

Travelin' Man

First Hispanic national FFA officer sees globe, tries to break stereotypes

By Kimberly Sweet

Staff writer

For the past year, UNL freshman Jose Santiago has known home to be a hotel room.

As one of six national officers of the FFA organization, formerly known as the Future Farmers of America, Santiago visited nine countries during his yearlong tenure, which ended in November.

He spent 280 days of the last year in airports.

While touring Japan, he met with the presidents of the Toyota and Mitsubishi car companies.

When he was in Washington, D.C., he shook hands and talked with the president of the United States.

But amid all the grandeur of traveling across the globe and meeting with dozens of dignitaries, the first thing Santiago mentions when you ask him about his trip is the portion of the 100,000 miles he logged that included America.

The Puerto Rican native left his home for the first time to come to college at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln so he could learn English and take advantage of its top agriculture program.

He wanted to learn the language so he could run for the office of Southern Region vice president – the position that represents Puerto Rico and the southern part of the United States.

After being appointed to the office late in 1998 and spending a year being an ambassador to the 450,000 FFA members across America, Santiago said his greatest experience was learning about what it means to be an American.

He brags about being in the stands for the Kentucky Derby, as well as the Indianapolis 500.

He talks about meeting NASCAR Winston Cup Series winner Jeff Gordon.

And to top it all off, he and his fellow officers talked to President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore when they were guests at the White House.

Shaking hands with the president and talking with him about economics, the role of government and the outlook for youth in America meant a lot to Santiago.

"It's pretty amazing for a little guy from Puerto Rico who has never seen what America is all about," Santiago said.

Of course, Santiago's

duties included more than sight-seeing.

Along with giving workshops to students across the country, Santiago and other executive FFA board members met with leaders throughout the agriculture industry.

Santiago said the post gave him a chance to ask agriculture industry leaders the pressing questions facing many youths considering going into agriculture or related jobs.

The future of family farms and the effects of biotechnology were two of Santiago's biggest concerns, he said.

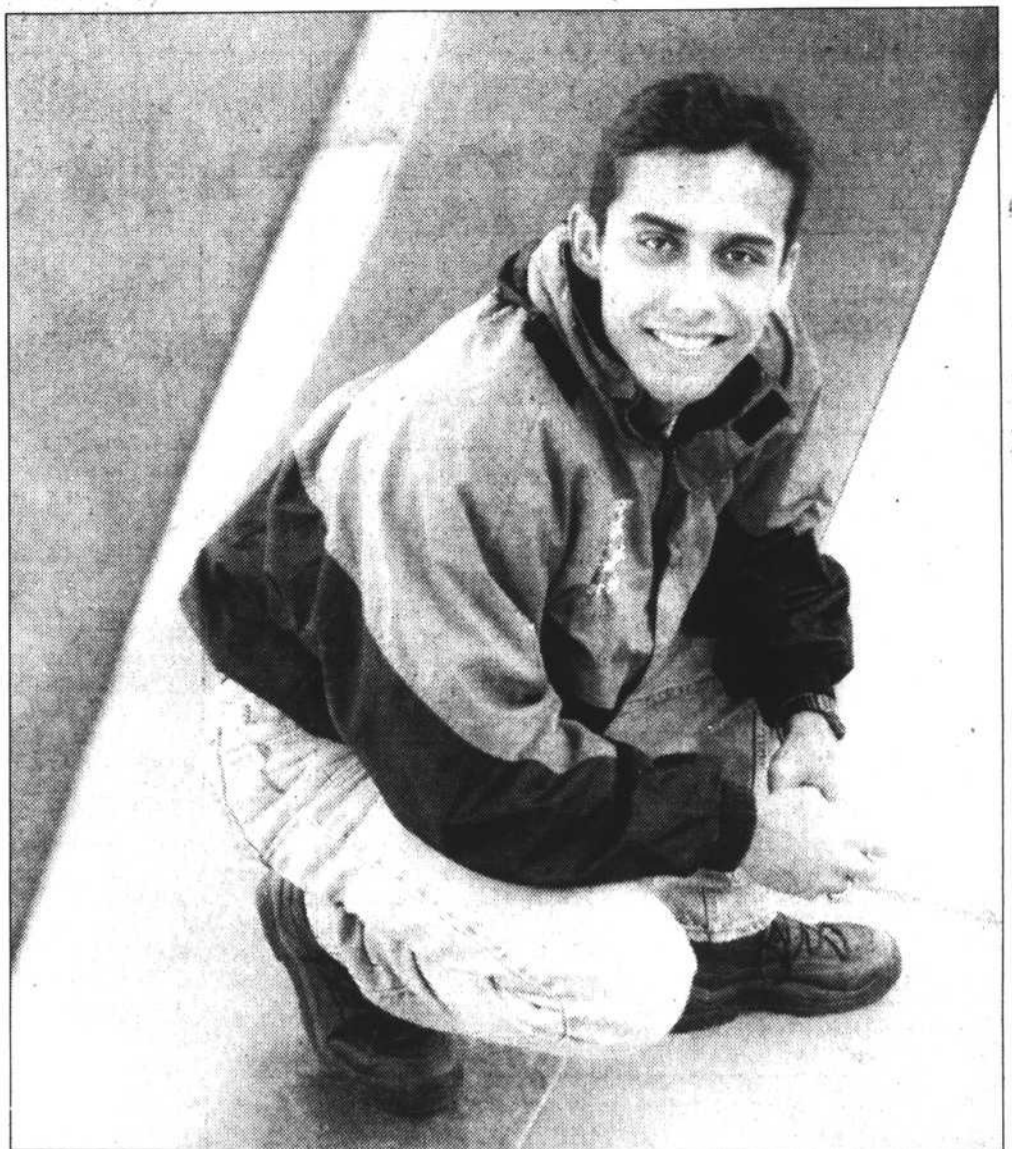
But Santiago said industry leaders assured him and the other national officers they would do everything possible to help farmers.

