

AGRIBUSINESS

Farm Leaders of the Year



RANDY

DEBBIE

CURTIS

GRAHAM

Farm Leaders of the Year Debbie Curtis Graham and Randy Graham walk among the apple trees at their Curtis Orchard and Pumpkin Patch in Champaign.

Rob Le Cates/The News-Gazette

Agricultural Loans Built for Your Operation

You face different needs each season. Our Agricultural Loans support your goals with flexible terms that fit your operation. Our advisors know ag lending and will stand with you in strong seasons and hard seasons. The Longview Capital Family of Banks give farmers a practical path to growth through practical decisions grounded in real farm experience. We are here to support you every step of the way.



Longview
CAPITAL CORP 

 **LONGVIEW**
BANK
13 Locations
longviewbank.com
217-582-2175

 **MAC**
MIDWEST AGRICREDIT CO.
Crop Insurance
midwestagricredit.com
217-431-4960

 **LONGVIEW**
COMMUNITY BANK
4 Locations
longviewcb.com
217-792-5211

 **Federated**
Bank
5 Locations
federatedbank.com
815-268-7676

 **MIDDLETOWN**
STATE BANK
3 Locations
middletownstatebank.com
217-445-2616

FARM LEADERS OF THE YEAR



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Jose Vazquez of Champaign is framed by an oversized rocking chair as he works on a 'Wizard of Oz'-themed mural on the barn at Curtis Orchard and Pumpkin Patch last August in Champaign. The business recently covered the 125-year-old structure in steel to help it last longer and worked with Vazquez to re-imagine the mural, said co-owner Randy Graham, who with his wife and fellow co-owner, Debbie Curtis Graham, were named The News-Gazette's 2025 Farm Leaders of the Year.

ROB LE CATES: ABOUT THIS SECTION

What I've learned on the ag beat



Despite having grown up in "Soybean City," as the Decatur locals like to call it, my wealth of agriculture knowledge was quite elementary before starting on the beat at

The News-Gazette in August.

Stepping into a role that my predecessor, Dave Hinton, who grew up on a farm in rural Mahomet, knew like the back of his hand was a tad intimidating - but I do like a challenge.

Once I began, I covered the Midwest drought that covered most of East Central Illinois, developments at the University of Illinois' Biomanufacturing Lab, and most recently, the SCAPES Agrivoltaics project led by the UI's Institute for Sustainability, Energy and Environment.

Along the way, I met a decent crop of farmers, past News-Gazette farm leaders and other agricultural experts who fielded questions from me at all hours of the day, no matter how obvious they may sound.

Besides watching people harvest cornfields practically in my backyard and an elective ag class in seventh grade, I didn't bring much industry knowledge when I started working on my first story.

With any journalism beat, you learn along the way, and Illinois agriculture wasn't as steep a learning curve as I imagined it being. Everyone welcomed me with open arms and was very appreciative of the coverage.

The pinnacle of my beat so far arrived in mid-January, when I sat around a table in the conference room at our offices with a group of past farm leaders who were tasked with selecting the next person to join their ranks.

They ended up making a decision



Rob Le Cates/The News-Gazette

Cole Pruitt, The News-Gazette's 2025 Emerging Farm Leader of the Year, worked at Shaff Implement during high school, which helped him earn his FFA American Degree, the highest honor obtainable from the organization.

that was a first in the award's 50-year history, selecting husband-and-wife duo Randy Graham and Debbie Curtis Graham, co-owners of Curtis Orchard and Pumpkin Patch in Champaign, to share the honor. They also selected the second-ever Emerging Farm Leader of the Year, St. Joseph's

Cole Pruitt.

All three are very deserving of the recognition. I had a wonderful time talking with each of them and telling their stories.

And I hope to see more faces and speak with more of you at the 53rd annual Farm Leader of the Year award

ceremony, set for 5 to 7:30 p.m. Monday at Riggs Beer Company in Urbana. Tickets, which cost \$25, are available at news-gazette.com.

Rob Le Cates is a multimedia reporter at The News-Gazette. Reach him at 217-393-8262 and rleates@news-gazette.media.

WELCOME TO THE CLUB

With the addition of **Debbie Curtis Graham** and **Randy Graham**, here's the list of winners through the years

- 1972 — Lyle E. Grace
- 1973 — Richard H. Burwash
- 1973 — Kenneth M. Kesler
- 1974 — Eugene Curtis
- 1975 — W. Stanley Wood
- 1976 — John H. Mathews
- 1977 — Gerald Compton
- 1978 — Jay Wallace Rayburn
- 1979 — Maurice Gordon
- 1980 — Keith C. Kesler
- 1981 — W.T. Hodge Jr.
- 1982 — Eldon Hesterberg
- 1983 — Charles L. Ehler
- 1983 — Luke M. Feeney
- 1984 — Richard C. Rayburn
- 1985 — Tom Barker
- 1986 — Paul E. Curtis
- 1987 — Fred Werts
- 1988 — W. Stephen Moser
- 1989 — Linden Warfel
- 1990 — Lloyd Esry
- 1991 — John Reifsteck
- 1992 — Lyle Shields
- 1993 — Lee Eichhorst
- 1994 — Jerry Wallace
- 1995 — Kent Krukewitt
- 1996 — Donald Wood
- 1997 — David Downs
- 1998 — Ray Aden

- 1999 — John Albin
- 2000 — Gary Grace, Roger Grace
- 2001 — Terry Wolf
- 2002 — Wayne Busboom
- 2003 — Lowell Heap
- 2004 — Steve Stierwalt
- 2005 — John Jay
- 2006 — Gary Luth
- 2007 — Dennis Riggs
- 2008 — Eric Rund
- 2009 — Paul Compton
- 2010 — Ronald R. Warfield
- 2011 — Dale Stierwalt
- 2012 — Jack Murray
- 2013 — Gerald Henry
- 2014 — Rick Nelson
- 2015 — Chris Hausman
- 2016 — Mark Pflugmacher
- 2017 — Jon Schroeder
- 2018 — Dan Schaefer
- 2019 — Laverl Byers
- 2020 — Ken Dalenberg
- 2021 — Stan Harper
- 2022 — Russell Buhr
- 2023 — Steve Hettinger
- 2024 — Larry Dallas
- 2025 — Debbie Curtis Graham, Randy Graham



Provided



Provided

Emerging Farm Leaders

- 2024 — Olivia Shike
- 2025 — Cole Pruitt

FARM LEADERS OF THE YEAR

'AMBASSADORS FOR AGRICULTURE'

Debbie Curtis Graham and **Randy Graham** are continuing a family legacy of living off the land and teaching visitors where their food comes from at Curtis Orchard and Pumpkin Patch

News-Gazette 2025 Farm Leaders of the Year Debbie Curtis Graham and Randy Graham are shown in the dining room at the Flying Monkey Cafe at their family farm, Curtis Orchard and Pumpkin Patch, in southwest Champaign. The cafe primarily sells from-scratch food, including recipes made with some of the apples grown on site.

