

A Dog-Eared Page



Sarah's World

By Sarah Jane

Scholarships, ACT scores, college applications, and high school in general are all rapidly winding to a close for me, like the pages of a book that are being flipped faster and faster. A new chapter is about to be written. After I take that first step on campus I will officially go from being a top of the pile Dodge City Red Demon senior to an ever-proud freshman K-State Wildcat (sorry all you KU fans).

I have already been accepted into the Bioengineering program and I cannot wait to start! I had a difficult time deciding what I wanted to do with my degree or even where I wanted to get it in the first place, and then I heard something that struck me to my core. K-State already has the brand new Level 3 Biosecurity Research Institute and it is partly because of this, that Plum Island is being relocated to Manhattan, Kansas, and becoming the National Bio and

Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF)! This is it! This is my huge break! This is where I need to be! It is not terribly far away from home, I can stick with my agricultural roots AND I can be doing something that I love every day.

I will admit that at first it didn't seem logical to be moving the facility that houses so many agriculturally threatening diseases to the middle of the nation's agricultural source, and I was worried if this would really be the right choice for my future. I was incredibly worried, but then my whole perspective was changed by a man that I hold in the highest esteem, Dr. Stephen Higgs. Grandma Barbara and I were given the opportunity to interview several department heads for this issue and Dr. Higgs (who is now the Associate Vice President for K-State and Research Director of the Level 3 BRI)" was the one I looked forward to the most. Between interviews, mom and I were able to walk through the campus and not a single person we talked to had anything less than total respect for Dr. Higgs, and after meeting the man myself, I understand why. He is the kind of man that you can tell has great intelligence but does not impose that intelligence upon you.

I was terribly nervous as we went into the conference room to start and had to try very hard not to throw up on his shoes! We started talking about how he first came to the United States, leaving his home in the UK. He had only been working at the Pat Robert's Biosecurity Research Institute (BRI) Level 3 facility on K-State's campus for about four weeks when I interviewed him (in September 2011).



There are many layers of security to this building, and each layer has its own level of clearance and set of training that one must go through before even entering that area. I was shocked to learn that a man that who had dedicated his whole life to science, has had years of training and experience, earned a Ph.D. and had worked at several different Level 3 and 4 facilities for many years before coming to K-State, still after four weeks had not yet received his clearance to work in the highest clearance levels of the facility. This put the human security measures of the new K-State level 3 Biosecurity Research Institute facility into perspective for me. The building itself is designed for security. Even the air leaving the facility is filtered before it leaves and the joke is that “the air leaving the facility is much cleaner than when it came in.”



(above) Sarah interviewed Dr. Stephen Higgs.

Everything that enters the building is completely sterilized before it ever leaves. This is the big reason that Plum Island is being moved in the first place. It is over 50 years old and we only have to look and see how far technology has come to realize that some of the safety measures that were put in place at Plum Island are now obsolete. Dr. Higgs explained it as: “You can remodel a house but it will never be up to the standards of modern technology;” and he is right, it is no longer an issue of location but an issue of safety. I will admit that I was very excited to learn more about the place where I might hopefully work someday, but I think the highlight of the whole experience was when Dr. Higgs brought out a picture of himself injecting a mosquito! We had talked earlier about his true passion being with insects, but

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I could never imagine injecting mosquito after mosquito by hand! It was incredibly cool!

The Plum Island facility had to be moved, that was certain, but the question came up as to where. The location for the new NBAF was chosen by K-State's ability to stand out. There are a handful of Level 3 facilities across the United States, but K-State's is the only one with a full meat processing facility. This means that scientists are able to study diseases (such as E. coli) during each of the processing steps, from the living, breathing animal to the steak on the grill. This unique facility was a major draw when deciding the location of the new Level 4 federal facility, which is not yet completed. The purpose of the facility will be to conduct research on animal and plant diseases and also food security and safety. It is



there to prevent any disasters and to combat them if there ever is one.

I'm really not sure what is going to happen in the future, but who can really tell? This interview really made me open my eyes and think carefully about the decisions I have made for my future, for I am the future. Dr. Higgs is incredibly student oriented, and after we were through talking, it really sunk in that my generation is the future, and it is our responsibility to be prepared to take the lead when the time comes, because no one else will.

This day, like the dog-eared page in a book, marked a new beginning for me. I realized that I cannot change what has already been written, that I can only look back over my shoulder for guidance from my past and smile with fond memories as I take that huge step into my future, for there are more stories that have yet to be written. ❁

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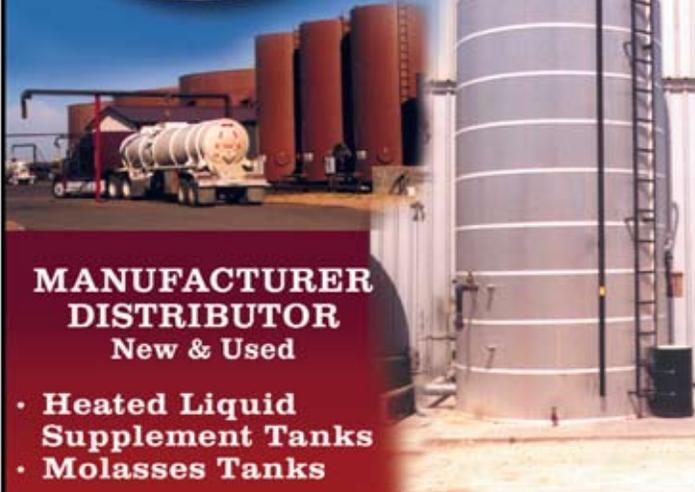
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