

Steven Brockshus / “Everlasting Impact”

I’m a farm kid and proud to be from the country! Great to see we’ve got some country folks in the room. Now, I love all people – so I want to give everyone a chance to hoot-n-hollar and show their pride; if you’re from a small town, suburbia or the city and proud of it – make some noise!

We’ve got a lot of different types of people here today – and on the outside, we’re all very different. This year, I’ve met FFA members from all walks of life – from the incredible mountain and salt life people of North Carolina, to folks as hip-hop as all get out in California, to bayou-loving swamp-dwellers of Louisiana... the fact of the matter is – we’re all different. We come from different places, look different, act different – and that’s OK. But what if we’re actually more alike than what we think? Check it out.

I’ve drawn this nice little scale. This end is us – aren’t we cute – and on the other end of the scale is anyone who is different than us. For example, if you’re a farm kid – then this is a city kid. If you’re popular, then this person is not popular. Different people. Different ends of the scale. This is how our brain works.

Our mind begins to play the comparison game. Let’s say this is you and they are someone who you think has a much better life than you.

You think their life is so good because making friends comes easy to them. They can afford nice clothes. People like their

Facebook posts. They're athletic. Never get nervous. They've got their whole life together.

We tell ourselves that we wish our life was like theirs.

Now look at our end of the scale: we tell ourselves, I'm awkward, I don't fit in, I can't afford name brand clothing. I try – but I'm still not good at anything; not sports, not music or FFA. No one even likes my Instagram posts. Sometimes, I feel worthless.

Have you been here before?

I have. In high school, I would find myself at home on a Friday night by myself. I would wonder – where did I go wrong? Why does nobody like me? My parents would fight, my girlfriend broke up with me, things I thought I had control over – I actually had no power over at all. I thought, if I could just be more like them, that person on the other end of the scale – my life would be better.

Have you ever thought, if I was just a little more like them, if I had more money, if I was funnier – smarter – prettier – everything would be better?

You see – looking at the scale, we see that other person's best and we see our worst... and it's not pretty, not fun, not fair. But let's take a look at it a little bit differently.

This person, who we compare ourselves against... they've got struggles too. This year I've met people just like you and me

who have lacked confidence. People who have a lot of friends, but struggle to build deep relationships. People whose family life is rough, who feel pressured to keep going out for volleyball, run for chapter office or tryout for the school play because they're good at it – not because they actually enjoy it.

That person who at times seems perfect, that person who we wish we were more like... maybe their life isn't all that it seems on the outside.

You see, no one is perfect. That includes you and me. But through it all, you've got some positive things going for ya.

You're in the FFA. I don't care what people say, you are smart. You are beautiful. You have the potential to do great things. You've been blessed with the opportunity to go to school and get an education. Someone believed in you enough to say, you're worth wearing that blue jacket and today – you're sitting at the largest youth-led conference in the country proudly wearing one.

You see, logically speaking, if we take all these things, on both ends of the scale and average them out – if we stop comparing their best to our worst and start looking at the big picture – we're actually a lot closer than we think.

So I ask you – who do you compare yourself against? Who's life do you wish yours was more like? Who do you not give the time of day, because they're so different – they're so far on the other end of the scale that you think, "I've nothing in common with you?"

Truth is, I'm guilty of it too... for unknowingly just passing by people because of how they look or what they wear. I, Steven Brockshus, am guilty of comparing myself with others – because, in the past – I've envied the life that others had.

But you see... looking at this scale – I realize something. Surprisingly – we are more alike on the inside than we are on the outside.

Travelling around the country, I've seen things this year that I can't un-see – had experiences that have rocked me to the core. Words can't express what it's like to sit and cry with a member in Colorado, because her parents got divorced and she feels torn, being pulled both ways. Or what it's like to sit and cry with a member in Idaho whose father forced her to run for chapter office – even though she didn't want to. Or sit and cry with a member in Iowa who is struggling with their sexuality, in Ohio who is struggling with their faith, in Oregon who is struggling with trust, in Maryland who's fighting with their friends... it doesn't matter what we look like on the outside – words cannot possibly express how – at the core of who we are as human beings – how similar we are on inside.

Wake up. Open our eyes. Deep down, with every fiber of our being – each of us is the same... each of us needs to love and to be loved.

Now, I'm not talking about the fluffy kind of love – like I love hotdogs or I love Disney movies, no – no, it's much more than that.