Story and photos by **ROB LE CATES** ❖ ❖ ❖ rlecat@news-gazette.com

A CHAMPAIGN anyone who's spent time in Champaign-Urbana in the late summer and early fall has undoubtedly made a trip to pick apples or pumpkins — and grab some doughnuts and cider — at Curtis Orchard and Pumpkin Patch. The agritourism hot spot in

southwest Champaign that traces its roots to the 1870s is known for its "Wizard of Oz"-themed mural and delectable apple cider doughnuts — and the faces behind it are just as sweet and dedicated.

That dedication to continuing their family's legacy while transforming the farm into a perfect day

out for more than 300,000 visitors a year has earned its co-owners, Debbie Curtis Graham and Randy Graham, the title of 2025 News-Gazette Farm Leaders of the Year.

The 2025 award, bestowed by past farm leaders, marks just the second time that more than one person has been honored in the

same year, and the first time honoring a husband-and-wife duo.

It also continues a legacy, as Debbie's father, Paul Curtis, and his father, Eugene Curtis, were also named Farm Leader of the Year in 1986 and 1974, respectively.

Please see **GRAHAMS, E-4**



BUILT TO LAST BACKED BY PEOPLE YOU TRUST

Sunrise FS delivers the products, service, and expertise growers rely on season after season. Our team of specialists works alongside you to help maximize yield and keep your operation running when it matters most. Dependable solutions, backed by people you trust.

Get the service and solutions you need.



sunrisefs.com

FARM LEADERS OF THE YEAR

GRAHAMS

Continued from E-3

Debbie and Randy will be honored at a banquet set for 5 to 7 p.m. Monday at Riggs Beer Company in Urbana. Tickets are \$25 and are available at news-gazette.com.

The Grahams said they feel “humbled” by the generational recognition.

“It’s a legacy that we need to carry on taking care of the land, and we know that we take care of our community, because it brings many happy memories to people, so we don’t take it lightly — we take it with responsibility,” Debbie said.

The two met at the Vineyard Church in Urbana after Debbie graduated from Eastern Illinois University and Randy was finishing his studies at the University of Illinois.

Randy played the trumpet for the church and knew her parents and brother already, but hadn’t seen Debbie before, because she was away at college. He introduced himself at the end of a service, and they began dating during the summer.

In search of a job, Randy started working with Debbie’s dad on the farm.

“I did not grow up on a farm, but I pretended I knew, because I wanted to work here so I could be around her,” he said.

They married during Thanksgiving weekend in 1981 and immersed themselves in Debbie’s family business, eventually taking over from her parents in 2015 after a gradual transition.

Storied tradition

They inherited an operation that traces its roots to the arrival of Debbie’s ancestors in East Central Illinois in 1873. For the next century, the Curtis family supported themselves raising traditional row crops and hogs, but throughout the generations, they had to sell some of it off.

By the time Debbie’s parents, Paul and Joyce Curtis, married in 1956, their family’s land had shrunk to the point that maintaining two families on it had become very difficult.

Paul decided he needed to supplement their income, so

he earned a bachelor’s degree at the UI, later getting a doctorate during Debbie’s youth.

In the late 1960s, Paul became one of the founding members of Parkland College and started a teaching career that continued for around 20 years. In the midst of this, he had a “spiritual encounter with God,” Randy said.

“He started just taking stock of his life, re-evaluating every aspect of it,” he said — including the health and longevity of the family farm.

At this point in time in the early 1970s, less than 2 percent of the U.S. population lived on a working farm, Randy said.

Paul saw this correlation in his classroom too, with every generation of students slowly becoming more distant with where their food comes from — and decided to change that.

“He really wanted to help reconnect people to agriculture,” he said. “He’s always put into me, Debbie and everyone to be ambassadors for agriculture to help promote the fact that this is how food is produced.”

Moving to apples

Paul had the goal but hadn’t worked out the steps to get there, Randy said, until his love of apples provided a spark.

“One day, he was crunching on an apple and (had an Isaac) Newton moment where he says, ‘I ought to grow apples,’” Randy said. “He knew nobody would really want to come out to see hogs and corn and soybeans, because that’s pretty boring.”

Though many older generations of farmers would “dig their heels” into keeping what’s already been working, Randy said Paul’s father was very supportive of the change.

“I got to know him quite well before he passed away, and he was 100 percent behind Paul and Joyce transitioning this to a specialty crop farm, even though he himself had always been a commodity guy,” he said.

In order to make this transformation as seamless as possible, Paul collaborated with other specialty growers like the Eckerts near Belleville, southeast of St. Louis, who grew apples and peaches.

Then in 1977, he and Joyce took the plunge, planting 700

trees on 3 acres in the first year and 1,700 more the following year, all by hand.

The first year Curtis Orchard and Pumpkin Patch opened, Debbie’s parents were in their mid-40s. It took nine years before they turned a profit.

Both worked in education, and to invest for nearly a decade is “a real act of faith,” Randy said.

Getting help

Even though Paul had planted more than 2,000 trees, he didn’t know all that much about growing apples, Randy said — which is where UI Extension enters the picture.

The program proved to be an invaluable resource to the green growers.

“We relied heavily on Extension knowledge, and we would make a lot of phone calls over there,” Randy said. “A lot of them, even to this day, are good to come out and take a look” when problems arise.

They also could rely on the knowledge of their fellow farmers.

“We are in a business that’s not as cutthroat as most businesses,” Randy said. “Most growers are friends with each other, and they willingly share what works and what doesn’t. So that’s the other component that’s been a blessing ... to have a network of friends, not just in the state, but beyond, that are in the same business.”

Throughout Paul’s career at Parkland, he often brought students to Curtis Orchard, and his daughter and son-in-law maintain that focus on education, hosting groups from around the country and overseas to see how their operation works.

A sentiment that Debbie and Randy carried over from Paul was that you can never be done learning — there’s always more to know.

“I think one of the great leadership qualities that her grandfather and her father had was this long-term vision of how to keep the land in the family and continue the legacy,” Randy said. “If her father had not made that crucial transition, the farm would likely not be in the family any longer.”

