Science Societies

Classroom to career: Tina Sullivan

By Dan Linehan

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Tina Sullivan smiles while her team harvests alfalfa plots in Cedar City, UT. Both the small grain and alfalfa projects are vital components of the extensive water optimization research she conducted for her master's and Ph.D.

This month, we launch a new series, Classroom to Career, which spotlights members who began as students and grew into thriving professionals.

Our first installment features member Tina Sullivan, who shares the pivotal experiences and challenges that shaped her career and how being a member of ASA, CSSA, and SSSA helped her make key connections.

Tina Sullivan began expanding the limits of her comfort zone early, at just six years old, as she and her father stood at the side of a southeast Tennessee road selling pumpkins.

“We picked them, and Dad and I went and sat on the corner of the road and all I was told was ‘We’re going to sell pumpkins.’”

“You never know what connections will turn into. You have to build relationships and leave your comfort zone.”

Her youthful pluck would grow, thanks in part to Society membership, into habit. It didn't come naturally. As an introvert, Sullivan had to remind herself of the value in reaching out, in making connections.

"You never know what connections will turn into," she says. But they didn't just happen. "You have to build relationships and leave your comfort zone."

Stepping outside her boundary was not always, well, comfortable. At one Annual Meeting (now called CANVAS), she became so wrapped up in service that she actually missed her own scheduled presentation.

But making those connections, even when it was hard, was worth it. At the Annual Meeting in 2023, Sullivan was walking the exhibit hall when she spotted one of her graduate program committee members, Earl Creech, speaking with a stranger.

Creech was speaking with a Kansas State University graduate student who asked Sullivan how she felt about the Sunflower State. He knew of a few jobs she might be interested in applying for.

Six months later, Sullivan joined Kansas State University as assistant professor and extension agronomist, focusing 80% of her time on extension and 20% on research.

"Everything I had done worked up to that moment," she says; her relentless volunteering with Society committees, her Annual Meeting explorations, her graduate work—and probably the goats.

Two tough kids

When she was a girl, Sullivan's family operated a farm for meat goats. She enjoyed caring for them and wanted to be a veterinarian. But only for goats.



Tina Sullivan holds Dava, a beloved goat. She grew up on a farm where her family raised meat goats, which originally led her to consider a career as a veterinarian.

"And if it wasn't goats, I wasn't going to do it," she says. She eventually did decide on an alternative career path, but she still loved her goats. When she was in high school, a goat named Caramel had triplets. One of the three was small and ignored by the mother—not good.

But the goat was still alert that evening, so Tina tucked the baby into her Carhartt jacket and took it to buy some colostrum, crucial for newborn kids. Dava Boo became a house goat and would go on to thrive—and make an appearance in her high school yearbook.

Dava Boo was one of Sullivan's many lessons in solving new problems by making quick decisions. This kind of resourcefulness would give her new opportunities, both for herself and those around her.

Tina would go on to graduate valedictorian and attend the University of Tennessee at Martin thanks to undergraduate scholarships from the Tennessee FFA. Advisers told her engineering would be her best path, and she majored in agricultural engineering.

Then life threw another curve ball. Her mother had thyroid cancer.

Path to grad school

Sullivan's priorities shifted, and she took a job close to home with an agricultural co-op after she earned her degree.



Tina Sullivan marks the center of the plots during a small grain harvest in Cedar City, UT. This work was part of the water optimization trial for her graduate degrees, focusing on irrigation technology, rate, and crop type.

Training to be a manager behind the front desk, Sullivan fielded questions about feed prices and seed varieties as well as those of a more personal nature.

"I'd constantly be asked where I was from because I didn't sound like them. I grew up in Bledsoe County, but they'd ask who I'm married to and 'Who is your dad?'" she recalls.

Though the job didn't stick, it provided Sullivan's introduction to the Societies as the co-op paid for her to become a Certified Crop Adviser, a program of the American Society of Agronomy.

Her mother recovered from her cancer surgery, and Sullivan began cold-emailing graduate programs. She focused on those that worked with the tomatoes, bell peppers, and other vegetables she grew up alongside.

Often, the research wasn't a good fit—"I didn't want to study pigweed for the rest of my life"—but she soon found a match in Utah State University.

It was thanks to her adviser, Dr. Matt Yost, that Sullivan became a member of the American Society of Agronomy (ASA), Crop Science Society of America (CSSA), and Soil Science Society of America (SSSA). But getting the full benefits out of membership means putting yourself in, and this was just how Sullivan was built.

Making the most of membership

Membership was far more than a box to check. It was a vehicle to serve, to be helpful, and to meet people. Soon, she was applying to join committees, such as the Graduate Student Committee, where she served three years. She spent much of her time there helping to craft meaningful experiences for fellow grad students at the Annual Meeting.

She would go on to sit on a dozen committees and other groups, including on the board of directors for CSSA. That might sound like a natural volunteer's attitude, but it often took a force of will to step out of her shell.

"You just have to do it sometimes," she says, "you have to pull the band-aid off. It's gonna hurt for a hot second, but then it's over with."

Her work with the Societies has given her many opportunities for informal mentorship. Often, the perennial topic of job hunts comes up. It's "less intimidating" to hear job interview advice from a peer than a graduate adviser, she says.

Maximizing her time at CANVAS, has been another priority.

"I've never used the Societies or CANVAS as the platform to talk about my presentation for 15 minutes and then never talk again," she says. She'll hop from session to session, picking topics she's interested in. Or she'll walk the poster exhibits, browsing hundreds of

research projects. When serendipity strikes, it's due to effort, not mere chance.

Membership was far more than a box to check [for Tina Sullivan]. It was a vehicle to serve, to be helpful, and to meet people.

In an era of digital communication, Sullivan doesn't overlook the value of face-to-face conversation.

Sometimes, we rely too much on the device in our pocket," she says.

Perhaps most of all, what membership provides her is practice at a set of often-ignored but invaluable skills.

Sullivan gets asked about how she's become such a good communicator. Timid by nature, she had to practice and refine these skills, just like any other.

"I would not be a good communicator if I didn't practice," she says.

From a young age, Sullivan was again and again put into situations where there was no background to fade into. Her church choir had three people where she and a schoolmate were two of the three.

And then there were the goats and the roadside pumpkins. That memory stands out more because it was quality time with her father, who would pass away less than a year later. It was one more reason she had to grow up fast.

Her ability to step beyond the familiar has also unlocked the value of membership in the Societies. By staying curious and making the most of every connection, she found not only a career, but chances to give back, just like she learned back home.

More Classroom to Career

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