"(Industry leaders) are trying to educate the public," Santiago said. "They want to change things and create good results."

Santiago said he was happy to talk to industry leaders about issues important to FFA members.

But he said his larger goal for the office was also met.

"I tried to change the stereotypes of people," Santiago said. "I wanted to show that it doesn't matter what you do or what language you speak."



Nate Wagner/DN

JOSE SANTIAGO has visited 40 states and nine countries as one of six national officers chosen to represent the national FFA organization in 1999. He was the first person from Puerto Rico or any territory to be a national officer of the FFA organization. While in Japan, which he said was his favorite of the nine countries he visited, Santiago learned the phrase "gombate," meaning "Do your best."

"The most important thing is the desire to do it."

Phil Erdman, a fellow FFA member and Santiago's friend, said Santiago's contributions as the first Hispanic national officer were important.

"Not only has he made an impact on high-school and college-aged students," Erdman said. "I would say he has made a really big impact on the national advisers and the state advisers in the organization."

Being from a small farm in Puerto Rico gave Santiago a different perspective from other national officers,

Erdman said.

Santiago admits the obstacles he had to face to become the first Hispanic national officer in the 72-year history of the FFA organization were big.

Leaving his family in Puerto Rico, learning a new language and attempting to break the stereotypes present in the industry and the organization were challenges, he said.

But now that he has successfully completed the task, he is going to try to succeed in the classroom for the next few years while pondering the way

to fulfill his next big goal: becoming the governor of Puerto Rico.

Santiago said his newest goal is a result of his year of trying to represent and help the people of his home territory.

"I want to help the people back home," he said. "I want to make (Puerto Rico) a better place to live."

Erdman said he has no doubts that Santiago's next goal could be just as realistic as his last one.

"If he wanted to go back to Puerto Rico and be governor, he has the ability to do that."

McNamara, Kerrey speak about Vietnam

MCNAMARA from page 1

Poughkeepsie, N.Y. – McNamara is the co-author of the recent book "Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy."

The book grew out of a dialogue among policy-makers and scholars from the United States and Vietnam.

The Vietnam War claimed the lives of 58,000 U.S. soldiers and about 3.8 million Vietnamese – appalling losses that must not be repeated in the 21st century, McNamara said.

Despite the carnage, he said, each side achieved its primary objectives. Vietnam was reunited and gained its independence, and the United States prevented further communist expansion in Asia.

"Ironically, each of us achieved our geopolitical objectives," he said. "This led me to a hypothesis: Each of us could have avoided the war or terminated it earlier without changing the geopolitical outcome."

McNamara now believes both the United States and North Vietnam, plagued by mutual misunderstanding, missed several opportunities to avoid or shorten a tragic war.

For example, he writes in the book, both sides missed chances to create a neutral coalition government

in South Vietnam or to reach a peace agreement in the mid- to late-1960s rather than escalating the war.

"Our mutual ignorance was mind-boggling," he said. "That was the origin of the conflict. We didn't understand each other."

While seeking to prevent the fall of Asian "dominoes" to communism, McNamara said, the United States failed to understand that Ho Chi Minh and his North Vietnamese regime were nationalists first, communists second.

But North Vietnam mistakenly viewed the United States as a new colonialist power seeking domination in Indochina and missed its own chances to avert a catastrophic war, he said.

The United States should learn several lessons from the Vietnam War, McNamara said.

Leaders should use high-level contacts to communicate their views more clearly to adversaries, recognize that certain problems cannot be solved by military force and "never use our economic, political or military power unilaterally," he said.

"I hope what we learn will permit us to have more caution as we enter the 21st century, so we can make it less tragic," he said.

While Kerrey applauded

McNamara's efforts, he disagreed with many of the former defense secretary's conclusions.

"Simply put, our objectives were in such contradiction with those of North Vietnam that it is highly unlikely either side could have achieved its objectives without loss of life," he said.

Had the United States sought merely a geopolitical outcome – preventing the fall of South Vietnam to communism – it could have achieved that objective through a neutral coalition government, Kerrey said.

But, he said, those who conclude that the war was "wrong, terribly wrong" ignore that the United States was fighting for something that went beyond its own self-interest: freedom for the people of South Vietnam and surrounding countries in Asia.

The U.S. effort in Vietnam helped countries like Thailand and the Philippines resist communism, Kerrey said.

In contrast, he said, the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973 left the Vietnamese people under a dictatorship that has denied them basic rights, such as freedom of speech and of the press.

"It's easy to look at 58,000 names on a wall and conclude the war was not worth the loss," he said. "It's not

easy to quantify the fight for freedom."

Kerrey said the United States should not conclude, based on its experiences in Vietnam, that it should never fight for the freedom of people who live under dictatorships – as in Iraq or Yugoslavia.

Only by continuing to provide world leadership – unilaterally if necessary – can the United States encourage the spread of political freedom and democracy, which are essential to

humanity's well-being, Kerrey said.

"Thirty years ago, I was not sure of the worth of my effort in Vietnam," he said. "But in the 30 years since, I have seen that one of the most noble characteristics of the American people is the desire to spread the promise of freedom and democracy throughout the world."

"The lesson I take from Vietnam is that the fight for freedom, though it often has terrible costs, is the highest value of all."

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