Please see GRAHAMS, E-5



Rob Le Cates photos/The News-Gazette

ABOVE: Debbie Curtis Graham stands in the kitchen in the Flying Monkey Cafe, which she dreamed about in her youth and which opened in 2004. Early on, it hosted birthday parties where she and co-owner Randy Curtis’ son performed magic shows.

BELOW: Generations past and future are shown as Debbie’s father, Paul Curtis, poses on an old tractor with his granddaughter Rachel Coventry, who with husband Jeremy is heavily involved in the operation and stands to inherit it when her parents retire.



FARM CREDIT
ILLINOIS

Helping Farm Families Succeed



Ready to Purchase Farmland?

Work With An Expert Farm Lender

- Competitive interest rates
- Annual cash patronage
- Customizable loan terms & options
- No lender fees at closing



Todd Smith
217-898-0624



Cory Mitchell
217-552-0372



Michael Plunk
217-417-7763



Tyler Johnson
217-714-1426



Lucas Stark
217-328-6100



Matt Hardecke
Regional Manager



www.farmcreditIL.com/farmloans

Mahomet Regional Office

217-590-2222

mahomet@farmcreditIL.com



Prairie State Bank & Trust



The only bank
you will ever need.

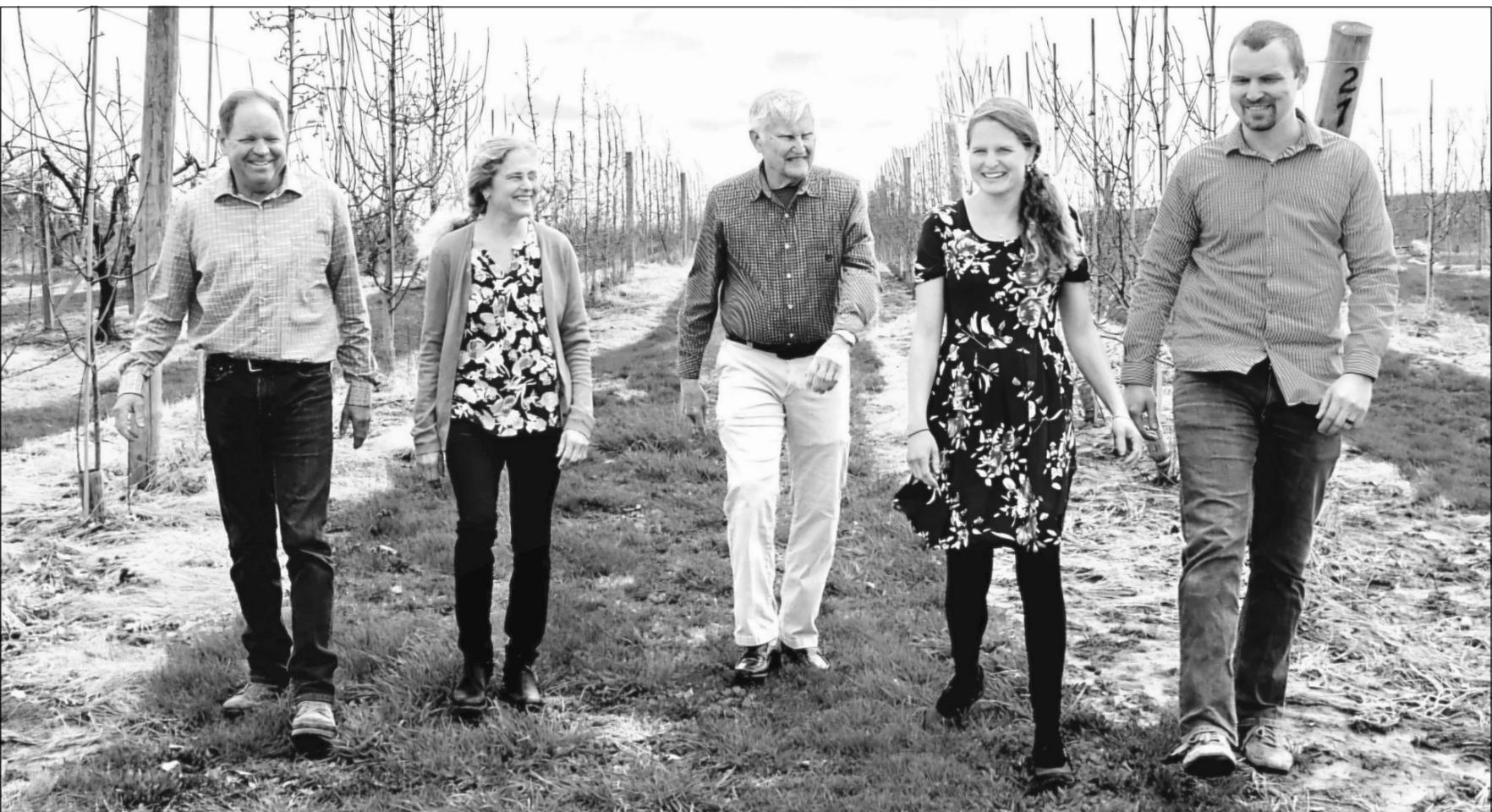
Member
FDIC

VISIT US AT
www.psbank.net

410 W. Curtis Road, Savoy, IL 61874

217-239-7616

FARM LEADERS OF THE YEAR



Christopher Fuller Photography

Three generations of the Curtis family — Paul Curtis, center, founder of Curtis Orchard and Pumpkin Patch; his daughter Debbie Curtis Graham and husband Randy Graham, current co-owners, left; and their daughter Rachel Coventry and husband Jeremy, who are set to inherit it when Debbie and Randy retire — walk through the apple orchard at the farm in southwest Champaign.

GRAHAMS

Continued from E-4

From growing to cooking

When Debbie was in junior high, she started dreaming of running a cafe out of the barn. It faded for a while, but eventually manifested into the Flying Monkey Cafe — keeping with the “Wizard of Oz” theme — built just a few feet from where she first started dreaming it up.

Funnily enough, she said, she didn’t remember that dream until a few years after the cafe was up and running and her dad mentioned it to her.

The cafe emphasizes made-from-scratch cooking — a theme that came from her mom, Debbie said, and that she has upheld through the many recipes they’ve crafted, many of which incorporate the almost 30 different apple varieties grown on site.

“A lot of things are cooked here,” she said. “Not absolutely everything, but most things are cooked from scratch, like the Italian beef recipe I came up with, and we have cider pulled pork.”

“I came up with the pumpkin bar recipe with cream cheese frosting, and our cooks were doing it like once a week, then it was twice a week, and now it’s a full production.”

Those menu items were among the many that continuously sold out quickly, with other favorites being their apple cider and applesauce.