According to ancient Greek – there are actually four types of love: Storge love means affection, or “putting up with,” like I love my dog after he have peed on my couch or messed all over the place.

Phila love is that general love and is probably the most widely used in our American vocabulary. This is, “I love football, I love strawberry milk, I absolutely love the movie Frozen.” That’s Philia love.

Eros love, on the other hand, is romance and emotion with absolutely no logic. If your heart flutters as you see that cute guy or girl walk across the cafeteria at school... then the next week you see them and you think to yourself – man, oofta! What was I thinking? That’s eros love.

Now, we’re not going to talk about those types of love; the love we’re going to focus on is a deeper sense of true, unconditional love. And that’s agape love.

Agape love is selfless; it gives and expects nothing in return. It’s the love we see when someone leaves a kind note for their teacher, the love a parent has for their new-born child, the love a friend shows when they help you, even though their plate is already full. The question is, how can we shape our hearts to automatically express this, Agape love?

Growing up, I’m convinced that each person has a childhood superhero. Someone who shapes our thoughts and beliefs – and for me, my superhero was my Dad.

It drove my mom crazy dressing me in the morning – because I always had to wear the same cowboy boots, Wrangler jeans and plaid button-up shirt, just like my hero. Chores took Dad a lot longer, because I was always nipping at his heels, asking if I could drive the tractor, or carry extra buckets for him... But that's alright, because as a six year old, I loved my daddy and while I didn't do anything to deserve it – my daddy loved me too.

Think about your childhood hero – someone you idolized. Maybe it's your Mother or Father, like me... or that high school varsity basketball or volleyball player. Maybe it was your crazy uncle or your Ag teacher and you thought, “man, when I grow up – I want to be just like them.” Got it? Now think of the moment you realized your childhood hero is just a normal person – someone who has qualities that make them great and qualities that make them human.

For me, I realized this about my Dad at the dinner table when I was 15. You see, the dinner table is a place that makes my heart smile... it's the place my family would gather every Sunday after church to have Mom's delicious homemade chicken and rice, the place we would stay up late into the night playing Risk or Monopoly... It's also the place I first felt tension in the air as my parents wouldn't look each other in the eye. The place where my Mother told us she was moving out, because my Father, my super hero – after 15 years of marriage and raising four kids – no longer loved her. See, I thought that was a pretty bold statement, because if after 15 years he didn't need her – then I

guess that meant he didn't need me either. That night – my world came crashing down.

Mom moved out. Things between my Dad and I were rough. I didn't want to talk with him. No, actually – I did, but I couldn't bring myself to, because of... because of what!? The hurt he caused me, the pain he caused my mother – my family. There was this anger wrapped up inside me and I couldn't... it was a pain I couldn't let go.

Time passed by. My parents worked hard to mend the wounds. They went to marriage counselling. My father finally righted his wrongs. Mom moved back into the house. The fighting lessened. It was difficult, but after a long trek, my parents were once again – happy. A year went by, two years, three years – I was in college. I'd come home and their love for each other was stronger and deeper than ever before. And it showed...

Time out – on a side note, I don't know if your parents do this thing where they hold hands in public or kiss each other in the kitchen – but it is disgusting. Parents in the room – if you ever show a public display of affection in front of your children – you are making their life miserable... please – just stop. Alright, that's my rant... time in.

One night we're sitting in the living room – watching a movie. They were on the 'love seat,' holding hands – being all lovey-dovey like parents do. I'm on the couch – dreaming of the day that, by-golly, I'll actually get to hold a girls hand... and it hit me. For them, things were once again great.

But something deep inside me started welling up. Something saying this isn't right. I felt this anger, this frustration, this pain towards my 'super hero.' He had wronged my mother, had wronged me, my family... and them just sitting over there, like nothing had happened, it wasn't right! I wanted to scream – to hide – to get as far away from the situation as possible.

One night I was in my room, pretty emotional and, I just didn't understand... My mother came in – wrapped her arms tightly around me and in that moment, I realized something. This burden I feel, this cage I'm trapped in... the ball and chain – dragging behind me, the pain... my Mother had none of it.

The woman who had every right to be upset at the brokenness of her ideal marriage, she only feels – love... How can this be!?

She was exhibiting one aspect of pure, Agape love – she said, "I'm not going to let my past dictate my future," and did the one thing in her power to free herself of the hurt and pain – my Mother forgave.

Forgiveness... how does that make sense? Well – logically, it doesn't. It makes absolutely no sense. Why would my Mother forgive him? Why should I forgive my Father for the pain he caused? Why should anyone ever forgive?

