

Educator spotlights love of agriculture

By Josette Keelor

Some agriculture teachers might find middle school tough for inspiring a love of agriculture.



Ritenour

Children change a lot at that age, said Derek Ritenour, an agriscience educator at Peter Muhlenberg Middle School in Woodstock.

"They don't know what they want," he said. "They're still learning who they are and what their interests are."

It isn't until high school or later that many students settle into their niche career path, but that understanding is also why Ritenour, this year's Virginia Agriscience Teacher of the Year, said he loves teaching middle school.

Agriscience today is also at an age of exponential growth, learning what it is and where it fits



Courtesy photo

Students in Derek Ritenour's agriscience class at Peter Muhlenberg Middle School in Woodstock participate in their first Lego challenge last school year in a competition to see which group could build the strongest bridge. Pictured, from left, are Victor Burgwald, Gracie Holzbauer, Jessica Sharp, Hunter Mullins and Trevor Vormbrock. Ritenour had to stop this group at 163 pounds.

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into an evolving world market.

Ten years from now, Ritenour said, "I'll have kids do jobs that we haven't even thought of yet."

Anticipating careers that will likely include more biotechnology, Ritenour said, "We are needing to feed and clothe and house and medicate a world that is ever-changing."

"I don't know exactly what it looks like, but it's exciting," he said.

Named Virginia's Agriscience Teacher of the Year at the 89th Annual Virginia State FFA Convention in Blacksburg, Ritenour followed in the footsteps of his mentor, Central High School agriscience teacher and FFA adviser Sherry Heishman — one of three teachers Ritenour credits with helping him grow an interest in the subject. Heishman, a 30-year

teaching veteran, was last year's state and national teacher of the year. Ritenour has been teaching for nine years and called it humbling to be chosen from among more than 200 agriculture educators around the commonwealth.

He also thanked Randy Ward and George Bowers for the time and effort they put into the subject.

"Being in agriscience as a student in Shenandoah County was really the inspiration for me to want to teach," Ritenour said.

A unique place for its rural landscape and easy proximity to Washington, D.C., Shenandoah County affords its students opportunities that other exclusively rural or suburban areas might not have — like the diversity of production in the valley and advances that take farming into the future through the use of hydroponics and robotics.

Such advances help agriculture teachers make classroom lessons "so very

relevant," Ritenour said.

Students learn "where it all comes from" and "how they can make the best of the world around them."

Ritenour received his award at last week's Virginia Association of Agriculture Educators' professional development conference in Woodstock, where teachers from around the commonwealth gathered to talk shop and see how Shenandoah County adds its own unique twist to a growing and expanding field.

Though glad to show off his home, Ritenour said Shenandoah has an esteemed reputation for agriculture that it more than earned, and he hopes to pass it on.

"There are just so many things that I could teach," he said. "I'm not creating farmers but hopefully I'm creating good consumers."

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