

## **Failing at attracting young talent? Steal some notes from Texas florists.**

BY MARY WESTBROOK

# **MOST LIKELY TO SUCCEED**

Growing up on a farm in Texas, Ashton Lucas always figured she'd do something related to agriculture. But it wasn't until she was a sophomore in high school that she considered the idea of being a retail florist. That's the year she started taking floral design, taught by Shana Brittain, a Texas Master Florist and longtime high school teacher.

"I'd never heard of horticulture or floral design until I had Mrs. Brittain as a teacher," Lucas said. But once she started taking courses, she was hooked, thanks in large part to Brittain's enthusiastic instruction. "Her passion for the subject shined through," said Lucas, now a senior at Texas A&M University, majoring in horticulture and minoring in agriculture economics.





**A WILL AND A WAY** Pat Shirley-Becker, AIFD, TMFA, a co-chair of TSFA's education committee, and TSFA Executive Director Dianna Doss Nordman, AAF, outside of Manor High School in Manor, Texas, one of the many schools in Texas using the new TSFA curriculum and ongoing leadership in floral design education.

DARREN CARROLL PHOTOGRAPHY

Today, if you ask Lucas about her future plans, she talks about the possibility of running her own shop one day — and not in the “golly, wouldn’t it be fun to be a florist” kind of way the uninitiated (your disillusioned dentist or lawyer sister-in-law) talk about the business. Lucas can tell you about costs and design skills, as well as information on employee relations and customer service.

An ambitious 21-year-old with real-world experience and proven design skills who understands the realities of the floral industry (long days, hard work and no mega bonuses at year-end) and still wants to jump in? (Shaking your head in disbelief now?) Get ready to

be bowled over. Thanks to an ongoing effort by the Texas State Florists’ Association (TSFA) to build a next generation workforce for industry members in the state, Lucas isn’t an anomaly. In Texas, she’s becoming the norm.

In fact, six years since Lucas set foot in Brittain’s classroom, she’s not only taken a series of design courses, she’s also worked part-time at a local shop and earned Level 1 Floral Design Certification through TSFA, a designation that proves Lucas has mastered a series of design and business skills directly tied to retail floristry.

“Twelve years ago, we came to the realization that we needed to mentor high school students before they

made a career choice and show them the many options the industry has for them,” and in many cases, educate them on what exactly the floral industry is, or that it even exists in the first place, said Dianna Doss Nordman AAF, TSFA’s executive director.

The realization set into motion a series of initiatives involving an alphabet soup of state agencies, mountains of paperwork and hours (and hours) of staff and volunteer time spent learning the intricacies of high school education in Texas, and how the floral industry could not only fit into the school system but become a shining example of how to train students for a viable, rewarding career.



DARREN CARROLL PHOTOGRAPHY



**The rewarding part is seeing success when the students pass the design and written tests. When they complete an arrangement, their eyes light up and the smile is big and wide. When the test is passed, it is ‘OMG!’ and ‘Wow, really?’”**

- Pat Shirley-Becker, AIFD, TMFA



**GET IT RIGHT** TSFA initially planned to reach out only to high school juniors and seniors for its certification efforts. Today, the group also trains floral design teachers, such as Ryan Runnels, left, who in turn bring higher quality education back to students such as Armondo R.

The result? Since 2013 alone, more than 3,000 high school students in Texas have tested for Level 1 design certification through TSFA and scores of teachers in the state's 1,000 school districts now teach design from a professional-based curriculum that TSFA created. Countless more students have been exposed to the floral industry, and all of its intricacies, through design classes.

Through its multilayered efforts, TSFA has created a new generation of employees and employers, and it's helped create a sense of excitement and appreciation for the industry among the country's youngest workers — and consumers.

### Teaching the Teachers

When TSFA started its current outreach to high schools, the plan was straightforward: Begin a certification program for juniors and seniors.