When you withhold forgiveness, like I experienced first-hand, you suffer more than the person who hurt you. You feel bitterness, you feel un-easy, it affects your everyday life.

So what pain are you holding on to? Is it your parent's broken marriage; a surprise divorce? Maybe it's who bully that made your freshman year unbearable, or overbearing parents... your friend who said something that crossed the line. Someone calling you fat, ugly, saying you're not beautiful, your teacher saying you're not good enough...

You see, we must face our past – the hurt, the lies, the broken and busted up things inside of us – like my mother was able to do. Your past isn't your past if it's still affecting the present.

Forgiveness is not pretending it never happened; it's not excusing the behavior that caused you so much pain... Truth is, forgiveness is straight-up hard. It's giving without expecting anything in return. Forgiveness is Agape love – and that's not easy.

We must forgive. So what are the benefits of it?

To answer this question, I turned to my friends on Facebook, including many of you – and here's what you said:

Forgiveness is a weight lifted, friendship renewed, peace of mind. When you forgive, you're able to breathe – it's a relief from anger, from guilt. Forgiveness keeps love strong... When we forgive, we receive a freedom and a love that is much deeper than anything we've been able to experience.

You see, it's OK to not be OK. When we realize no one's perfect, we're truly able to forgive. When we're able to forgive – then, and only then, can we truly start to love.

My freshman year of college, my great-grandma B, who was 87 years old and I were pen pals. We would write back and forth sharing what was going on in our lives... I told her about being an officer in FFA and she told me about being president of her 4-H club ‘back in the day.’

The last letter I sent to grandma was just before college got out for summer. A couple of days later – I got a call from my Dad, saying great-grandma B passed away – but it was in an uplifting kind of way, if that’s possible. You see, grandma could feel her heart beating fast and her breath getting short and, I don’t understand exactly how it works – but she knew it was her time.

So she called up the ambulance and as they were waiting, my grandpa was standing there and great-grandma B was really concerned. Not because she was going to the hospital to die, but because this was May and our family has a lot of May birthdays. Right before the ambulance loaded her up, she told my grandpa, “there’s a stack of cards on the commode, \$20 bills in my purse – stuff the letters, get em sent – I’ll see you at home.”

My grandma is crazy – she’s on her deathbed and she’s more concerned about getting those letters sent than she was her own life.

Great-grandma B knew she wasn’t gonna have another day on this Earth – yet she chose to give one last thing to the people she loved most, knowing she would gain absolutely nothing in return. That’s Agape love.

So I dare to ask the question: how do you express Agape love for people in your life? Make an excuse to insert yourself into someone's life when they're having a bad day. Strike up a conversation with someone you've never given the time... maybe it's a janitor, school cook, kid that sits by themselves or person you've envied all year. Listen, speak, share, pray, promise, forgive and embrace others for who they are.

Do you see the big picture? When we truly understand life isn't about ourselves, it's about others – we look at that scale and see we're standing right next to people we thought were so different from ... and at that moment – we are capable of forgiving and we are capable of loving others for who they are... that's Agape love.

You know...great-grandma B passed away on that ride to the hospital, college ended, a few months passed by and I received a letter in the mail that was forwarded from school...

As I tore open the side of the envelope and pulled out the letter, I choked up as I saw the eloquent, familiar cursive handwriting of my great-grandma B. It's like she was still here...

In FFA, we pride ourselves on leadership and when you boil it down, leadership is influence. And if we want to have premier leadership – we must create a premier influence that lasts long past our lifetime, just like my great-grandma B. We must create an everlasting impact.

So what's your great-grandma B moment? What will you do today that will impact tomorrow?

I envision a world where we all love each other for who we are. Humble yourself to realize no-one's perfect. It doesn't matter whether you're sitting in those chairs or standing on this stage... we all make mistakes – we're all broken and busted up on the inside. Close the gap on that scale. Stop comparing, start embracing. Don't be a super hero, simply be human. Embrace different. Be real. Forgive yourself. Forgive others. Love people for their core values, not their core failures. Embrace others not because they deserve it, but because they need it. Love others in a way that long outlasts your life.

FFA members, advisors, parents and guests... ya'll are my friends... and when we have a deep, steadfast love for others – just like you've shown me for the past 365 days – we will create an impact that long outlasts our life.

Stop judging. Start forgiving. Love unconditionally and create an everlasting impact.

Thank you and God bless.

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