May 3, 2017

The team’s goal now is to raise the remaining $8,000 of the total $19,000 cost of the nine-day trip through The Netherlands and Belgium, scheduled for June 15-24.

Among the planned stops are a number of commercial and private family growers, along with the largest landscape garden design business in Belgium and the world’s largest flower market.

They will also witness first-hand production of perennials, hydrangea, cut lilies, orchids, pine berry, leek and salad greens, azaleas, rhododendrons, tomatoes, amaryllis and other bulbs.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime educational opportunity,” said Birkenberger, an Agriscience and Technology Teacher at Nonnewaug High School in Woodbury and the team’s coach and advisor. “I truly believe that success in life is largely influenced by putting oneself in situations that provide unique opportunities and then taking advantage of those opportunities.”

Team member Courtney Gibson said she is particularly looking forward to visiting large-scale cut flower producers and Berryworld, an attraction that breeds novelty berries and fruits.

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“This trip is going to be an amazing opportunity to tour the best parts of the horticulture industry,” said Gibson, of Southbury, who has been accepted into Cornell University, where she will study plant genetics and research.

Catherine Dunham from Woodbury is planning to attend Shenandoah University for a fast-track, six-year Doctor of Pharmacy program that will enable her to become a clinical pharmacist with a specialty in herbal remedies.

“I am really excited to see other countries’ ways of growing plants and their greenhouses,” she said. “This trip will be an amazing experience for me to expand my knowledge and see the many other ways plants are produced.”

Elizabeth Nielsen, also of Woodbury, is attending Liberty University in Virginia for two years before transferring to UCONN to complete her degree in Agricultural Education in preparation to teach high school Ag Science.

A fourth member of the team, Shannon Goggins, will not be making the trip. She plans to attend Texas A&M University to become an emergency care veterinarian.

Birkenberger said the team will make a presentation about the trip to students at Nonnewaug sometime after returning, and he plans to use the experience in his classroom.

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He is particularly looking forward to bringing the team to the flower auction in Aalsmeer, The Netherlands. It is the world’s largest flower market, where nearly 40 million flowers go to auction every day.

More than 3.7 billion roses and 1.7 billion tulips are among the 12.5 billion flowers and plants sold there each year.

Birkenberger has included the highly-automated Aalsmeer auction in his curriculum for years due to its significance in the worldwide chain of distribution.

“I love high tech-plant production and new innovations,” he said. “I want to be able to see and learn as much as I can so that I can use that information to make my students leaders and more competitive in the horticulture industry.”

He said the team’s success is based on their commitment to working not just on their horticulture skills, but also focusing on teamwork and communication.

“They know that being on this team will make them better prepared for their future, no matter what career they pursued,” he said. “Even the preparation for this trip, planning and fundraising, has taught us a great deal. That in itself is an educational experience.”

Donation checks to defray cost of the trip can be made out to Woodbury FFA Alumni and sent to Eric Birkenberger, 5 Minortown Rd, Woodbury CT 06798.
Above: The world’s largest flower and plant auction in Aalsmeer, The Netherlands, which the Woodbury FFA Floriculture Team will visit in June.

Page 1 right: (L to R) Team advisor Eric Birkenberger, Catherine Dunham, Courtney Gibson, Shannon Goggin and Elizabeth Nielsen. Page 1 left: Team members at the state horticulture competition held at UCONN in November 2015, when they qualified for the 2016 national finals in Indianapolis.

Below: A photo of peach orchards at Bishop’s Orchards in Guilford posted on social media with the hashtag #CTGrown and the caption: “Looking south with Long Island Sound in the background. Everything is in full bloom at Bishop’s Orchards Farm Market! You can see color differences in the blossoms, based on varieties in our orchards.”