

Farm Bureau Highlight

Bill Burnette

By G. Shane Morris

From citrus and tomato farmers to horse and cattle ranching, Florida's agricultural community sports a wide range of career choices and expertise. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the diverse crowd of volunteers and members at the Hillsborough County Farm Bureau.

Bill Burnette, a relative newcomer to the Bureau, is one such example. Although he has been involved with the HCFB for a number of years, Bill only recently became a board member. Already however, he loves his role in the organization and praises its work in the community.

"Farm Bureau is a good watchdog for what's going on the industry and for what's going on in Washington and Tallahassee," he told me during an interview at his Dover business, Harold's Feed and Pet Supply. "The Bureau members are my eyes and ears as to what's going on that may affect me and everyone else down the road."

What's ironic is the fact that Bill Burnette is even involved in agriculture, let alone a standard-bearer for farmers throughout our county.

"My dad worked in the Kraft food service," he explained. "We used to call it the 'coat-and-tie' side of agriculture. But the other kind doesn't exactly run in my family. I mean, my grandparents farmed, but I think everyone's grandparents did at some point," he said with a chuckle. "Still," he continued, "I got into farming as a kid and decided eventually to pursue it as a career. I started off by buying a little piece of dirt and working it. In fact," he added, "I bought everything I own today."

Long before he was a leadership figure in Farm Bureau, this stout-hearted Floridian was a successful cattleman who also owned other feed stores around the state. Finally in 1997, he decided to purchase Harold's from its original owner and namesake.

"It took a while," Bill told me. "But eventually they talked me into it." And from what I can see today, he doesn't regret that decision one bit.

"Harold was getting ready to retire and he wanted his son to take over the store. But his son had other plans; he wanted to go into the ministry. Well, I guess you don't tell your son, 'don't become a minister...come run my feed store!' So they both worked on me really hard to buy this company. It turned out to be a very good thing for both of us." Bill says.

continues on page 31



continued from page 29

Indeed it has. The Burnette family has truly been blessed through Harold's old store. Bill told me a little about his three children and their own pursuits in the field of agriculture:

"One works here at the store, one back at the ranch and my nine-year old son..." said Bill with a wry grin, "well, he doesn't work much yet."

Obviously proud of his kids, Bill hopes to see their individual passions for agriculture blossom and grow much the same as his own did years ago. Both he and his wife, Rhonda, were overjoyed to see their daughter marry last year and even more pleased when their new son-in-law joined the hard-working crew at Harold's Farm Supply.

All of this has uniquely prepared him to assume his new position on the board of directors at Hillsborough County Farm Bureau. I asked Bill what his driving priority on the board would be.

"Community involvement," he replied. "My family and I have been plugged in to the community through Farm Bureau for quite some time, and they have a lot to offer. In fact," he continued, "all homeowners in Hillsborough should have an interest in the Bureau. They protect the lands. If you own a quarter-acre house, that land is yours just as much as the guy who owns a thousand acres."

"Serving that same community is also a big part of their business," he added. "They do a lot of projects and work to help get people involved." He described for me one such effort, held bi-annually at the Florida State Fair Grounds. "I've helped out a lot with Ag-Venture," he said,

referring to Florida Farm Bureau's community education program which centers around hands-on, agricultural experiences for the youth.

"They had a cow one year that was broken," Bill said. "So they called me in to fix her." He must have read the confusion on my face, because a moment later he started laughing. "She was mechanical," he clarified.

Apparently Bill has suffered no shortage of opportunities to improve the relationship between local farmers and the Hillsborough government. The week before our interview in fact, he and several other board members took Hillsborough's county commissioners on a farm-tour around the area. He also reminded me that within a few days, Farm Bureau's Ag Literacy Week would begin. And from all appearances, Bill plans to participate in that event as well, passing on a lifelong passion to his fellow citizens.

As we prepared to say goodbye, I asked Bill one final question: What is your favorite aspect of Farm Bureau?

"Getting to know other people," he replied. "Having Farm Bureau insurance is definitely a bonus. But forming relationships with the people in our community is the most important thing. It helps you to realize that you're not just



Southside GROOMING

For the Pawsaholics
Addicted to Pets

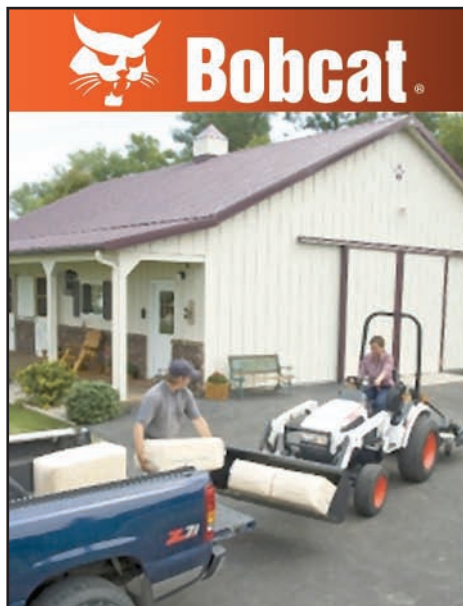
Tel: 813.754.6797

3012 James Redman Pkwy
Plant City, FL 33566

another number on the insurance roll. Farm Bureau is here looking out for our careers and futures. It's also a place to stand up for your rights as a landowner and a citizen."

And though the Burnette family has very shallow roots in the agricultural industry, Bill hopes that his profession and involvement with Florida Farm Bureau will start a new tradition.

"I've got something to pass on now," he said. "So maybe our history has finally started." •



Bobcat of Tampa Bay...

"The Full Size Leader in Compact Equipment"

Bobcat of Tampa Bay

2910 Overpass Road
Tampa, Florida 33619

813.626.3470
www.cfbobcat.com

