

Restoring Tractors Yields Rewards For Texas Teens Ⓟ

(NAPSA)—In Cotton Center, Texas, restoring tractors is more than a hobby; it's a way of life. It's not uncommon to hear discussions about tractor maintenance while strolling through town.

If restoring tractors is a major pastime, then the annual Chevron-Texaco Tractor Restoration Competition, held at the Future Farmers of America (FFA) Convention, is the Super Bowl.

Since 1995 the competition has rewarded the determination, mechanical skill and business savvy of high school aged FFA members from around the country.

"One of the reasons Chevron-Texaco sponsors this program is because it inspires teens to learn," said Kurt Schulte, commercial automotive specialist, Chevron-Texaco Products Company. "To finish their projects kids seek out knowledge from teachers, advisors, family, friends, community and teammates. A program that inspires kids to ask questions, interact, learn, and ultimately accomplish the incredible is something we are proud to support."

It was with great anticipation that the Cotton Center High School FFA team—Jesse Masters, Heath Reeves, Sara Barr, Jessica Caswell, Nikki Edwards, Brittany Swoap, KC Garcia, Toby Castilleja, Amy Davis, Cody Heath, Jennifer Heath, Julie Heath and Brenda Marquez—geared up for the 2004 competition. Teams from Cotton Center had placed in the top five each year since 2000. This year's team, comprised of all 11 Cotton Center High seniors and two juniors, had extra motivation.

Two women closely connected with the team were fighting cancer during the restoration process.

Robin Heath, mother of triplets Julie, Jennifer and Cody Heath, and Becky Gast, wife of Cotton Center School Superintendent Keith Gast, both fell ill around the time of the competition.

There was another reason for motivation; Cotton Center's chief rival, Abernathy FFA from nearby Abernathy, TX, had beaten them in 2003.

"It's a very friendly rivalry," said Jessica Caswell. "The FFA members are all friends and we appreciate the work done by each other."

The process of restoring their tractor, a 1939 John Deere H, was long and involved. The boys did the mechanical work, the girls took care of the body work and workbook. Competition rules require teams to submit a workbook that details the entire tractor restoration process, from mechanical overhauls of the engine, transmission and auxiliary and ancillary systems, to the external appearance.

The team tore the tractor apart completely, rebuilding each component and making a number of parts.

"We worked as much as we could during school hours, but most of the work was done on weekends," said Cody Heath.

Once the work was done, the fun began. Team members agreed that traveling to the competition was the highlight of the experience.

A primary reason for that was the presence of Robin Heath and Becky Gast. Both women were able to accompany the team to Louisville for the competition. In recognition, the team dubbed the trip the "Celebration of Life Tour."

"We didn't have an official senior trip, so going to Louisville was great," said Cody Heath.

Once at the competition, the

team was all business. They had put considerable effort into preparing for their presentation to the judges and were confident their hard work would be evident.

"We all worked together to get the presentation where we wanted it to be," Caswell said.

The judges agreed and awarded Cotton Center the Grand Prize in the Chapter category. Abernathy also had a strong showing, finishing as second runner-up.

"Our personalities put us over the edge," said Julie Heath. "The judges could see how well we got along. We didn't go in there pretending to know everything about the tractor. We just went in and told them what we knew."

The team was given a hero's welcome upon its return. As they arrived home, they found the school parking lot filled with cars and were greeted by a throng of family and friends screaming, "Surprise!" and waving a banner that read "Smell Our Diesel Fumes, Abernathy!"

The team also received a letter of congratulations from Texas House Representative Pete Laney lauding their efforts.

Reflecting on the experience, the team is grateful for the opportunities provided by the competition.

"It's great to see ChevronTexaco investing in the youth," said Caswell. "We're the future of the industry and it's nice to know they care so much about education and developing our skills."

In 2005, the program will change its name to the Chevron Delo Tractor Restoration Competition, in recognition of one of the company's major lubricant brands.

For more information, go to: www.allen-martin.com/tractor.htm.