

Farm Bureau

HIGHLIGHT

by Jim Frankowiak

Though he has been a Farm Bureau member for a number of years, Joe Keel was not actively involved until last year. That's when Jemy Hinton, a board member, nominated Keel to serve on the board.

"I have known Jemy for some time and to have her nominate me to the board was important," said Keel. "I had known many members of the board and I was familiar with the work of Farm Bureau. I love agriculture and the opportunity to help here in Florida."

The owner of Keel & Curley Winery and three other related businesses, Keel was born in Peoria, Illinois and moved to Tampa when he was just 16 months. "My dad had attended the University of Miami Law School and his roommate was a Tampa native. While in law school, he enjoyed the climate and when planning where to pursue his law career, it was an easy decision for him to pick Tampa," said Keel. Many members of his family continue to reside in the Peoria area.

Growing up in south Tampa, Keel spent his summers from age 7 to 17 at his grandparents farm near Peoria. "That's where my love for agriculture began and was nurtured." His grandparents had a field corn and hay operation and other members of the family were also involved in agriculture.

Keel began his secondary education at St. Petersburg Junior College where he earned an Associate of Arts degree. He then moved on to the University of South Florida and a degree in Business Administration which he received in 1979. Keel began a wholesale nursery operation in 1981 at what is now the headquarters for Keel & Curley Winery. "We had good success supplying plants for both commercial and residential customers. Disney, Home Depot and Wal-Mart were some of our customers," he said. "There was something missing. I wanted to grow something people ate."

The inspiration for growing blueberries came from the man who was selling him containers for his wholesale landscape nursery. "I started out small in 1996 and grew slowly so that by 2001 I was growing blueberries exclusively." Keel has 35-acres of blueberries at two locations, one where his nursery had been near the intersection of Forbes and Thonotosassa Roads, and another in the Keysville area.

The Keel & Curley Winery, named after both sides of his family, began in his kitchen during the 2002-2003 growing season. "Our fruit that season was fine, but some was not aesthetically

pleasing and as a result could not be sold as fresh fruit. I took a wine-making class in Pinellas County and we have grown steadily ever since." There was a glitch in August of 2006 when lightning struck one of the key buildings at the winery. "We lost wine that had been bottled and boxed and was awaiting shipment, but we were able to recover and continue in just a few short months."

Keel and Curley Winery produces three types of Blueberry wines: a sweet wine, a semi-dry or semi-sweet wine and a dry wine. "We just introduced a Dry Blackberry wine and a Sweet Blackberry wine this summer." The winery also produces seven different fusion wines, wines that are blended: Strawberry Riesling, Wild Berry Pinot Noir, Tangerine Zinfandel, Key West – Key Lime, Black Raspberry Merlot, Mango Mama and Peach Chardonnay.

Keel & Curley operates a retail tasting room and gift shop located at 5210 West Thonotosassa Road. He has 20 fulltime employees and up to 150 additional employees during the blueberry harvest.

Keel, who has three sons from his first marriage, served as president of the Florida Blueberry Growers Association in 2004 and 2005. His four businesses include Keel Farms, Florida Berry Wine, Inc., the Keel & Curley retail store located west of Plant City and Six Stars Beverage Company, the current exclusive distributor of Keel & Curley Wines that may eventually represent other brands. "Our retail sales are limited to the state of Florida," said Keel.

"However, we ship to 38 other states via our web site and under a licensing agreement with United Parcel Service."

Two of Keel's three sons, Clay and Ryan are involved in the business, while Ray is a corporate pilot. Clay, who is leaving the U.S. Army, and Keel's wife, Alicia, are principals in Six Stars.

"I look forward to working with Farm Bureau," said Keel. "I am anxious to do whatever I can to help what's best for our country and Florida agriculture during these challenging times."

When not involved in his varied business interests, Keel enjoys time with his family "just as I did growing up." Family includes his wife, sons and their wives and his six grandchildren. "We especially enjoy fishing and lobstering at our second home in the Keys."

For more information about Keel & Curley Winery, visit www.keelandcurleywinery.com.

