his class in meat cutting.

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By Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY

But then Bill Davenport booms: "Morgan, like you mean it! Like a wood-chopping contest!"

Except Morgan, 17, stands in a meats science classroom, not a butcher shop, and Davenport is her teacher, not her boss.

Davenport, 42, is director of the Ellis Clark Regional Agri-Science and Technology Center at Non-newaug High School here in affluent Litchfield County.

Which makes the success of his program — last year the National Association of Agricultural Educators recognized it as one of the six best among the 7,300 in the country — all the more remarkable. Though bucolic, the region is increasingly more Range Rover than John Deere; only 10 of the program's 300 students actually live among cows and crops.

No matter. The kids, who hail from 26 towns and as far as 30 miles away, clamor to be admitted. The number of applicants increases every year; there were more than 200 last year for 90 freshman slots.

One reason is that Davenport and his five fellow ag instructors have adapted the 85-year-old program to the community's needs. Only 10% of the curriculum teaches traditional farming practices, such as food production and livestock management. The rest explores subjects such as conservation, floriculture and ag mechanics. Kids tap maple syrup from the school's sugar bush and analyze the chemical properties of the Non-newaug River. They tend to annuals and perennials and design bouquets and boutonnières. They learn how to drive tractors and how to fix them. Off-campus work experience is required.

And, through their involvement in the FFA (formerly Future Farmers of America), they learn how to run meetings and compete in contests on everything from forestry techniques to parliamentary procedure.

Even though 65% to 70% of graduates end up in ag-related careers — there's an animal science professor at the University of Connecticut and a manager at a caramel-coloring company in Louisville — the skills they acquire are applicable "whether they're going to Harvard or to community college or to work on the family farm," says Non-newaug principal John Vecchitto. Seventy percent to 80% head to college.

Another reason students and graduates give for their interest in, say, pig castration is "Mr. D" himself.

"You can see how interested he is, and it just rubs off on you," says Morgan, her pink-polished fingernails smeared with pig fat.

"Don't hit the tenderloin, because that's a beautiful muscle we don't want to hurt," says Davenport, stroking the pale pink flesh. He turns his attention to other students: "Very nice job on the fat, guys." A girl walks by carrying a freshly carved roast. "That's beautiful," Davenport coos.

Davenport's energy is legendary, even in his 20th year at Non-newaug. "It's tough to keep up with him when he walks down the hallway," says Mindy Crane, 20, a 2003 graduate who's now a junior animal science and ag education major at UConn. "Every single student he gives a little push to. It's like a little seed for you to cultivate. You really take the initiative after that to make it grow."

His is a spectrum of students, from kids who struggle in traditional settings to valedictorians destined for Cornell. Accommodating the varied learning levels is "challenging, but the common core you have is the interest," he says. "And they help each other out. There's no competition in the class. It's like a family."

The program works as a release for the high achievers and as a motivator for those who wouldn't otherwise have college in their sights. Davenport says the rest of Non-newaug is beginning to look to his hands-on, differentiated teaching style as a model.

Says Vecchitto: "I'd like to clone him."