

Nicole Koziolk, a sophomore at the College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences, served as State Secretary for Minnesota FFA in 2021-22. She delivered this retiring address at this year's Minnesota FFA Convention, on Monday, April 25, at Mariucci Arena.

Speech by Nicole Koziolk

Growing up I was the slowest reader in my class. I went to tutor upon tutor and completed reading program after reading program, but nothing really helped. Homework took hours to complete, and I was always the last one to finish a test. I got very good grades, but I had to work harder than all my friends to make that happen. My school nights were not spent watching TV or playing, they were spent doing homework. My summers were spent in reading "camp", as we called them. No matter how hard I studied or how many hours I worked, reading was not easy for me. On September 12, 2018 I learned from an eye specialist that I have an eye disorder called Convergence Excess.

Let me explain. Most people's eyes meet nicely in the middle when focusing on any close-up image such as when reading a book, writing in a journal, or looking at our phones. My eyes didn't. When I looked at anything close-up, my eyes crossed, creating a double image and it took energy and concentration to create a single image. Reading was exhausting and time consuming.

We all start learning to read in kindergarten, but it wasn't until my JUNIOR YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL that I got an answer to something I'd struggled with most of my life. The diagnosis led to five months of vision therapy and daily exercises to retrain my eyes. It was incredibly hard, but I knew if I wanted to improve, I needed to show up every single day and put in the time and effort. The exercises helped A LOT, but they don't eliminate convergence excess. The exercises gave me the tools to overcome the impact of convergence excess. The solution isn't a magical pill or a surgery that hasn't been invented yet. I had to learn that the solution is putting in the work day after day.

I believe one of the most important things you can do in life is show up every day and put in the work. For ourselves, at school, in our FFA chapters, at work, and especially in the relationships that are important to us. That's what it means to have grit.

Being gritty is not trendy and it's not flashy. It is a mental edge, and it is mental toughness. It's the ability to know where you are going and staying with your goals despite adversity - those unavoidable life challenges we all experience. It's the ability to stay the course despite SETBACKS. Grit is about attitude, effort, and preparation. It isn't about our circumstances.

I keep my Showpigs in my grandpa's old dairy barn on the farm. When doing chores, I often think about Grandpa and how he always showed up and put in the work. He milked around 75 cows for over 50 years. Most of the extra help he got was from Grandma, my mom, and her sister. Of course, they did a lot of work, but Grandpa was the main guy. He loved milking cows and never complained. It didn't matter if it was really hot or freezing cold, if milk prices were

high or low or if he felt good or was fighting the flu or a common cold. He showed up every day for himself and his family.

Now I see those same traits in my cousin Charlie. He's a 4th generation dairy farmer and farms with his parents. I never hear Charlie complain, even on the hard days. And I know there are hard days. Some days a piece of equipment breaks down, a cow gets sick, or a newborn calf doesn't make it through the night. It doesn't matter what your job is there are days when things just won't go as planned. Those are the days we need grit. Grit cannot be measured in one day; it's demonstrated over a lifetime.

Where do we see grit in the world around us? If you train your eyes just right on the successful people in your life, I promise, you will find grit. We all know people who show up every day, put in the work and don't complain. Maybe they are a parent, a sibling, or a teacher. They can be in any job or role. Maybe it's a surgeon who stands to perform an 8-hour surgery or a fireman that carries a 50-pound backpack during a call. It's anyone, who despite their own hardships, is determined to do what is necessary to succeed. When have you used grit?

We all need grit to see us through the day-to-day challenges and the defining moments of our lives. November 11, 2021 is another date I won't forget. I was alone in a hotel room in Kansas City when my friend Abby called me way too late for it to be good news. I answer, "Hello? Nicole, this is Abby. There has been a medical incident. Karson died tonight."

I've had other moments where I was the recipient of bad news. I've lost grandparents and felt my world flipped upside down - but nothing compares to the shock I felt in that moment. My ears rang and I was unsure of where I was. For a moment I thought I'd forgotten English, because the words Abby was saying didn't make sense.

You see, Karson wasn't old or reckless. He didn't appear sick, and he was my age! We met when we started school, here at the University of MN, as freshmen in Fall of 2020. It was the height of COVID and there were fewer students in the dorm and on campus, and a group of us in the dorm bonded quickly. We did nearly everything together - ate together, studied together, did online classes together, went to the gym together - you name it, we did it - together. Karson was in our group. He was the definition of a good person. He was a friend who didn't limit his joy, his style, or his love. He took a genuine interest in the people around him. He lit up the room when he walked in - and he had the GREATEST sense of humor. When you think of the traits you want in a great friend, Karson had them all. He showed up every single day for those around him - and for that we will never forget him.

To be honest, I really struggled to work through the pain of Karson's passing - and still do. I often reflect on who he was and why losing him is so hard. Karson had grit - but he didn't JUST use his grit to survive. He used it to thrive. There's a saying "no grit, no pearl". You see, every natural pearl starts as an irritating piece of grit that an oyster smoothed over with layer upon layer of a substance called nacre (NAKE-Er). When applied in many layers over time, nacre creates a dazzling, precious and valuable gem. When I look back on my friendship with Karson, I

see how he used his grit and how he applied his version of “nacre” every day. Not only did he focus his eyes on the beautiful, but he also showed up every day, did the work, and turned his relationships from plain to precious. That realization caused me to ask myself, if I were to die tomorrow, how will I be remembered? And is that how I want to be remembered?

Immediately I thought of FFA, dedication and work ethic...grit, if you will. But I realized I want the KIND of grit that creates a pearl. I want to be the kind of friend who truly shows up for others, who is available. I'm still working on balancing showing up for myself, my work, and my people. My aim is to be more like Karson, to use my grit not only for my own accomplishments, but to make my world and my relationships valuable gems.

My challenge for each of us is to be gritty and mentally tough - show up every single day and put in the work for ourselves and for others. Do it with balance - grit isn't just about surviving, it's about thriving. Use the consistent effort of grit to turn ordinary things into shining beacons that make our lives beautiful and valuable. In life, some moments are hard. Some days are hard - heck, some SEASONS or YEARS are hard... but it's grit that helps us to see beyond the blurry double vision of adversity and to push through the pain and fatigue allowing us to see the potential that was on the page the entire time.