Most students in Texas at that level could already take floral design as an elective course, taught by a vocational education teacher. A certification could give students a competitive advantage once they graduated and entered the workforce — while providing the industry with already trained workers. Win-win, right?

Soon, however, the group faced its first challenge: Few vocational teachers had real floral design experience. In fact, most were juggling multiple courses — teaching farm-related education to welding — and often learning the basics of floral design alongside their students, from online videos or instructional guides that failed to offer adequate support.

"Many teachers had been told by their schools, 'You are teaching floral design, with little warning,'" said Debbie Woltmann, TMFA, of Brenham Floral Co. in Brenham, Texas, and one of four current co-chairs of TSFA's 25-member education committee. "They'd pick up a book, read and start teaching with no skills of their own. [It was the] blind leading the blind."

To provide more students with a high-quality education, TSFA determined it would have to start with the teachers, rather than the students. "We knew we needed to assist teachers who lacked a floral background



**MULTIPLE CHOICES** For more than a decade, TSFA leaders such as Pat Shirley-Becker, AIFD, TMFA (top, left) have worked to make floral design more accessible for both high school students and teachers, including Staci Bartos (top right).

PHOTOS: DARREN CARROLL PHOTOGRAPHY



DARREN CARROLL PHOTOGRAPHY

**KNOWLEDGE BASE** Students like Britten Tedford, who now works at Freytag’s Florist in Austin, receive classroom and hands-on experience. TSFA leaders point out that even students who don’t stay in the industry become more educated consumers.

in teaching hands-on floral design,” Nordman said.

Members of the highly engaged education committee got to work, creating free or low-cost resources, including a PowerPoint presentation, a bevy of guides and how-to sheets, and a series of classes to help bring teachers up to speed. Still, to truly gain traction in the schools and appeal to the teachers, TSFA leaders soon decided they’d have to work *within* the school systems and affiliated organizations.

That often meant hitting the road. For instance, although offering agriculture floral design teachers informal education online and through TSFA events was a great service, making that education eligible, upon approval from the Texas Education Agency, for continuing education credits (or “Career and Technical Education Continuing Professional Education Hours”) would be even better—and critical to the program’s long-term success. (Some school systems in Texas pay for teachers to earn approved credits. Indeed, to stay current, teachers

must take a certain number of these credits throughout their careers.)

To make TSFA training eligible for those professional hours, TSFA had to apply to the Texas Education Agency, the state government agency responsible for the oversight of public primary and secondary education in Texas. After a thorough review of the proposal, the agency approved it.

Around the same time, TSFA also began to reach teachers on the teachers’ turf, and in a way that was convenient for the educators. That meant coordinating with the Vocational Agriculture Teachers Association of Texas, a professional organization for agriculture science teachers and supporters of agriculture education. TSFA members started attending the group’s annual convention and offering training through that association.

### Making Floral Design Mainstream

Investing time to build relationships and a reputation with the Texas

Education Agency and Vocational Agriculture Teachers Association paid off in many ways, Nordman said. Doing so helped the group build credibility among the decision-makers in Texas. “TSFA became the experts,” she said.

That positioning helped the group tackle another challenge around 2010 when TSFA began to advocate for floral design classes to be classified as fine arts credits, rather than electives.

That effort, like so many others associated with the education program, required TSFA members to make their case to state agencies. Pat Shirley-Becker, AIFD, TMFA, an education committee co-chair, testified at a Texas State Board of Education meeting. For this step in the process, TSFA completed a registration form for public testimony with the State Board for Educator Certification.

“This certification is important to the floral industry as it provides qualified high school students entering the field,” Shirley-Becker explained in her testimony. “This is a very ‘hands-on’ profession. Students trained in these

basics have an excellent opportunity for part-time, holiday, or event work during high school and college or as a chosen career in the fields of retail, wholesale, grower or educator."

"That change opened the courses up to younger students," not just juniors and seniors, Nordman said, allowing the group to reach out to students even earlier.

