CRYSTAL CONNER: AN UNPARALLELED ASHS GO-GETTER

For most of us, when we encounter barriers to our objectives, we might say, "Why doesn't this work out?" And then we move on to the next objective, because there really are so many. But Crystal Conner seems to say to herself, "How can I *make* this work out?" And then she figures what to do and makes it work out. She has proven herself to be a relentless go-getter with an incredible rate of success in ferreting out opportunities for herself and for assisting others to meet their goals too.

First, Crystal may have been raised with a bit of agriculture already in her system. Though both of her parents were teachers, both sets of her grandparents were farmers. Her appreciation for plant life and crops is natural.

Academic excellence is natural for her too. Again, she was raised by two teachers. Her mom taught high school math and special education. Her dad had earned a PhD in music. He served as the band director at Jackson State University and at the University of Arkansas Pine Bluff. Educational discipline was indeed important to her household as a kid.

When she was in fourth grade, Crystal earned her way into a special advanced science course. That may have been a tipping point for her. She loved science and anything related to it, and as she progressed though her educational tract, she applied herself to a course load of science and research while seeking opportunities that would empower her with more than academia was offering.

After high school, Crystal maneuvered herself into being a lab technician with Agri-Starts in Apopka, Florida where she contributed to (and learned from) the ongoing research and development efforts within that company's World Coffee Research Project.

Agri-Starts is an industry leading supplier of plant tissue culture starter plants and services. They dabble in atypical plant material which they generate via careful selection, heat treatments, and state of the art production techniques. And since this was a company somewhat local to Crystal that seemed to conjoin agriculture and science, she simply could not stay away. But did they open their doors to her through some blanket appeal for help from high school students? No. This arrangement was all her. She calculated that behind the doors to the pristine tissue culture lab and the state-of-the-art greenhouses, there was benefit to be had. She had some free time after high school and wanted to spend it there. And she connected those dots.

Besides exhibiting an early version of her ability to create opportunity, Crystal discovered that she truly loved life in the lab. She knew then that this would not be her last experience in one.

When she embarked on her collegiate adventure at Valencia College in Orlando, Crystal knew she wanted to pursue academic excellence as well as contribute to the laboratory environment there. She made both of those things happen. It did not take her long to secure the position of Lab Assistant. And during that same period, she secured an internship to be the Greenhouse Assistant Manager there.

She decided to transfer to the University of Florida because she perceived more opportunities there. Using her growing body of experience, she situated herself into the U of F lab as a Plant Science Undergraduate Researcher. She worked as a Lab Tech, first doing research and development on somatic

embryogenesis optimization then on agrobacterium-mediated plant transformation and isolation of pure bacterial cultures. It was work she found even more thrilling than her classroom experiences.

While an undergrad, Crystal volunteered in the biotechnology lab to soak in more of an education.

But Crystal is not simply a taker. She is equally a giver. And she does both with an ebullient calm that is as fun to encounter as it is reassuring. Her down-home charm is a substantive part of her identity. It has helped to make people especially receptive to her requests. She is the sweetest and kindest go-getter you are ever likely to meet, reaching out to broaden her exposure, positioning herself within helpful company and with helpful resources.

At the University of Florida, Crystal joined The Environmental Horticulture Club to meet like-minded students who were involved in similar realms of academia and who were also passionate about the paths they were on. Encountering fellow students who were actively involved in this sort of extra-curricular was inspiring.

Early on, Crystal was aware that there was no map for her path in life. She is not a cookie-cutter person. Her interests and pursuits were tailor-made, and she had become her own tailor. She feels that not everyone will understand her needs or goals. Nor is it likely that either the specificity or the broad nature of her interests will ever be completely satisfied by an institutional beaten path. She carves out her own nuggets of life enhancements. And she has shown those other like-minded students how to do so for themselves.

Crystal is unstoppably kind to others around her. To know her is to love her. For those who were befuddled by the process required to make these life-bonusses happen, she was the one to help them out. She is an unwavering optimist. She sees the world as flush with positive possibilities. Being in her orbit brings a sunny outlook to those blessed by her presence. And when those rosy occurrences aren't coming her way naturally, she bends her reality to position herself in a receptive zone.

