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FLORIDA AGRICULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM CELEBRATES 30 YEARS OF AGRICULTURAL LITERACY IN FLORIDA SCHOOLS

GAINESVILLE – Florida Agriculture in the Classroom, Inc. (FAITC) is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. In honor of the special occasion, the non-profit organization will hold a Farm-to-Fork dinner Thursday Nov. 3 at Sunny Acres Lodge in Polk City.

The event called ‘Boots, Barns and Books’ will feature Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services’ Chef Justin, a special video of FAITC’s history, a clay shoot and a buggy ride of the scenic location in Polk County.

“We’re very proud of how the organization has grown over the years,” said Tamara Wood, chairman of Florida Agriculture in the Classroom and representative of Florida Citrus Mutual on FAITC’s board of directors. “We’re reaching more K-12 teachers and students with our popular elementary school reading program Florida Agriculture Literacy Day, school garden curricula *Gardening for Grades* and *Gardening for Nutrition* and school garden mini grants and school garden teacher workshops and farm tours.”

FAITC estimates it reaches an average of 6,000 Florida teachers and 160,000 Florida students in kindergarten through 12th grade each year.

FAITC began in the 1980s with other state Agriculture in the Classroom programs at the request of then U.S. Agriculture Secretary John Block. He recognized the importance of educating teachers and students in K-12 general education classrooms about agriculture by infusing agricultural concepts into reading, writing, science and social studies instruction. Because Americans were becoming so removed from the farm, he asked states to create Agriculture in the Classroom programs to help address the issue.

Florida agriculture industry leaders accepted the challenge, and incorporated Florida Agriculture in the Classroom on Aug. 12, 1986 with three board members - Kelvin Robinson of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), Elin Oak of the Florida Phosphate Council and Polly Golden of the Florida Beef Council.

The program operated under the umbrella of FDACS in the early years, and began developing educational materials and holding teacher workshops around the state. FDACS’ Doty Wenzel served as its executive director at the time.

“I’m just so appreciative of the entire industry that got behind Florida Agriculture in the Classroom and kept it going and I look forward to more good things to come from it in the future,” said Kevin Morgan, assistant to the president of Florida Farm Bureau who was one of FAITC’s first board members.

In the mid-1990s, FAITC got a boost when the Florida agriculture industry worked together with the help of Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association's Butch Calhoun to create the Ag Tag specialty license plate, one of the first specialty license plates to hit the street. It provided the steady source of funding the organization needed, and allowed FAITC to hire its first full-time executive director Deena Stokes in 1998. After that, FAITC developed its signature *Keeping Florida Green* curriculum with lessons about Florida's citrus, beef, dairy and horticulture industries, among other commodities.

"Getting the Ag Tag license plate was a huge effort on the part of so many in the industry," said Joan Kyle, long-time treasurer of FAITC and a representative of the Florida Fertilizer & Agrichemical Association on its board of directors. "The level of support I received from the agricultural community for the Ag Tag was amazing."

In fact, the Ag Tag celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, too. With every purchase of an Ag Tag, \$20 goes to FAITC to support its programs. Since then, FAITC continued to grow under its next executive director hired in 2003, Lisa Gaskalla.

It began its elementary reading program Florida Agriculture Literacy Day in 2004, and began writing its own children's books with the help of the FDACS' Division of Marketing in 2007. In 2009, it launched its school garden program with the development of school garden curriculum *Gardening for Grades* in 2011 and *Gardening for Nutrition* in 2014 and \$500 school garden mini grants offered each school year thanks to funding it received from USDA and FDACS through the Specialty Crop Block Grant program. *STEMming Up Gardening for Grades*, a secondary school garden curriculum, will debut in 2017.

Of course, FAITC continues to offer professional development workshops to teachers around the state throughout the year, and ties lesson instruction in the morning to crops teachers see in the afternoon on farm tours. It boosted its appeal with Florida teachers in 2013 by hiring former classroom teacher Becky Whitmer Sponholtz who has improved the organization's curriculum and teacher workshop offerings.

Next school year, FAITC will partner with international agribusiness company Agrium to host two 'Seed Survivor' mobile learning trailers that will visit elementary schools around the state to educate students about seed germination and plant growth. In addition, it will introduce Agrium's new 'Journey 2050' educational platform that uses a farming game to educate students in 7th through 12th grade about what sustainable farming means.

Partnering with organizations with similar missions is the name of the game for FAITC as it tries to leverage its resources with other groups. In fact, it's very involved with the National Agriculture in the Classroom Organization and AITC programs in other states, and it worked together with FDACS' Farm to School program and the University of Florida/IFAS' Family Nutrition Program to hold its first joint school garden workshop for teachers in June at Bok Tower Gardens in Lake Wales. Look for more such collaborations in the future.

In the meantime, for more information about FAITC's 30th anniversary dinner 'Boots, Barns and Books,' please visit its website at <http://faitc.org/30th/>

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