The shift also brought a higher level of prestige to the courses (not "just" electives anymore but core credits) and allowed schools to start offering additional and more advanced design classes. And, ultimately, that was still TSFA's goal: to reach as many students as possible.

"The most challenging part of this process is limited time and resources," Shirley-Becker said. "Finding the teachers in districts and schools, training the teachers, as they have limited time and most have to be taught during their summer vacation. [But the rewarding part] is seeing success when the students pass the design and written tests. When they complete an arrangement, their eyes light up and the smile is big and wide. When the test is passed, it is

'OMG!' and 'Wow, really?'"

Around the same time, TSFA changed the name of the accreditation students can earn from a floral design certificate to Level 1 within the TSFA professional certification ladder. TSFA also now offers Level 2.

### Writing the Book — Literally — on Floral Design

The change to fine arts also created new opportunities last year, when the Texas Education Agency began its routine review of fine arts curricula. TSFA again played a role — and jumped on the chance to improve education even more.

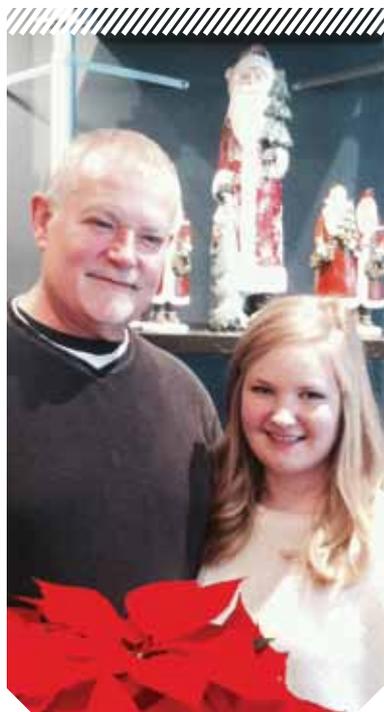
At that point, "teachers still really didn't have affordable, easy access to [official floral design] curriculum," Nordman explained. "But when the Texas Education Agency opened up fine arts for review, we were able to write the teacher's edition curriculum."

Drawing on the skills and experience of six education committee members, including Shana Brittain, the longtime teacher who had experience creating school programming, TSFA built a curriculum that covered design and business components of all segments of the floral

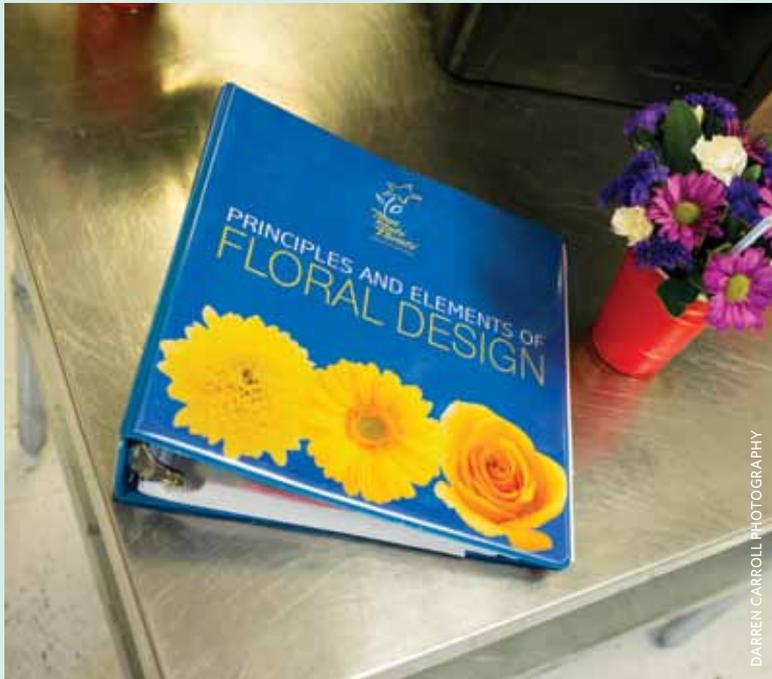


**"Twelve years ago, we came to the realization that we needed to mentor high school students before they made a career choice and show them the many options the industry has for them,"**

