

Chris Thompson honored with Kentucky FFA Golden Owl Award

By Kentucky Ag Connection

Chris Thompson, an agriculture teacher at Pendleton County High School and a Pendleton County native, has been recognized with a regional Golden Owl Award for his dedication to agricultural education.

Presented by the Kentucky FFA Foundation, the award honors educators who inspire students and make lasting contributions to agricultural learning.

Thompson described the recognition as especially meaningful because it came from the organization that first sparked his passion for agriculture.

Growing up in a rural community, Thompson said agriculture was always a part of his life. His interest grew through participation in FFA and the guidance of his high school agriculture teacher, Clay Sullivan.

The experiences inspired Thompson to pursue a bachelor's degree from the University of Kentucky, followed by a master's degree in agricultural education from Morehead State University and a second master's degree in administration from Georgetown College.

Thompson believes creating a welcoming classroom is the foundation of student success. "Students in my classroom are safe," he said.

"They can be themselves. I strive to make sure that they understand that I accept them for who they are and that I respect their opinions and I respect them as an individual."

"If there's no trust in the classroom or if you're scared, you're not going to learn," Thompson said. "So therefore, we have to make sure that those barriers are broken before we move forward."

Thompson students gain practical experience through projects such as building rabbit hutches, completing floral design assignments, working in the school greenhouse, performing animal dissections, and constructing a 10-by-12-foot storage shed for the school.

Beyond the classroom, Thompson partners with organizations including the Pendleton County Farm Bureau and the local fair board to provide students with meaningful community service and career experiences.

Reflecting on the award, Thompson said, "It makes me proud that I have put in the work and that I have done things that have gotten me to that level."

Photo Credit: kentucky-ffa

Teacher Mercedes Branham earns Kentucky FFA Golden Owl Award

By Kentucky Ag Connection

Carlisle County High School agriculture educator Mercedes Branham has been recognized with a regional Golden Owl Award for her dedication to agricultural education and her efforts to inspire students.

With 10 years of teaching experience, Branham was selected for the honor by the Kentucky Future Farmers of America (FFA) Foundation, which recognizes agriculture teachers who help prepare future leaders. Nominations for the award come from students, colleagues and community supporters.

Branham earned her bachelor's, master's and specialist degrees in agricultural education from Murray State University. Her path toward becoming an agriculture educator began when she discovered her passion for agriculture and FFA during high school.

"When I first entered high school, I had in mind that I wanted to be a veterinarian," Branham said. "It was my freshman year that I discovered a love of all things agriculture and FFA. My high school ag teachers were like second parents to me and I knew I wanted to be that positive influence for someone, too."

Today, Branham focuses on creating a welcoming classroom where students can build knowledge, confidence and personal growth.

"I try to create a safe space for all my students," Branham said. "Yes, I want them to learn about agriculture, but more than that, I want them to grow personally and know that I am there for them through successes and failures."

Branham believes students learn best when they can apply classroom lessons to practical situations.

"When the students can make connections between lessons we have in class to hands-on learning experiences that directly prepare them for the real world and they can see the immediate value, I think that makes the biggest impact," Branham said.

Through greenhouse projects and other hands-on activities, Branham has helped students gain confidence and discover new interests. She also supports the community through involvement in organizations such as the Carlisle County Farm Bureau board, WAVE Committee and school leadership groups.

A major achievement for Branham has been expanding the Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) for All initiative, helping students develop career skills and entrepreneurial opportunities.

"My students are tracking hours in their projects regularly and many of my students have successful businesses because of an SAE project they started their freshman year," Branham said.

Branham credits her students, families and community partners for the program's continued success and views the Golden Owl Award as recognition of a shared effort.

Photo Credit: kentucky-ffa