Additionally, the family produces between 25,000 and 27,000 gallons of their famous apple cider each year.

At first, their equipment only allowed them to produce a few hundred gallons at a time, but in the early 1990s, after being open for a little more than a decade, they upgraded to facilitate larger batches.

Debbie helped run the cafe seven days a week, serving deli sandwiches, au gratin potatoes, stewed apples, green beans and baked beans when it opened in 2004.



Every year, the Grahams replace their older apple trees with higher-density saplings. Right now, they have more than 13,000 trees on the property.

A lot of their efforts went into streamlining the process and maintaining quality while making it easier for people to enjoy themselves.

“That went on for quite a while, and then after we saw the lines start building up, and we kept putting our heads together every year, ‘How can we eliminate (the wait) so people can go through faster?’” she said. “So we got a steam table, and one thing led to another, and then we had a grill outside to take some of the pressure off — it was a learning experience the whole way.”

Another big game-changer was introducing broadband internet to the operation, speeding up all the transactions.

“We still get lines sometimes, but they move so quickly now that most people don’t even notice them and they don’t feel like they are waiting,” Debbie said.

Good gourds

Apples are only half the game, with pumpkin production taking a huge slice of the pie.

Randy said when he was growing up, there wasn’t anything like a pumpkin patch; they just bought the gourds from the grocery store.

Now, pumpkin-seed breeders are coming up with “all kinds of crazy stuff” like multicolored or warty versions, he said.

The Grahams grow anywhere between 30 and 40 different pumpkin varieties every year.

As for apples, each year, the couple plants an additional 1,500 to 2,000 trees, replacing the eldest ones with higher-density saplings.

“The goal is to get more bushels on fewer acres or more bushels on the same acres,” Randy said. “We’re never going to speed up to the level of technology that the digital world is in, right? It

still takes time to grow a tree, and all that, but high density gets us from ground to crop a lot quicker than the old-style trees we originally planted here.”

The orchard now hosts about 13,000 trees.

Adapting, innovating

Debbie said she takes immense joy in the decisions her family made before her and their willingness to adapt.

“All the displays my dad built by hand, and my mom personally started the bakery. It’s bigger than it was, but she worked hard,” she said. “It was always an encouragement to keep growing, and my dad, in particular, was the first one to get computers. He was always forward about thinking.”

Debbie and Randy share that forward thinking and love of legacy, as they have heavily involved their own daughter

Rachel Coventry and her husband, Jeremy, in the business and hope to hand them the reins when it comes time to retire.

The Grahams said the mission of Curtis Orchard is to provide something for all generations to enjoy, whether that be picking apples or pumpkins, eating delicious treats at the cafe or spending quality time with the family. And they credit those who came before with helping Curtis Orchard reach the excellence it has achieved today.

“It’s still a small farm, but we’ve seen that there’s a lot more potential than I think Paul and Joyce even realized at the time they made that transition,” Randy said. “One thing that we learned fairly easily early on was that there are a lot of different avenues that you can go with specialty crops and making the farm attractive and educational, but also enjoyable for people at the same time.”



Curtis Orchard grows more than 30 different varieties of apples and sees about 300,000 guests annually.