- Dianna Doss Nordman, AAF



**HEADS OF THE CLASS** Students trained through the TSFA outreach enter the workforce with practical experience and knowledge. That's a win for students and employers. Pictured, L to R, are Scott Hasty, AIFD, of J Scotts Aflorist in Orange, Texas, with Alaina Morris; Ashton Lucas, now a student at Texas A&M (seated with the school mascot Reveille); and Chad Freytag of Freytag's Florist in Austin, Texas, with Britten Tedford.



## CURRICULUM BUILDERS

When the TSFA education committee created the curriculum for high schools, members wanted to be sure that the information was practical, and easy to understand. They also wanted to ensure it was comprehensive, covering all aspects of life in a retail flower shop but also introducing students to the industry's different segments (including growers and wholesalers). Topics covered include:

- Basic floral design concepts
- Design elements and principles
- Art in floral design
- Evaluating floral design
- The business of design
- Care and handling
- Floral careers and skills
- Flower care and handling
- Flower types
- Arranging — symmetrical triangle and boutonnieres
- Flower arranging tools
- Corsages and boutonnieres
- Hand-tied and spiral bouquets
- Sympathy sprays — standing easel and casket
- Planning a flower event — wedding and special events
- Flower industry careers

By the end of a floral design course, taught through the TSFA curriculum, students should have mastery of:

- Flower and plant names
- Care and handling of flowers
- How to do inventory
- Phone skills
- Counting money and making change
- How to clean up after designing
- Customer relations
- Basic geometric design shapes
- Symmetrical triangle
- Asymmetrical triangle
- Round
- Oblong

How to create body flowers, including:

- Basic boutonnieres
- Wired and taped corsages
- Novelty designs
- Homecoming mums

—M.W.

industry (grower, wholesaler and retailer).

“We wrote and wrote and wrote this curriculum for about a year,” said Brittain, who recently retired from teaching to open her own floral business, Southern Seasons, in Shelbyville, Texas. “We wanted it to be timeless and easy for the teachers to use.”

The final product was rated 100 percent in compliance with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards, which outline what students are to learn in each course or grade. The high compliance rate is unusual — curricula need only a 50 percent rate to become approved — and it impressed even the agency contact tapped to present the group’s work to the larger review board.

“Her supervisor gave her a high five after her presentation,” Nordman said with a laugh.

By working within the system to create the curriculum, TSFA helped raise the overall level of education and ensure a certain measure of consistency among school districts. Perhaps even more important, since the curriculum is state-approved, school districts can now purchase it for teachers.

The curriculum is not a money-maker for TSFA; the group sells copies to the state for \$395 per piece a price that’s significantly lower than that of other similar curricula, which can run thousands of dollars.

“[We] price the curriculum at this attainable price because TSFA wants to provide the proper education to the teachers in a format that is easy to incorporate into classroom projects,” Nordman said.

## Testing Grounds

An important aspect of the TSFA program is the certification process, which is built into the state-approved curriculum.

Students who complete a year-long floral design course and pass a TSFA-approved written exam are then eligible to participate in the hands-on test in a timed setting. Testing takes place online or at one of five locations around Texas in March, April and May. Members of the education committee administer and monitor the test. They also provide detailed feedback to the

students, adding yet another layer of mentoring to the process.

"The students learn so much from that experience alone," Nordman said. "They receive written feedback from the committee members," with information on how to improve or any trouble spots.

That's not to say the testing process is a love fest. "I'm sure some students come into floral design thinking it will be an easy A," said former TSFA President Bruce Easley AAF, TMFA, a member of the education committee. "[We] make the test hard," he said, because the group wants to hold the students to a high professional standard.