Her tirelessness as a self-starter has contributed to her rise as a standout student. Achievements and awards for Crystal are common though we will illustrate only three of those here as typical examples.

She was singled out as an honor student for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS). As an undergraduate researcher with enviable high grades, Crystal was welcomed into this program that allowed her to take graduate courses and receive other advanced exposure not ordinarily offered to undergrads.

She was also honored as a University Scholar, a selective designation in which only 200 students from colleges and universities across the country are awarded a stipend to fund their keen level of undergraduate research. The award included the opportunity to present the product of her research at an international conference. Of course, Crystal found herself celebrated for her proficiency.

And finally, a mere six students from across the country are chosen each year to be dubbed a Farm Foundation Cultivator. Only six! And Crystal made that cut! There are several components to this selection process. Most of those are designed to weed people out. But she has elevated herself far beyond what is common and secured a coveted spot in this select company.

Crystal became a member of ASHS in 2016. Since then, she has participated in a couple of our annual conferences. And, honestly, this is what drew her to our attention. Showing up to a conference can be

expensive, especially for a student. And when there is no departmental commitment to send a student to a conference just for her own edification, well, most would merely give up on that notion and focus on campus life. Not Crystal. She determined that our conferences were where she needed to be, so she sought out grant money to cover the costs, and she showed up on her own.

She has been able to experience the joy of presenting her research at annual ASHS conferences. She found it most validating. But for Crystal, there was something of deeper value that she was able to wring from such a professional gathering. She is always able to glean something new and innovative that she packs into her ever-expanding bag of tricks. Her research is rarely the same as that of other scholars who draw her attention with their own presentations, but she extrapolates new-to-her methodology that she can incorporate into her current or future research. Plus, Crystal seizes opportunities to congregate with fascinating breeders and researchers from so many different countries. Whether they know it or not, they are contributing to her tailor-made educational journey.

Not only that, when she arrived at her first conference in Atlanta, Crystal approached the registration table and noticed that we were very busy and under-staffed. She studied where she might be of practical assistance. At a slow moment, she approached us and offered to help. At first, she directed traffic. She handed out bags. She looked up information. By day 2, she afforded the staff some much appreciated break time. By day 3, we were committing her schedule for the following year. Everyone, on both sides of the table, instantly liked her. Plus, she was genuinely helpful. Such a kind person.

When she attended her next conference under the same premise, the ASHS staff almost expected (hoped for) her assistance, and we were not disappointed. Not that dealing with ASHS conference attendees is unspeakably laborious, but her sweet nature and optimistic charm instilled in us a fortitude that we appreciate and continue to reflect upon fondly.

By the way, ASHS is not the only association to receive this sort of treatment from Crystal Conner. She has also behaved similarly with the Southern Region American Society for Horticultural Science, the American Phytopathological Society, the International Plant Propagators Society, and the Farm Foundation Round Table. She goes where she feels the need to go, and she has honed a skill for finding the right travel grants to get her there.

As a helpful and giving person, Crystal volunteers for service organizations and assists outreach programs almost angelically. Beyond an honest-to-goodness flurry of horticulturally themed efforts (18 of them at last count) designed to extend a hands-on exposure to kids and to communities lacking such beneficial influence, she donates her time and energies to such big-hearted endeavors as Give Kids the World and Coalition for the Homeless. She exhibits love for others in her every interaction, and she doubles-down on that exhibition with the gifts of her time and effort.

Between her consistent top echelon academic performance, her non-stop and varied lab work, her involvement with student organizations and committees, her unquenchable desire to travel to professional conferences, her amazing array of charitable involvements, and her part time job (yes, she also works weekends at Disney in Orlando), it's difficult to grasp when she has time to sleep. But she must. Her energy is formidable.

Crystal Conner is now wrapping up her studies for the PhD program in Plant Pathology. She has focused on identifying R genes with NBS-LRR motifs in selected blueberry genomes that are resistant to *Ralstonia*

solanacearum to build stronger viability in commercial blueberries. She wishes to parlay her growing expertise into later working with fruit breeders, some of whom she has already met by attending ASHS conferences, to find resistant genes to the most harmful bacterial diseases.

And I would bet that she will find a way to meet that goal.