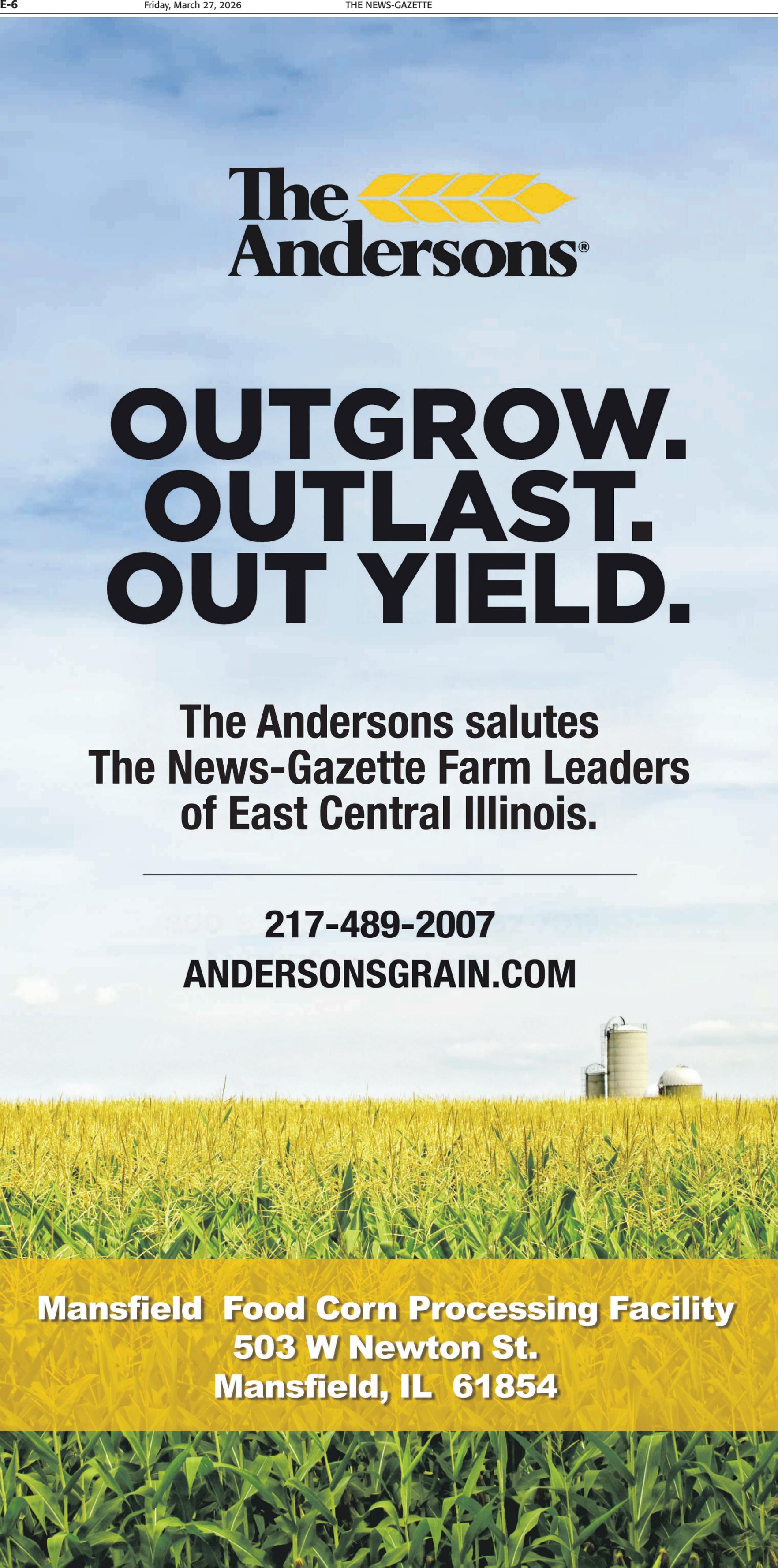
The 
Andersons®

**OUTGROW.
OUTLAST.
OUT YIELD.**

**The Andersons salutes
The News-Gazette Farm Leaders
of East Central Illinois.**

217-489-2007

ANDERSONSGRAIN.COM



**Mansfield Food Corn Processing Facility
503 W Newton St.
Mansfield, IL 61854**

FARM LEADERS OF THE YEAR

JACK OF ALL TRADES

Emerging Farm Leader of the Year **Cole Pruitt** is pursuing his twin passions — fighting fires and farming his family's land

By **ROB LE CATES**
rlcates@news-gazette.com

Cole Pruitt is on fire — metaphorically speaking — and fighting fire, quite literally.

The recent St. Joseph-Ogden High School graduate may say he has “free time,” but really, he’s using it to help others.

Among the ways he does so: farming, helping neighbors, completing his associate degree at Parkland College, working as a basic instructor at the University of Illinois Fire Service Institute, volunteering at both the St. Joseph-Stanton and Eastern Prairie fire protection districts, and serving as an EMT with Gibson Area Ambulance Service.

It’s no wonder Pruitt was chosen as second-ever recipient of The News-Gazette’s Emerging Farm Leader of the Year Award, given to a high school or college-aged honoree who is starting out in the industry.

Pruitt will be honored alongside 2025 Farm Leaders of the Year Debbie Curtis Graham and Randy Graham at a ceremony set for 5 to 7:30 p.m. Monday at Riggs Beer Company in Urbana.

Among Pruitt’s other honors are a state proficiency title from the FFA in agricultural mechanics, repair and maintenance — the first one earned by a member of his chapter in 40 years. He also held several leadership positions in the St. Joseph-Ogden chapter.

Pruitt is set to earn his associate degree this spring and — at his mother’s request — will walk the stage, stepping into the next stage of his life.

He’ll then continue assisting as the sixth generation to work on his family’s farm, which he prides himself greatly on, while pursuing a full-time career as a firefighter.

Please see **PRUITT, F-2**



Rob Le Cates/The News-Gazette

Cole Pruitt, The News-Gazette’s 2025 Emerging Farm Leader of the Year, earned the St. Joseph-Ogden FFA chapter’s first state proficiency title in 40 years in 2024.



PREMIER - POWERING YOUR SUCCESS

Central Illinois choice for grainhandling, grain marketing, and all of your energy needs - including propane.



PREMIER SERVICES



ENERGY

Providing your farm, commercial business, and home with diesel, gas, DEF, and propane. Professional delivery and service.



GRAIN HANDLING

22 grain facilities to serve you and your farming operation. Quality service from Premier’s quality employees.



GRAIN MARKETING

Grain Market insights and news at your fingertips. Premier’s Farm Marketing Specialist are here to serve you.



PREMIER+

Sell grain, make offers, view live and historical bids from anywhere, 24/7. Premier has the tools to help you succeed.



(217) 355-1983



www.premiercooperative.net

FARM LEADERS OF THE YEAR



Rob Le Cates/The News-Gazette

2025 Emerging Farm Leader of the Year Cole Pruitt is set to graduate from Parkland College this spring with an associate degree in precision agriculture and will pursue a full-time career as a firefighter.

PRUITT

Continued from F-1

“Every day I wake up trying to maintain that family legacy,” he said. “My great-great-grandpa was one of the first handful of people to come to Flatville, and they dug out the swamp with shovels by hand. Times have changed a lot, but I’m still farming the same dirt they did.”

His grandparents Vernon and Wilma Buhr also farmed that same dirt their entire lives.

Hooked young

Pruitt was introduced to the farm life at age 1, when his family moved to rural St. Joseph. Their neighbors, the Miller family, were in their combine harvesting corn across the street and invited the curious youngster and his dad to climb inside and get a better view.

The neighbors became farming partners. The Millers retired a decade later, but the two families still work together.

When the time came to get involved in FFA, Pruitt was glad the decision wasn’t up to him, as he was a fairly shy kid and public speaking is an intrinsic part of the group. He said working to overcome that reluctance has helped every day in his roles as a first responder.

“Now, that’s what every call we go on, or every time I meet someone new, I just enjoy making connections with people,” he said. “Even when (people) aren’t having a good day, if I can sort of be a positive person in that situation, I will be.”

To get comfortable with public speaking, he initially spoke in front of his church about faith. He said this took him outside his comfort level but paved the way for him to improve.

As a member of SJ-O’s FFA chapter, Pruitt held the titles of reporter, sentinel, vice president and president and had the honor of receiving his American degree, the highest achievable degree in the organization, with two of his best friends.

“We all kind of held each other accountable when we were doing our record books, so that was made a little easier,” he said. “I think we were one of the larger groups from St. Joe to ever get their American degree together, and we were all able to walk the stage together, which was nice.”

His FFA adviser, Darcy Nekolny, remembered that when she met him in his freshman year, Pruitt had a level of maturity for himself that bled over into other students and made them better.

“He’s one of those students who may not speak the most, but when he did, it was always worth listening to — and his peers knew that,” she said. “I truly enjoyed having Cole as a student, because he was a constant in the class, which is saying a lot given he started high school in the fall of 2020, when there were very few constants to be found.”



Photos provided

ABOVE: Cole Pruitt poses with his grandma Wilma Buhr and the centennial and sesquicentennial signs on display at the family farm outside St. Joseph. Buhr is the fourth generation to farm this land, and Pruitt is proud to be part of the sixth generation continuing the family tradition. **BELOW:** Pruitt poses with his uncle Andy and father, Chad, both of whom are firefighters with the Champaign Fire Department, in June 2023.



She said she knew Pruitt was destined for greatness, when, in his first year of membership, he declared he would earn the American degree.

Part of the qualifications for that honor include investing or earning \$1,500 and working 2,250 hours, which he completed at Shaff Implement, about halfway between St. Joseph and Flatville, selling parts that

went into repairs.

He kept a detailed list of the daily tasks he did for three years, and during the interview for the degree, he was questioned on his notes and general industry prompts.

