

# Farm Bureau Highlight

By G. Shane Morris



Florida Farm Bureau and its various branches around the state have long served invaluable roles in local agricultural communities. By representing the interests of farming professionals, providing vital services and raising awareness in the community, this organization helps Florida to stand out as one of America's most agriculture-friendly states. Equally important however, are the eclectic individuals who help keep the bureau running.

This month I received a letter from someone who does just that. Leslie Ann Turgeau, a wife, farmer and businesswoman, from Wimauma, Florida, recently joined the team at Hillsborough County Farm Bureau. Leslie grew up surrounded by Florida agriculture and the individuals who relied upon it for their livelihood. Her parents, Wayne and Barbara McDowell, regularly harvested and sold hay from their family land in Plant City.

"I helped as a kid," says Leslie. "I loaded bales of hay onto trailers, drove tractors and hauled each load to our customers' farms." Even in writing, the fondness with which she recalls those days was evident. "I always wanted to farm," she told me. "[My two brothers and] I loved living in Plant City and having the opportunity to own cattle, chicks, and horses."

Evidently, Leslie's upbringing and family values have played a huge part in getting her to where she is today.

"Dad always told us to be honest and fair with everyone," she says. "And he lived by that principle. Mom always told us we could do anything, and she has supported us in all our endeavors. Family has always been very important to me."

And apparently so has agriculture.

Unfortunately, we don't always get to pursue our passions right away. No one knows that better than Leslie, who set aside involvement with farming to attend college and work full time in the mortgage industry.

"I've always wanted to farm," said Leslie, "but while going to college, I had to get a good paying job. After I was hired, the opportunities just made it hard to leave."

Eventually she worked her way up the ladder and after ten years became a senior credit officer. But there was yet another twist in store for Leslie. "Due to the declining housing market, the company I worked for closed its Tampa office and left me without a job." Fortunately however, she quickly found herself occupied in a new capacity at the ninety-six-acre strawberry farm owned jointly by her husband, Maurice, and another couple. Leslie has no regrets about the transition, and in fact relishes the newfound freedom to pursue her true interest. "Everything happens for a reason," she told me. "And although being laid off was certainly not any fun, I was given invaluable experiences."

Indeed she was.

Having worked for so long as a credit officer, Leslie knew how to manage finances and communicate well with the public. Combining these skills with her agricultural background, she quickly settled into her new role as office manager, truck-driver and web wizard for Berry Bay Farms. And boy, does she love her new job!

“There’s just such an excitement in watching the [strawberry] field go from bare ground to plastic beds, to luscious green plants with bright red berries.” she said, her smile evident as I read her words. “Besides I like getting dirty!” she added. “My husband will tell you, if there’s dirt around, it’ll end up on me!”

Naturally, this enduring love for agriculture ended up manifesting in other areas of Leslie’s life as well. “I’m a member of the Florida Strawberry Growers Association” she says. “I’m also a part of the Hillsborough County Women’s Committee where I participate in Agriculture Literacy Day for the elementary school kids.”

Since then, Leslie and Maurice have had the opportunity to travel to Tallahassee and meet Commissioner of Agriculture, Charles Bronson, as well as Representative Marty Bowen. This May, they plan to accompany other members of Florida Farm Bureau on a trip to Washington D.C. to speak with Federal Legislators. “I’m definitely looking forward to that,” said Leslie in what I took to be an intentional understatement.

Leslie’s blossoming career came full circle when, last year, she and Maurice were appointed to the Florida Farm Bureau Leadership Committee. Soon afterward, she became a chairperson for Hillsborough County Farm Bureau’s Young Farmers and Ranchers, an organization designed to sow the seeds for agricultural success in Hillsborough and the state of Florida as a whole. In less than a year in that position, she’s toured wineries and blueberry farms, headed up donation drives to support American troops overseas and attended conferences with other young agricultural professionals from around the state. “I just love the Young Farmer and Rancher Program,” she told me. “There are so many opportunities to learn more about legislative issues, communicate with lawmakers, tour other farms and serve the community.”

With all of these activities, travels and service projects added to her already busy farming schedule, you wouldn’t think Leslie would have a spare moment for anything else.

Well, think again.

This past November, she was appointed to the Hillsborough County Farm Bureau Board of Directors.

“The board is full of experienced members from the Agriculture Community,” she wrote. “I’m proud to be a part of this team. Everyone is very supportive and looks out for the best interest of the community and farming industry here in Hillsborough County.”

She’s also picked up a rather intriguing hobby somewhere along the way.

“I love to quilt,” she says. “My husband says that I am too young for it, but I don’t think there’s an age requirement.” Leslie and her mother both enjoy getting together on occasion to work on a quilting project, both as a mutual interest and an excuse to spend some quality time together.

There aren’t a whole lot of people who could juggle the kind of schedule Leslie does. With her job in the family business, involvement in Young Farmers and Ranchers, Hillsborough Farm Bureau, trips to and from the Capital, charity work and family activities, you might start to wonder how she keeps up. The answer: a genuine love for her life’s calling.

“I plan on giving all my job responsibilities one-hundred and ten percent.” she said.

Finishing her letter, I smiled. It was very good to know we’ve got such dedication and love behind one of the most important organizations in our community.

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