As of 2015, students who earn Level 1 certification have the honor designated on their diplomas as a "performance acknowledgment." That's important because it provides one more layer of "official documentation of students' dedication" and sends a strong message to future employers and colleges, Nordman said. "An endorsement on a student's diploma denotes that they have deliberately set out to develop their knowledge more deeply in that subject, and confirms that they have achieved proficiency in that subject according to the state's criteria."

This year, TSFA also launched Level 2 certification, which will provide a pathway for more advanced students to become even more proficient upon graduation.

## Workforce Developed

How are all these multi-layered efforts playing out? If you look at the numbers, pretty darn well.

Last year 1,644 students in Texas tested for TSFA's Level 1 certification. (The percentage of those passing is 68 percent). When those students walk into a flower shop, they'll already have basic design skills and a solid understanding of business practices and the overall industry, Nordman said.

That's something Chad Freytag of Freytag's Florist in Austin has seen firsthand. Freytag has hired several of the students who have come through the program, including designer Britten Tedford, who graduated high school in 2014 and started with Freytag soon after.

"The students come in with basic knowledge of design and I find that



**UNITED THEY STAND** TSFA's leaders on its education outreach include Debbie Woltmann, TMFA; Shana Brittain, TMF; Dianna Doss Nordman, AAF (executive director); Pat Shirley-Becker, AIFD TMFA; and Bruce Easley, AAF, TMFA. For a full list of education committee members, visit [www.tsfa.org](http://www.tsfa.org).

## IT TAKES A VILLAGE (NO, REALLY)

Building a curriculum. Coordinating with state agencies. Attending regulatory meetings at 2 p.m. on a Thursday. Changing the way floral design is taught in Texas required thousands of hours of work and a level of dedication that's hard to find in many organizations.

One thing that sets Texas State Florists' Association apart is its 25-member education committee, said TSFA Executive Director Dianna Doss Nordman, AAF.

"The credit really belongs to them," she insisted. "This is a volunteer group that I'd put up against any other volunteer group in the country."

Still, those volunteer leaders have their own businesses to run, and as several members of the committee pointed out, the effort would have been a nonstarter without Nordman, who knows the ins and outs of Texas government, and has never met a challenge she wasn't ready to take on.

"We never would have been able to do this without Dianna," former TSFA President Bruce Easley, AAF, TMF, said. "She is so good at working with people and she thinks of every angle. I don't think this could have been done entirely by volunteers. You need some paid administrative staff."

While the experience in Texas is unique, Nordman, president of the National Alliance of Floral Associations, is also sharing what TSFA has learned. You can read more about other states' efforts at [safnow.org](http://safnow.org). —M.W.

they are eager to learn more advanced design," Freytag said. "Another plus is they know the majority of the flowers in the cooler, so we do not have to train them on that. I do believe the program is necessary.

For her part, Tedford, who achieved Level 1 certification before graduating, said design courses in high school helped focus her interest and introduce her to the industry — and the work she now loves.

"I get to work with my hands, be creative and learn new techniques," she said. "You also never know what you might get to do each day. It's always a surprise."

Scott Hasty, AIFD, of J Scotts Aflorist in Orange, Texas, had a similarly positive experience after hiring Alaina Morris about 18 months ago. "She knew mechanics. She knew care and handling," he said. "And she had mastered basic floral design. From that point, there was that interest, that



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- Britten Tedford, former student now employed at Freytag's Florist



**SKILLS FORWARD** TSFA's skills-focused education puts it on the cutting edge of job training for students. According to the 2015 Millennial Majority Workforce Study, hiring managers now more than ever before prioritize hard skills over personality.



DARREN CARROLL PHOTOGRAPHY

## AFE LAUNCHES INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

While the efforts of the Texas State Florists' Association are impressive, the group isn't alone in its efforts to build the industry's workforce.

Last fall, the American Floral Endowment (AFE) introduced its new Business Internship Program, specifically aimed at attracting business students to the floral industry, according to Dwight Larimer, AAF, president of Design Master color tool Inc., in Boulder, Colorado, and AFE's chairman-elect.