“It had to be pretty detailed, so it’s hard because I was in high school,” he said, adding he was grateful for “the days I was able to form a detailed plan

where I had upwards of five or six sentences and a paragraph about what I did that day.”

His boss at Shaff, Eric Evans, called Pruitt a “jack of all trades” because he was an eager go-getter who didn’t shy away from a challenging task. While he mainly worked in parts sales, he also filled in where needed, like taking care of inventory, lawn care or even in the shop.

Evans earned his American degree like Pruitt when he was in school a couple decades ago. He mentored him and provided advice throughout the record-keeping process and said Pruitt “takes agriculture to the heart” and puts in 110 percent effort — even though firefighting is his true love.

Please see PRUITT, F-

FARM LEADERS OF THE YEAR

PRUITT

Continued from F-2

Farmer and firefighter

Pruitt's dream career always tilted between farmer and firefighter, said his mom, Lonna Pruitt. That seems to run in the family, as both his father and uncle are full-time firefighters who work in ag on the side.

In fact, his father, Chad, was one of the first members of the Champaign Fire Department's Fire Explorer Post 207, established in 1982 as a partnership with Scouting America to help kids between the ages of 14 and 21 become firefighters through monthly training once they turn 18.

Cole joined the same post at age 15, and luckily, his friends convinced him to stick with it after a couple of meetings. Cole heard it out, got hooked, and didn't want anything else.

"Since then, I've pretty much gone 100 percent at it," he said.

He also took additional training in his senior year, when he was a part of Parkland's Early College and Career Academy.

Those morning EMT classes helped prepare him once he was of age, and after he earned his license, he took the first job he could get, with Gibson Area Ambulance Services.

"I wanted to get as much experience as I could running 911 calls, so I decided to go apply up north in Gibson City, and they were the first people to call me back," he said. "I don't regret that decision at all, and it's been great."

The agency took a risk in hiring someone who is one of, if not the youngest ever to work there. Almost two years into the job, Pruitt said he still wakes up every morning ecstatic to go to work — even on the unpredictably busy days.

"I enjoy the uniqueness of every day, and I like surprises," he said. "When you really don't know what is going to happen throughout your day, you could have a whole lot of nothing all day or a super busy day."



Rob Le Cates/The News-Gazette

Cole Pruitt repairs parts of the engine from his grandmother's 1975 grain truck, nicknamed 'Big Red,' in rural Flatville.

Hitting the books

Parkland's precision-agriculture program covers numerous agricultural topics, including soil science, geographic information systems, economics, computer applications, farm management and crop science, to name a few.

Technology has always been a strong suit for Pruitt, and bringing that skill set back home has benefitted his family's farming operation.

"I've always been good with computers, and when it comes to the efficiency of farming, we now have to do more with less," he said. "Things are only getting more expensive."

An example he gave was using variable rate technology, which helps pinpoint where aglime is needed the most on a field. That helps save costs for farmers compared to just blanketing their entire crop.

He said allowing computers and GPS to make farming as efficient as possible is where precision agriculture shines.

He said compared to when his grandmother started farming, technology has come a long way, and learning to do things differently is required. In his classes, they talked about that topic nearly every day, even



Photos provided

Cole Pruitt gets his first taste of spraying a fire hose, above, in October 2008 and poses with his grandpa Vernon Buhr, left, a month later on the family combine.

from a sales approach.

"When you go and do a sales call with a 70-year-old farmer, and you tell him 'Everything you've been doing needs to change, because you have no choice,' ... that conversation doesn't go well," he said.

He said he feels ready to enter the world with his two-year degree, and never planned on doing the four-year model.

"I enjoy what Parkland has offered me, but I don't really need to go to another school afterwards," he said. "I feel

prepared, and I feel ready to go out into the world."

In addition to the agriculture classes he's taken at Parkland, he will soon achieve his associate in fire-service technology.

In the next five years, he hopes to cement himself as a full-time firefighter in any department in the area that will have him, while still farming on the side.

"I wasn't ever really going to Parkland for the degree or for the diploma," he said. "I was going to learn from the ex-

perience and what the classes taught me."

Pruitt is set to farm his grandparents' land for the first time this spring, and following his achievements in Parkland and FFA, he knows what it takes to put seed in the ground.

His parents said their son makes them "extremely proud" every single day.

"To be a 19-year-old kid that wants to save lives and do all the things and also carry on the farming tradition — that's a big deal," Lonna said.

WE ALL NEED SOMEONE WE CAN TALK TO



CALL
1-833-FARM-SOS
(833-327-6767)

EMAIL
FarmFamilyResourceHelpline@mhsil.com

VISIT
siumed.org/farm

Additional support is available through telehealth counseling sessions with SIU Medicine counselors.



Farm Family Resource Initiative services are available at no cost to farmers and farm family members, supported by funding from the Illinois Department of Human Services Division of Mental Health.



SIU MEDICINE
CENTER FOR RURAL HEALTH &
SOCIAL SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

FARM LEADERS OF THE YEAR

ILLINOIS SOYBEAN ASSOCIATION

'There's always a seat at the table'

Arcola's Sydnee Shafer honored to be part of 20 Under 40 Class of 2025

ARCOLA — For Sydnee Shafer of Arcola, being named as one of the Illinois Soybean Association's 20 Under 40 farmers is much larger than just the honor — it also opens the door for others who aren't sure where they fit in on the farm.

Shafer farms corn and soybeans alongside her mother, father and brother and found her agricultural identity as manager of the Piatt County Farm Bureau.

While she didn't necessarily invest much interest in farming when she was younger — busy with sports, friends and her waitressing job — she paid closer attention as she got older. She observed that research advanced technology and efficiency, while maintaining the values of hard work and caring for the land.

"I love being immersed in the agricultural community day in and day out," she said.

When she isn't working, she loves spending quality time with friends and family, exercising, baking, and her two cats, Carrot and Crouton.

She was one of four in the East Central Illinois region to be inducted into the Class of 2025, alongside Tony Stierwalt of Pesotum, Alex Johns of Tuscola and Jeff Greg of Cerro Gordo.

What's your job like?

I manage the Piatt County Farm Bureau full-time. I've been there since 2023. My day to day at the office is always different — we focus on prioritizing our local farm families and agricultural professionals by providing them with access to timely information, advocacy efforts and a community for them to belong to.

We also highlight local agricultural education efforts through our Agriculture in the Classroom program, local scholarship opportunities and donations for agricultural-focused groups.

What does being honored as a 20 Under 40 farmer mean to you?

It means a lot. Aside from the networking opportunities and seeing others in my industry be recognized for their great work, I think it also opens a lot of doors for future agriculture professionals who aren't quite sure where they fit in yet.

