Small Farmer of the Year uses Family to Harvest Success

You can take the man out of the country, but he will come back. And when he arrives, he's coming with an entourage of folks who love the land just as he does.

That's the story of the 2009 Gilmer L. and Clara Y. Dudley Small Farmer of the Year Award recipient, bestowed this year on the Hoke County farm team known as John L. Council Farms. The team consists of farm patriarch John L. Council and his devoted adopted family that includes daughter Jacquie Rogers, and Ted Smith and Paul Raymond.

The family was honored at the Small Farmers’ Appreciation luncheon in March, during annual activities that The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T organizes to celebrate the achievements of small farmers.

Council, 72, returned to North Carolina in 1994 after 35 years in Camden, N.J. and began amassing what is now a 68-acre spread in Hoke County. The property includes forestland and farmland where the family breeds pasture-raised hogs, pastured chickens and turkeys, cows, goats and rabbits. They also grow 17 acres of hay for their cows, and farm 5 acres of pesticide- and fertilizer-free vegetables. Council also uses a solar panel in one of his pastures to generate enough electricity to charge a fence so that his hogs don’t stray.

His use of green technology, commitment to raising naturally grown food and use of such sustainable farm practices as integrating livestock with crop rotations, are reasons he’s this year’s outstanding farm recipient.

The Council family has worked with local Extension and with The Cooperative Extension Program on several efforts to sustain and make their farm more profitable. After A&T Extension associates installed the black plastic and drip irrigation system at Council Farms, the family increased its income from lettuce by 35 percent. A&T sponsored programs, including Farmers Adopting Computer Training (FACT) and Linking Youth with Farming Enterprises (LYFE), have also benefitted Jacquie Rogers and Ted Smith, respectively.

Nelson Brownlee, Extension Agent for Robeson and Bladen counties, has also worked with Council Farms on bio-security education.

“He has introduced us to programs we didn’t even know existed and to people who you didn’t even know cared,” Council says of Brownlee and Extension.

Council’s connection to the land is as much a part of him as his roots, which are planted in Bladen County where he was born, and in Robeson County, where he was raised. As a young man, he struck out to see more of the country and settled for the next 35 years in Camden, N.J. where, even in the urban environs of the North, he always farmed.


When Council and his wife, Willie Agnes, moved back to southeastern North Carolina 15 years ago, other members of his church family, including Paul Raymond, 31, and his father, also ventured south with him. Today Council serves as a surrogate father and grandfather to several young people, including co-farmer Ted Smith, 23, and Smith's nephew, Jonathan Smith, 17.

“We are all one big happy family,” says Council, “and I am training them to think like me.”

Dr. Mac’s Moment

I recently heard two things that are still reverberating with me. First, North Carolina lost more than 600,000 acres of farmland from 2002-2007 according to the latest Census of Agriculture. And second, during his first speech to the nation, President Barack Obama said that the answers to many of the problems plaguing this country lie within our universities. One dispatch was an issue of despair; the other, a message of hope.

Think about this: we are losing farmland at a time when the public has developed a renewed and keen interest in food and food safety. We all want to eat smarter, eat healthier and eat locally. At North Carolina A&T we don’t take this renewed interest lightly. We have food researchers who labor over their lab benches looking for the answer to what causes the allergic reactions some people have to peanuts, and we have improvements in the manufacture of probiotic food supplements and advanced-packaging technologies to slow spoilage.

We are applying food science to improving consumer health and agricultural productivity across this state. Some of the major activities include researching and developing health promoting food components from fruits and vegetables for use in functional foods and supplements, food-safety technologies, new technologies for predicting and extending shelf-life and quality, and new value-added agricultural products and processes.

But we won't keep these answers to ourselves. Through our Cooperative Extension Program, we will spread this new knowledge, and these new skills across the state.

That's our work.

So as I reflect on the Census of Agriculture data and the President’s observations, I know that here in North Carolina we see the challenges and we accept our role in providing answers or solutions.

— Dr. Donald McDowell
Interim Dean, SAES
American Association of American Veterinary Colleges singles out SAES’s Hanner for career contributions

Dr. Tracy Hanner, the coordinator for the SAES Lab Animal Science Program, has been honored with the Ijerson Bell Recognition Award by the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges. The award is named to honor a pioneering African-American vet, and it is presented biennially to an individual who has made outstanding contributions to adding cultural diversity to veterinary medical education. Hanner joins such a distinguished group. Past winners of the Bell Award include former Kansas State Provost Dr. James R. Coffman; Dr. Halyon Watkins, a professor and program leader at Prairie View A&M; and Dr. Allonia Atkinson, former dean of the Tuskegee University College of Veterinary Medicine, Nursing and Allied Health.

In presenting Hanner the Bell Award, the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges recognized him “for his leadership and contributions in promoting opportunities for underrepresented minorities in veterinary medical education.” Hanner was nominated for the award by a former student, Dr. Allen Hill, who is now the assistant director in the Office of Laboratory Animal Care at the University of Tennessee’s College of Veterinary Medicine.

The SAES will have to share a portion of pride in the honor Hanner has received with the College of Veterinary Medicine at N.C. State. Hanner was the first African American to receive a DVM from the N.C. State College of Veterinary Medicine.

New Greenhouse Expands Resources at University Farm by 2,880 Square Feet

A USDA grant has put a new greenhouse on the A&T State University Farms, where researchers and Extension staff will grow seedlings for their field studies. The greenhouse has individual automatic climate control and water systems with rolling benches to optimize space in the facility, which is 2,880 square feet.

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Danny Shaw, Southeast District Extension Director at the Small Farms Week kickoff in Pender County

“You feed the nation. You dress the nation. You house the nation. You are the reason we exist.”

Dr. Donald McDowell, interim Dean of the School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, thanking farmers for their impact on society at the Small Farmers’ Appreciation Day luncheon

“What if North Carolina was one of the first places in this modern economy to say that 10 percent of the calories we consume will come from within 100 miles? I think we’d be a healthier community … I’m more than a little enthusiastic about what could happen with small farms.”

Dennis Quaintance, CEO of Quaintance-Waver Restaurants and Hotels, the keynote speaker at the Small Farmers’ Appreciation Day luncheon

“You are the nation! You house the nation. You are the reason we exist.”

Steve Troxler, N.C. Commissioner of Agriculture at the Small Farmers’ Appreciation Day luncheon

“Local foods are safer and fresher than foods that are shipped in some 1,500 miles away.”

Steve Troxler, N.C. Commissioner of Agriculture at the Small Farmers’ Appreciation Day luncheon

“Looking at the landscape of the present, one can see a lot of greenbreath in the movement. We’ve been through a lot, but this is Small Farms Week.”

Dr. Ralph Noble, chairman of the Animal Sciences Department at A&T, discusses education and marketing practices at the Small Farms Week kickoff at Poplar Grove Plantation in Pender County.

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“These are my co-workers. I can call on them any time of the day or night and they’re there.”

The 2009 Small Farmer of the Year, John L. Council, at his Hoke County farm.
A Food Network video crew made a visit to the University Farm in March to shoot some footage for an upcoming series on barbecue that will feature Raleigh restaurateur Ed Mitchell (far left) and Dr. Ralph Noble (second from left), chair of the SAES’s Department of Animal Sciences. Mitchell has worked with swine specialists in the Agricultural Research Program on developing pastured pork as a niche market for small-scale pork producers.