"The Business Internship Program is perfectly focused on two important floral industry needs: attracting new talent and exposing the industry opportunities to a diverse, business-oriented group of students," Larimer said.

Internships are full-time (35-40 hours per week) and can range from 10 to 12 weeks. Host employers are responsible for paying these interns (no less than minimum wage).

After successful completion of an internship, four students will receive a \$2,500 scholarship from the program, a gift made possible thanks to former AFE Chairman and 2015 Floriculture Hall of Fame Inductee Del Demaree Jr., AAF.

AFE will provide participating host employers with qualified students in:

- Management
- Accounting
- Marketing/Communications
- Information Technology
- Sales
- Analytics
- Logistics
- Digital Marketing
- Graphic Design/Creative
- Human Resources

AFE has a long history of offering both internships and scholarships to promising students. Doing so is central to the Endowment's mission but it's also critically important to the industry, which needs "next generation" workers and leaders, said Laura Shinall, president of Syndicate Sales in Kokomo, Indiana, and an AFE trustee.

"As an industry, we offer so many rewarding opportunities in a myriad of fields, and I think sometimes that isn't emphasized enough," she said. "The internship program is meant to not only create an awareness of our industry within the business school community, but to provide an opportunity for students to actually experience who we are, what we do and how they can find meaningful and challenging careers in the floral industry." —**M.W.**

spark. She was willing and open to learning other design styles. I think the program is important and necessary."

Having those hard skills is no small thing, and the TSFA program's focus on real-world application puts it on the leading edge of job training. While many experts advocate for hiring by personality, research conducted last year indicates that many employers are taking a closer look at hard skills, particularly among younger workers. Indeed, according to the 2015 Millennial Majority Workforce Study, commissioned by the consulting firm Elance-oDesk & Millennial Branding, hiring managers now more than ever before prioritize hard skills over personality. "Fifty-five percent [of hiring managers] say they focus more on hard skills when hiring, versus only 21 percent who say they focus more on attitude or personality," according to the study. "Forty-five percent of hiring managers expect to become even more skills-focused in 10 years."

What about the students who become certified and don't end up in the industry — or those that simply take a design course or two in high school? Is that wasted effort? Freytag and Nordman argue that's far from the case.

"The program not only trains for our future workforce, it also shows these young people and their families the importance of flowers in our everyday lives," Freytag said.

That exposure could help build something even bigger than a new workforce: a new cadre of customers.

"In the end, even if those students do not become floral industry professionals, they are the most educated consumer that we will ever have," Nordman said. "They understand costs, distribution, the business part of the industry. When they go into a flower shop, they aren't going to hesitate."

And TSFA isn't done yet. Far from it. In addition to offering classes and support to teachers throughout the year, the association has also opened its own School of Floral Design, with locations in Austin and Houston. The school offers Texas Education Agency-approved basic classes not only to younger generations but also to nontraditional students interested in a career change.



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- Chad Freytag,  
Freytag's Florist



Through the Texas Floral Endowment, TSFA also offers scholarships to promising students who want to complete their Level 1 testing but can't afford the \$100 testing fee.

For Nordman, much of the effort comes back to the people, and the lives changed. She recently recalled the story of one student, from a low-income school in Houston, who thanked a teacher during a recognition ceremony at the local school board. "I never thought I could do this, but now I know I can do anything," the student said. The story still moves Nordman to tears.

Woltmann agreed — through all the paperwork and red tape, the story is about people first. "The most rewarding has been the stories from the young people who are excited about a career possibility or feel this is the first positive thing in their lives," she said.

In Texas, Nordman said, the investments made in public education mean the future is bright.

"We're providing a workforce for our industry," Nordman said. "We're also creating educated consumers. All that together means that in 20 years, the floral industry will still be very viable and very vibrant in Texas." 🌸

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