

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

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Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Marilyn Harrel By Betty Thompson

LEEDEY---“Teach the student, not the subject.”

Marilyn Harrel has carried this motto from her classroom to life issues of present. Whether she is helping raise scholarship money for youth in agriculture, serving on the Multi-County Youth and Family Services Board, volunteering at the Youth Shelter in Clinton, or mentoring young ladies through the Oklahoma Youth Expo “This One’s For the Girls” party, one thing is for certain, Harrel has a passion for helping youth as they develop their strengths and skills.

“Every young person has a key, a key to open their possibilities for a good and productive life,” Harrel said. “It’s up to energetic, caring adults to find that key and help them develop into a productive adult.”

Growing up in Leedey, Okla., Harrel said she was fortunate to observe people who were honest, hard working, dependable, respectful, and kind to one another. Her dad and mom were farmers, raised cattle, crops, horses, and five children.

“We helped with the usual farm chores, gathering the eggs, raising a garden for food for the family, milking cows, and helping with household chores,” Harrel said.

Each of the children worked for the neighbors chopping and picking cotton, exercising and breaking horses, and any jobs to help pay for school clothes, school pictures, sports equipment, and for spending money. We learned to work hard and give our bosses our best efforts.

Harrel recalled being afraid if she didn’t work hard, and do more than was expected, she might not get hired again and then she would not have money for shoes!

It's only natural that she is drawn to youth with the same commitment and work ethic. One of the many avenues she found for furthering her experiences and talents is through a state women's organization called the Diamond Hats.

The Diamond Hats was an idea and focus of OYE Executive Director, Justin Whitefield, now deceased. Justin, with the encouragement of the board of directors of the Youth Expo, suggested a women's organization to support youth in agriculture be formed. They had observed these types of groups at other large livestock shows across the nation.

Justin sought out Harrel and Melissa Eisenhauer, OYE staff member, to get a women's organization started. In 2005, the organization began with a membership drive, netting around 40 members. Bob Funk, cochairman of the OYE board, matched the membership fees with a generous donation, and the ladies' group, The Diamond Hats, was formed. Harrel served as president of the organization for the first few years, with the membership growing each year.

The Diamond Hats' mission is to support Oklahoma's agriculture youth as they aspire to gain knowledge and skills to help their state and nation sustain the agriculture way of life. Harrel serves as an advisor for the group which has successfully provided scholarships to seniors, premiums on livestock exhibits at the annual OYE Sale of Champions, mentored young girls at the annual "This One's For the Girls" event during the OYE, purchased FFA and 4-H official wear for youth in need, and provided wheelchairs for livestock exhibitors with special physical needs.

"Seeing the smile on the face of the young lady from her new heavy duty wheelchair, as she showed her 4-H project in the sheep show was a very exciting moment for us!" Harrel said.

Last March, over 300 young ladies attended "This One's For The Girls" where a "Muscles and Mascara" mentoring program of fitness and personal grooming was held.

At the onset of Diamond Hats, Bob Funk and Jimmy Harrel challenged the group to elevate the image of agriculture through special events. As a result, an annual Diamond Hats Gala began, with Harrel in the helm. Since the first Diamond Hats Gala, over \$1.2 million has been raised to promote youth in agriculture in Oklahoma. The 2017 Gala set a new record with over \$165,000 being raised. They were able to provide bonuses at the OYE sale of champions amounting to \$76,000.

Her passion for promoting youth in agriculture stems from her own background.

When Harrel was in the fifth grade at Leedey, young Jimmy Harrel moved to town and enrolled in the sixth grade.

"We liked each other at that point, went on a church skating party to Clinton, sat together and never said a word to each other all the way there, skated, and came back to Leedey." Harrel laughed. "Quite a date!"

The two dated through high school and became engaged during her first year of college at Northwestern Oklahoma State while Jimmy was at Oklahoma State. After a year, Harrel transferred to OSU where she graduated with a degree in Vocational Home Economics Education, and Jimmy graduated with degrees in Animal Science and Agriculture Education.

The Harrels were married before her senior year at OSU and will celebrate their 55th wedding anniversary this year.

After college, Harrel began teaching Home Economics at Putnam High School. A year later, she started the Vocational Home Economics program in her hometown of Leedey, served as advisor to the Future Homemakers of America for 16 years, and served as high school counselor for five years.

As school counselor, she realized many of her students weren't aware of how smart they were, and felt additional recognition should be available for their academic talents. So, she organized an academic bowl team.

“We'd go to academic contests and a team member would speak out with the correct answer to a difficult question, and look at me and say ‘how did I know that?’” Harrel said. “Scholarships, medals and trophies came rolling in for those students.”

Today, Leedey Academic teams are winning state championships.

The Harrels are also committed to supporting their church, community, and state, whether it is assisting borrowers with loans, purchasing 4-H and FFA projects at local, county and state premium auctions, or supporting Oklahoma State's Oklahoma Agriculture Leadership Encounter groups. Harrel has had the privilege to join this group of OSU students as they traveled to South Africa, Spain, Canada, Italy, Ireland and Scotland.

Harrel is serving her second term on the state Career and Technology Board, has served two terms on the Oklahoma Arts Council, received the Governor's Arts award, the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation Board, and the Multi-County Youth and Family Services. She has been named by the Diamond Hats as Ag Woman of the Year, and received awards at the State FFA convention, is Dewey County Historical Hall of Fame Member, was a Leedey Teacher of the Year, and along with her husband, received the Dewey County Farm Bureau Farm Family of the year award. She serves on the Board of Directors of the Bank of Western Oklahoma.

Her volunteer efforts, along with life-long friend, Robetha Fariss, enabled town celebrations in Leedey for the opening of a new medical clinic, a fire station and community building, a week-long “Roll of Thunder” Commemoration and Art Show, and a “Home for the Holidays Parade of Heroes” to show school age children the success stories of former graduates of Leedey Schools.

She takes great pride in being involved with youth and agriculture but remains humble about her contributions. When asked to give the Commencement address at the high school last May, she laughed and said she thought they had the wrong number.

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Editor's note: This is part of a continuing series of stories on Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture. The project is a collaborative program between the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food & Forestry and Oklahoma State University to recognize and honor the impact of countless women across all 77 counties of the state, from all aspects and areas of the agricultural industry. The honorees were nominated by their peers and selected by a committee of industry professionals.

Photo Caption: Marilyn Harrel of Leedey is a life-long advocate for agriculture and youth. She is being recognized as a Significant Woman in Oklahoma Agriculture.

