

The Herbert Hoover Uncommon Student Program

A Parent's Perspective

By Carol Balvanz

Mother of Casey Balvanz, USA Class of 2004

My daughter, Casey, was selected as a Hoover Uncommon Student in 2004. Like most juniors in high school, Casey was thinking about a career path, but her chosen path at that point – becoming a large animal veterinarian—seemed like a pretty long road ahead. Her dad and I were hoping she would and could succeed, but also wanted to allow her the space to change her mind.

We encouraged her to get involved in the Hoover program to see whether she was really willing to work toward her passion of animal care. She decided she wanted to share baby farm animals with the local pre-school as a service project. However, once she saw how the children reacted to the animals, she extended the project to put together a picture book about children's interactions with animals to share with a wider audience. Publishing and distributing the book became the focus of her project. She had lots of fun visiting pre-schools around Hardin County, sharing both her baby animals and copies of her book.

On May 9, 2009, Casey graduated from Iowa State University with a major in animal science, and an acceptance letter to the ISU College of Veterinary Medicine for the Class of 2013. Looking back, I think her participation in the Hoover Uncommon Student Project was the beginning of her believing that she really could reach her goal of becoming a veterinarian.

Hubbard Radcliffe is a small rural school, and Casey's class numbered only 35. She had always been a good student, but wasn't sure she could compete outside the shelter of small town Iowa. Developing her project and her presentation forced her to think about communicating with a wider audience and allowed her to really discover and display her passion for animal care—which may have seemed exaggerated or hokey within her own hometown. Once she met the other Hoover class members during the June event, she was a little intimidated. But she came home with the idea that she would have to put something special together in order to measure up to the Hoover standards.

At some point between the June and October Hoover sessions, I think Casey gained the confidence to believe that she could actually succeed in veterinary school. In working on her project, she started to uncover her own special skills with both people and animals, learning to share them in new ways. She'd always been the "girl who has all the animals." This project gave her the opportunity to become the "girl who has passion and expertise with animals." She was no longer just a hick farm girl in boots, but was recognized by an outside audience for her knowledge and ability that could someday translate into a respected career. During her work with her Hoover project, Casey's confidence in her ambitions took root.

I think I saw this most clearly in Casey's final presentation. Her first inclination had been to put together a Power-point, simply outlining the steps she took in sharing the animals and then

publishing and distributing the book. At some point she realized that a Power-point shown with the lights off really reduced her ability to share the passion and joy she found in her project.

She ended up creating a poster-sized version of her picture book, putting it on an easel and simply talking with the audience about her experiences. Every once in awhile she'd turn a page and let the audience share some of the pictures of the kids with animals. Her personality became an integral part of the presentation—and she was able to connect with her audience—and even make them laugh once or twice. She didn't use a script. But she knew the points she wanted to make. I think it was the first time she realized that if you're really involved in an issue, you can speak from the heart and have a far greater impact on an audience.

The Herbert Hoover Uncommon Student project pushed my daughter out of her comfort zone of small town Iowa and challenged her to pursue a project she could get excited about. In her case, it turned out to be a project that solidified her career goals. Up until that point, she was going through the motions, and telling people she wanted to become a veterinarian was only words. The Hoover project required her to test her passion and commitment, and to share it with strangers. I think it was a real turning point for Casey. I hope it will be for your children as well.