



WORKING FOR THE PEOPLE OF HENDERSON COUNTY

By Toni Garrard Clay

AGRI LIFE EXTENSION SERVICES SEEKS TO EDUCATE AND IMPROVE LIVES

FOR DECADES, an organization in Henderson County has been on a mission to educate people. Whether it's in the field of agriculture, health and wellness or community and economic development, the agents with the AgriLife Extension Service are dedicated to sharing knowledge and improving lives.

"Our extension agents are educators," said District Extension Administrator Sheila Lewis. "What makes us unique is that all of our education efforts are research based. We have the researchers that have gathered the information and we have agents who take that information to the people."

There are three agents in Henderson County taking what they know to the people. Rick Hirsch is the county coordinator and has served over 21 years as the county's ag and natural resources agent. Lauren Tedford has served two years as the family and consumer science agent. And Caroline Tyler was recently hired to serve as the 4-H and youth development agent.

The AgriLife Extension Service is part of the Texas A&M System. The system is comprised of three parts: teaching, research and extension. Because A&M is the designated land grant university for the state of Texas, research and extension are state mandated components. The extension component is an informal outreach effort in which the information collected through research is shared.

"Our agency is charged with taking proven research-based information and disseminating it to the public," said Hirsch.

According to Lewis, the extension service is present in 250 of the 254 counties in Texas. "We have a presence across almost all of Texas," she said. "In almost every county, there is [at least] an agriculture and natural resources agent and a family and consumer science agent."

The extension program gives the various county agencies a great deal of autonomy, allowing agents to work with the public to determine what programs will best serve the needs of their communities.

"Henderson County has a strong history of having a very progressive and interactive extension program," said Hirsch. "A lot of credit for that goes to the agents here before us, like Wendell Tackett and Gayle Finch. They laid a foundation we're still building on today that involves a tremendous amount of volunteers. Our volunteers are the key to our success."

In his work as the ag agent, Hirsch works with a number of volunteer groups, such as the beef cattle committee, the horse committee, the wildlife committee, the 4-H program and master gardeners. In her role as the family and consumer science agent, Tedford helps present programs like Walk Across Texas, diabetes education, the Do Well/Be Well health program and food service manager training, to name a few. And 4-H and youth development





Extension Agent Lauren Tedford reminds elementary students that fresh fruit and vegetables are a great way to fuel up.



The Henderson County Master Gardeners host a plant sale at their spring conference.

agent Tyler is just launching her efforts to work with the ever-changing needs of today's young people. For example, the 4-H program includes archery, photography and a robotics project.

"Each of those areas have volunteers with whom we work to develop and plan programs for the people of Henderson County," said Hirsch. "That's a simple statement, but it encompasses a tremendous amount of work. There are hundreds of volunteers who help present extension programs by volunteering tens of thousands of hours."

The various committee members serve a set period, such as three years, and then rotate off and are replaced by new members in order to "keep new ideas flowing."

"Our volunteers represent all parts of the county from all walks of life," said Hirsch. "We work with everybody, not just farmers and ranchers." Hirsch noted the success of the extension service is also attributable to office manager Sharla Paris and 4-H secretary Angela Hemphill.

"People I talk to who know what the extension service does are very passionate and supportive about it," said Tedford.

Tedford expends a great deal of energy working to share health, wellness and nutrition information, especially with those who may be lacking in some basic health knowledge. She talks to people about how to read nutrition labels and how to eat better. She provides appropriate car and booster seats to those who don't have them and offers childcare education for childcare workers. She also certifies the food managers on the staffs of businesses that serve food to the public or to people in their care, such as hospitals and nursing homes. Since there is no county health

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Participants listen to a presentation at the Tri-County Forage Utilization & Weed Control Walkabout, cosponsored by the Henderson County Beef Cattle Committee



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inspector — Gun Barrel City is the only municipality in the county with its own health inspector — it is particularly important that food managers know and enforce good food handling practices.

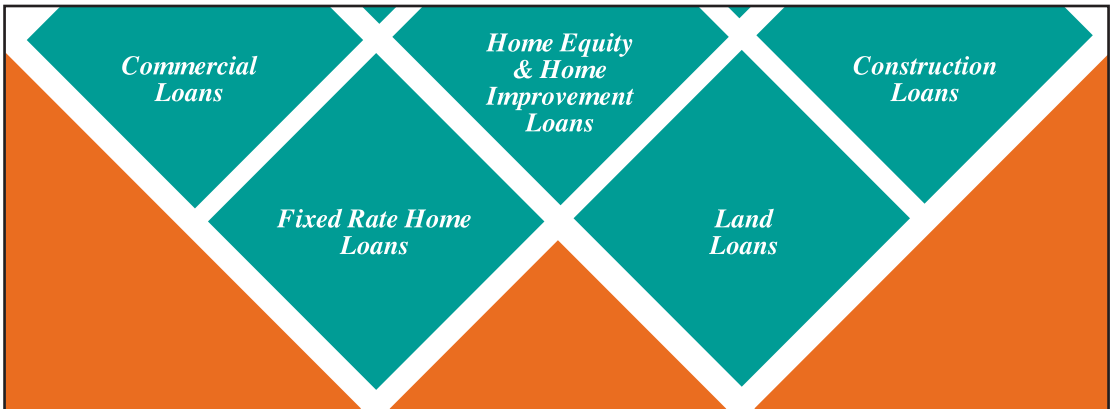
The extension service stays flexible in order to address the changing needs and issues affecting people. “We have to be adaptable,” said Hirsch. “When a drought hits, we have to be able to address it quickly, which we did in 2006 and 2011. The needs of youth change. 4-H is not just about cows, plows and sows. ... We want to be proactive, not just reactive to the issues that affect people.”

The ability to be proactive is possible because of the constant in-flow of theoretical and applied research

from A&M and other universities. “That’s how the extension service is designed to work,” said Hirsch. “Sharing information in a way that benefits the lives of people is the goal.”

Tedford said she receives a lot of joy from those times in which a participant in a class or program has a “lightbulb” moment. “For instance,” she said, “when you see someone in the diabetes education class register ‘Oh, I didn’t realize what I was doing to my body,’ that leads to a lifestyle change, because they really understand what they need to be doing and why. That excites me as an educator.”

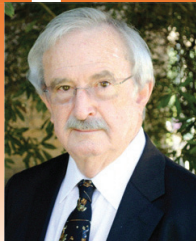
For information on upcoming events and programs offered by the extension service in Henderson County, visit henderson.agrilife.org or call 903-675-6130.



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nhunter@cnbtexas.com



MATT TYLER
 (903) 729-6043
 ext. 2302
mtyler@cnbtexas.com



JENNIFER MORRISON
 (903) 675-0011
 ext. 4113
jmorrison@cnbtexas.com
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739 E. Tyler Street, Athens, TX • 903.675.0011
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