As someone who isn't on the farm full time, I think it's important to show that there are hundreds of different ways to be involved in and support agriculture; you just have to find what you love and jump in.

Why is inclusivity important to you?

Through my role, I've seen that agriculture isn't just farmers — it's educators, advocates, and community members as well. Creating a more inclusive industry is the first step in people finding their place in agriculture, even if they didn't grow up in it or don't work on a farm full time.

There wasn't one specific moment (where I realized this), but more a collection of experiences over time. Growing up, there were times I felt like I didn't quite fit the traditional role in agriculture. That ultimately encouraged me to find where I did fit and to help create space for others to do the same.

How did your father and brothers help you find your place in ag?

Both my brother and father have never looked at me and assumed I couldn't do it. As a matter of fact, they've both probably trusted me a bit too much and assumed I can do everything they can. Having that support behind me in whatever decisions or mistakes I was making is invaluable. They've both played a huge role in helping me define where my passion for agriculture lies and how to make the biggest impact.

Whom do you credit as a major influence or mentor?

My parents have both been huge influences on me in my agriculture journey.



Provided Sydnee Shafer, left, a member of the Illinois Soybean Association's 20 Under 40 farmers Class of 2025, with her brother Austin during harvest season.

My mom doesn't come from a farming background, but she now plays a key role in our operation and does a great job. She supported me throughout school when I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to pursue — sometimes with a little tough love, but always with my best interest at heart.

My dad, on the other hand, is where my love for agriculture stems from. I've learned from him that farming can be a very thankless occupation, but with dedication and patience (he has the patience of a saint), it can also be incredibly rewarding.

What would you tell people questioning whether to get involved in agriculture?

To young people who want to step into the agriculture world but aren't sure where they'll fit — join your local groups. Your county farm bureau is a great place to start and see where it takes you. Agriculture needs so many different personalities, skills, politicians, problem-solvers, writers and more. There's always a seat at the table.

Farmland Auctions & Farm Management

Christopher S. (Scott) Johnson, AFM
 Designated Managing Broker
 217-369-7046
 christopher.johnson@pgim.com
 Mahomet, IL

Timothy A. Harris, AFM
 Designated Managing Broker
 Illinois Lic. Auctioneer #441.001976
 815-875-7418
 timothy.a.harris@pgim.com
 Princeton, IL

www.capitalag.com LICENSED REAL ESTATE BROKERS

Thank you farmers for your stewardship of the land.

CONGRATULATIONS
 Farm Leaders
 Randy Graham & Debbie Curtis Graham

WAIBEL
 FARMLAND SERVICES INC.™
 Direction for Your Farm

Brian Waibel - Seth Waibel - Brennen Kraft
 107 S. Lincoln, Mahomet, IL - 217-590-0233
www.WaibelFarmlandServices.com

Illiana Insulation
 POWERED BY SEALTITE

**ENERGY EFFICIENT
 QUIET
 COMFORTABLE**

- Commercial
- Residential
- Agricultural
- New & Existing Construction
- Free Insulation Assessment

illianainsulation.com • 815-457-3900

Congratulations
Cole Pruitt,
Emerging Farm
Leader of
the Year!

MEMBER FDIC

ST. JOSEPH COMMUNITY BANK
 FACILITY OF PHILO EXCHANGE BANK

(217)469-2100
philobank.com

802 E. Warren Street
 St. Joseph, Illinois

FARM LEADERS OF THE YEAR



Rob Le Cates photos/The News-Gazette

Stan Born, a retired Caterpillar executive and former director of the American Soybean Association, lives by a motto displayed at his Vintage Farms in Lovington that reads 'The land is the host; we are only the guest.' He says he wants to try to leave his farmland better than he found it for future generations.

AMERICAN SOYBEAN ASSOCIATION

'NO HIGHER CALLING THAN FEEDING PEOPLE'

Former director, Caterpillar executive who grew up on a farm went back to roots after retirement

LOVINGTON — At his core, Stan Born just likes to feed people.

The former Caterpillar executive who grew up on a farm and went back to working the land in retirement just concluded a term as director of the American Soybean Association. He's also held roles with the Illinois Soybean Association and U.S. Soybean Export Council.

Born and his family rented and lived on around 500 acres of farmland near Findley, where they raised cattle, pigs and hundreds of chickens in addition to growing row crops and hay. He said the farm was mid-sized for the 1970s.

After high school, Born headed to Lake Land College from 1975 to 1977 for an associate degree in engineering, then continued his studies at the University of Illinois, focusing on chemistry.

In his senior year, his father died, so his family stopped farming. Born said he "carried on" with his studies but didn't step away completely from agriculture, regularly helping as a farmhand.

"I stayed connected to agriculture because my ex-wife's family farmed here in Lovington, and so I was a weekend warrior," he said.

After landing a job at Caterpillar, he advanced through a plethora of roles, choosing to stay with the company for 33 years because opportunities were plentiful.

"They promoted within, and I worked in engineering, sales, marketing ... I was a director of environmental health and safety and sustainability product manager," he said. "So I had a lot of different roles during those 33 years, and it always kept me interested and challenged."

In 2010, two years before he retired, he saved up enough to buy some slightly outdated equipment and 40 acres in Lovington. He named it Vintage Farms, and developed a motto: "The land is the host; we are only the guest."

"That helps remind me that I'm just a steward. I'm here for a short period of time," he said. "I'm charged with making sure that I can make a living off of this, off this ground, while I'm here."

"I've got to leave it in as good as or better shape than I found it so that the next generation can make a living off this ground."

Farming gave him something to retire to, he said, and he wanted something worthwhile.

"There is no more worthy vocation ... no higher calling than feeding people, and that's what I do," he said. "I like that it makes me feel valuable and I'm contributing and doing something with my life that's important to help other people — that's basically growing their food."

Born chose soybeans for many reasons, one being their nutritional value.

"The reason I focus on soy is because of another passion I have ... all about feeding children," he said. "I think that every kid deserves a chance to have a healthy lifestyle and a healthy diet. Soybeans are really a magical product to help provide that kind of nutrition for

healthy growth, development of minds."

He said that at one point in time, six of every 10 rows of crops produced in the U.S. went to the export market, which affected people in other countries too. While the average American family may devote between 1 and 10 percent of their income to food, that range differs vastly in other areas of the world, rising as high as 30 to 70 percent.

Getting the soy market started in those communities would improve overall health and well-being in addition to the economy, he said.

He said he chose to go back to farming in retirement because "all I have to do is look over my right shoulder to see what I got done today. It's rewarding to do that and have that immediate gratification."

