

The A-Maize-ing Race

She teaches teens the value of work, and a whole lot more, in a cornfield.

BY SHARON SELZ

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RENÉE WELSTEAD



Field commander Dawn Buell (in red, with her own seven children) leads an elite team of young corn detassellers.



Cream of the crop squad descends on acres of corn, ready to snatch tassels.



Crack-of-dawn bus ride...



...takes detassellers to job site.



Teens wet their whistles.



Wacky wardrobe wards off sunburn and corn rash.



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Her background as a teacher makes Dawn Buell a natural leader of kids. It's no wonder she dedicates summers to helping them earn their tassels.

"I believe the kids who work for me are the best detassellers in the state of Nebraska," says Dawn, the founder of a unique and aptly named teen-powered business, Not Afraid to Sweat Inc. Based in Lincoln, it specializes in corn detasseling.

The toilsome task, essential to creating hybrid corn seed, is typically done during three weeks in July, mostly by machines. But human hands must pull off any tassels the machines miss.

This will be Dawn's 14th summer of ushering 400 workers, ages 13 to 22, onto buses at 5:30 a.m. and off to fields of towering cornstalks. "The fields range from 15 to 200 acres, and I assign buses according to how many kids are needed," she explains. "It's like being the commander of a small military operation—sending troops out to contain the tassels."

Upon arrival, her plucky armies, in platoons of 35 to 55, divide into groups of four, supervised by an experienced squad leader. From there, it's several hours of reach, grab, pull and drop as the teams walk row by row, seeking and snatching tassels with gloved hands.

"We pull the tassel upward until we hear it pop, which tells us it's detached properly," Dawn says. Tassels are cloaked in green leaves, so crew veterans help newbies learn to spot them.

Detasseling Details

To crossbreed two varieties of corn, growers plant them in the same field. Machines lop off the pollen-bearing tassels of some plants, allowing the other variety to cross-pollinate those plants. This creates hybrid seeds used to grow bigger, more disease-resistant ears.

But machines can't get all the unwanted tassels. Leaving even one in 400 plants can contaminate the entire field. So detassellers walk the targeted rows up to three times, manually pulling off remaining tassels.

A fashionable detasseler generally wears long pants, long sleeves, knee socks, a bandanna and a hat—protection against scratchy corn leaves and intense sun. Heavy dew makes a trash-bag poncho the must-have morning accessory for walking along rows of 6-foot stalks.

"The crews learn how to persevere under tough conditions and have a good time while they do it," Dawn says, noting that they dream up games and such themes as Dress Like a Pirate Day. "Occasionally I'll reward a job well done with a surprise. They love when I order pizzas delivered to the fields."

Detasseling is a first job for many. Depending on experience, teens can earn from \$600 to a hefty \$3,000 for their three weeks. The cash is a big draw, of course, but Dawn says kids return year after year partly for the camp-style camaraderie.

"My own daughters miss crewmates so, they go through withdrawal when the season ends," she says.

Force Field

About 60 of the most experienced qualify for The Force, the A-team that handles Dawn's most challenging assignments. Last year, The Force had 200 years of combined experience—and let nothing slip through their fingers.

Dawn's leadership stresses the importance of giving. "As an incentive, I choose a different charity every year to receive part of our profits," she says. "For every acre we walk during a season, a dollar goes to the cause. Last year we helped buy rice-grinding machines for a village in India."

Not Afraid to Sweat has taught Dawn, who's been invited to the kids' graduations and weddings, some important things, too.

"I'm very grateful for the chance to watch these kids grow up before my eyes," she says. "Seeing them work so hard renews my faith in our youth. Our future is in very good hands." 🙌

Interested in Dawn's detasseling company? Visit her website, notafraidtosweat.com.



Many hands make for lighthearted work. Dawn and her tenacious crew flash ear-to-ear grins as they celebrate amid rows of tassel-free corn.



"Four years of detasseling? The price of my first car. The respect and admiration I earned for life? *Priceless!*" — DAVID K.



CORN TASSEL: WINTROP BROOKHOUSE / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM