

STEAL THIS IDEA: SPEAKER SERIES

Nevada County Fairgrounds reaches out to inspire youth



“The word ‘can’t’ can’t do anything,” said Jack Parnell, former U.S. Deputy Secretary of Agriculture. “But the word ‘can’ can do anything it wants to do, so fill your mind with the word ‘can’ and believe that you can do whatever you choose to dream.”

A group of students, comprised of FFA participants from local high schools, looked on. The gathering took place at Nevada County Fairgrounds in October as the first of the Nevada County Fairgrounds Foundation’s Speaker Series, launched by new CEO Rea Callender. The series features six speakers, one each month, running October to April. Speakers ranged from government decision-makers, professional sports players, local business owners and Callender himself.

According to Callendar, the main goal of the series is to “give high school students real life advice from real life professionals, and to provide tips on how to build and succeed in a career.” Most recently, Chair of the California Board of Equalization Fiona Ma spoke to approximately 25 students about her own experiences working her way from accounting to an elected government official. During her time in the Assembly, Ma became the first Asian American woman to serve as Speaker Pro Tempore, a position that has existed since 1850.

“I had never even voted in a school election before running for office,” she said. “Standing here today, I help make laws, and I can help change laws.”

Ma, who served as a speaker at WFA Convention, has taken more than 80 agriculture tours to educate herself about the industry. “You have to be better educated—if you can prove yourself and prove that you know more than the next person, the more you will be respected.” She encouraged the students to find something they’re passionate about and work to enact change.

This is the fourth Speaker Series Callender has started during his career and the response has been overwhelming. Originally, Nevada County Fair reached out to educators at two local schools, Nevada Union High School and Bear River High School, to invite FFA students to the free event. The series’ reputation spread, and soon Placer High School reached out to the foundation to see if their FFA students could also attend. “Of course we said yes,” Callender noted.

So why should you consider adding a Speaker Series?

1. It’s a great way to reach out to the community: The students get used to coming to the fairgrounds and feel a connection that hopefully translates to them coming back during fair. Not to mention the useful and inspiring take-aways that students learn from the speakers.

2. It’s inexpensive, and potentially more than pays for itself: The events happen on the grounds, and other than the location, the fair provides water during each hour-long talk and Q&A session. Nevada

County Fairgrounds Foundation hosts the series and landed a local sponsor (Sandy Ballou and California Outdoor Properties), offsetting costs to the point of generating a modest contribution.

3. People want to do it: Another way that costs are kept in check is that the speakers are all volunteers. Callendar said that he has never paid a speaker for any of his series events. There’s also a very high participation rate. In his years of putting these together, only a couple of potential speakers haven’t been able to attend the event, and that was due to scheduling conflicts as opposed to lack of interest. You never know where you might find a speaker! Several of the speakers Callender has called upon have been acquaintances or local leaders.

Callender met Fiona Ma during WFA Convention and approached her about participating in the series.

4. It endears the fair to people: It’s not just the community or the students who become more interested in and grateful for the fairgrounds. Callender’s experience in previous Speaker Series’ have shown that several of the speakers themselves, having participated in the series and learning more about the foundation supporting it, end up becoming donors. “It’s certainly not a hard sell,” he said. “They just come out and see the importance of what we do and want to help.”