It soon turned into a passion project, and the experience helped him understand other soy farmers.

He eventually worked his way up to hold several executive positions for the Illinois Soybean Association, American Soybean Association and the U.S. Soybean Export Council. Additionally, he was director and treasurer for the World Initiative for Soy in Human Health, which helps emerging markets in overseas countries.

In his leadership roles, he emphasized policy change and how the government helped farmers. His teams spent ample time on Capitol Hill talking to legislators, regulators and administrative personnel about the Farm Bill and the Endangered Species Act.

"Our goal is to represent the voice of the American soybean farmer so people who are making decisions, we're trying to provide influence so that the decisions that they make are formed about how they will affect soybean farmers and hopefully get them to marshal in the right direction," he said.

In the last 20 years, the uses for soybeans have skyrocketed, he said. The meal and oil together each serve unique purposes in feeding and manufacturing exports. Biofuel alone accounts for a massive percentage of usage.

There are also multiple uses for soybeans outside of the common purview, he said, and companies are finding out how to expand their use. For instance, soybean oil is used to make the rubber soles for Skechers shoes, as well in fire-fighting foam, ink, industrial greases, plastics and tires.

Born has noticed that many farmers felt like they didn't have a say in what happens at the national level of agricultural politics. He encourages them to get involved, because "if you don't tell your story, somebody else will tell it for you, and they won't get it right," he said.

"I encourage (farmers) to use their voice, because nobody knows your business better than you do," he said. "If you have a voice, it is incumbent upon you to share your perspectives and to share your understanding with people who don't and particularly people who make the decisions that impact what you do."

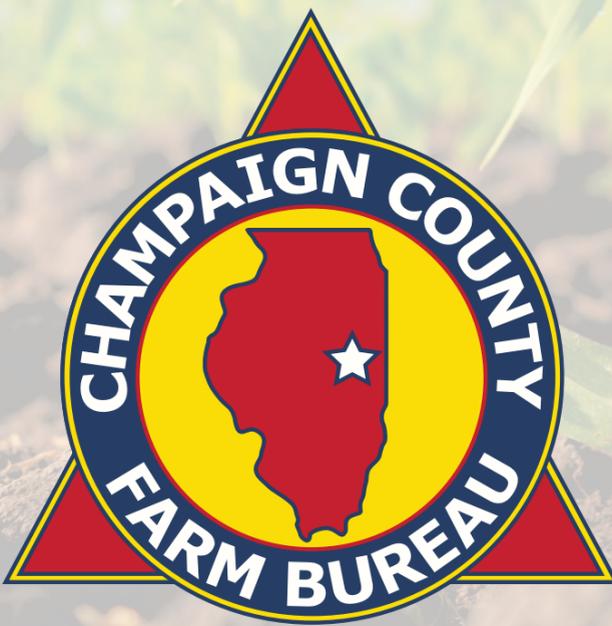
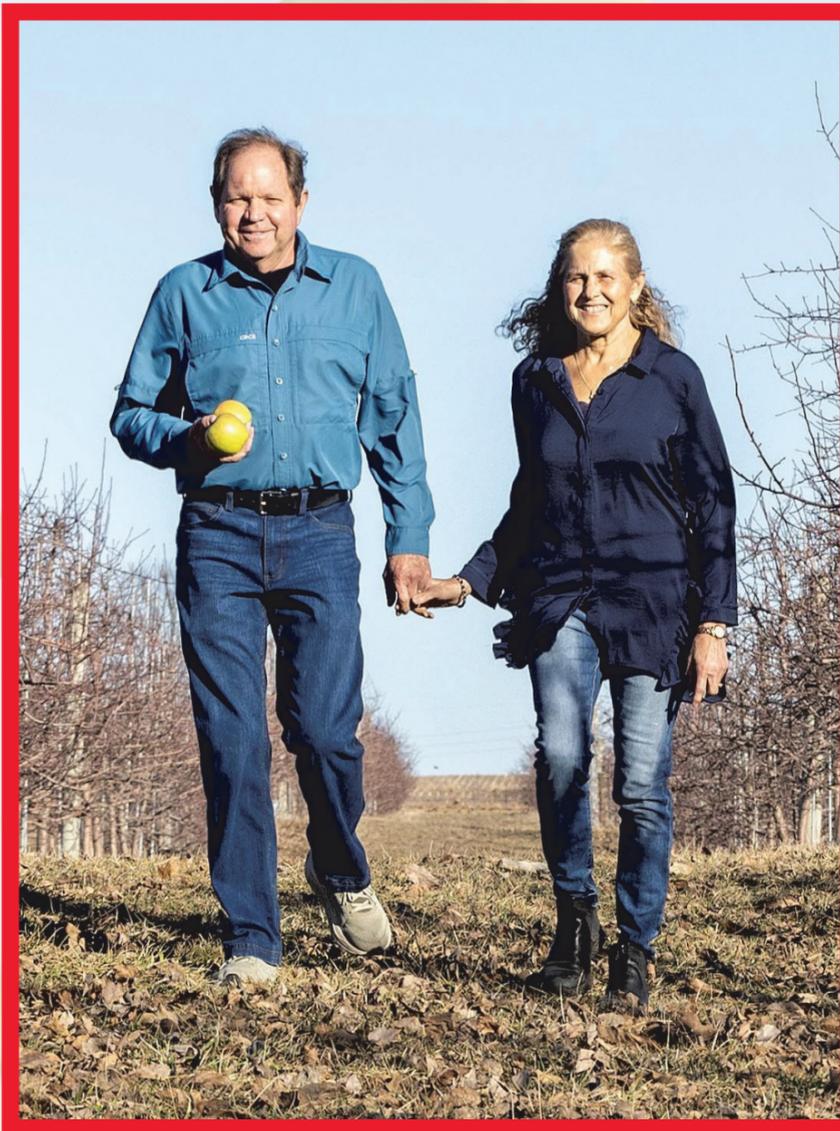


Born retired from the American Soybean Association at the end of last year after holding leadership roles in state and other national soybean organizations for nearly a decade.

THE CHAMPAIGN COUNTY FARM BUREAU

Proudly Salutes the Farm Leaders of the Year!

Randy Graham & Debbie Curtis Graham



Champaign County Farm Bureau will strive to assist families in agriculture by recognizing and responding to issues of concern while strengthening partnerships and improving farm family life for this and future generations.

THE CHAMPAIGN COUNTY FARM BUREAU

801 North Country Fair Drive, Suite A | Champaign, Illinois 61821

Phone: 217-352-5235 | www.ccfarmbureau.com

