

Swisher/Sunbelt Ag Expo

Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release
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For Immediate Release

WESLEY C. PARKER NAMED 2022 KENTUCKY FARMER OF THE YEAR

Wesley Parker was raised on a 150–acre dairy farm in Christian County, Kentucky, where his family grew silage and hay for their cows and a small crop of tobacco. In the late 1970s, they transitioned out of the milk business into raising hogs. Parker recalled, “My dad, brother, and brother-in-law and I formed a partnership that worked well for a while. But in the 1980s, we went through some very tough times. My brother and brother-in-law had to take jobs in town. I stayed with it, growing row crops and raising a few beef cows.”

The decision to stick with farming was rooted in part in his educational background. Parker had spent four years earning a BS degree in Agriculture from Murray State University, graduating in 1976. It was also the place where he met his future wife, Marsha, who obtained a BS degree in Home Economics in 1977. She remembered, “Wesley and I met on the very first day in our first 7:30 a.m. class, and we married the year I graduated. I guess you could say that getting up that early worked out pretty well.”

Marsha had a full-time job as a University of Kentucky Extension Agent for Family and Consumer Sciences, so she and Wesley were able to financially survive those difficult years in the 80s when a lot of farms in the area went under due to drought conditions, crop failures, and market difficulties. They also raised two daughters, Angela (“Angie”) and Erin.

“Our girls were instilled with a love of the land,” Parker said. “They got to experience work the way we did growing up, feeding calves, helping with the strawberries, peppers, tobacco, and whatever else we were doing that we thought would make some money at the time.”

Now married and parents themselves, Angela Parker Bronson, 41, and Erin Parker Thomas, 39, both live in the Nashville, Tennessee area. Their proud dad said, “Fortunately, my daughters married intelligent, hard-working, professional men. Angie’s husband, Stewart Bronson, is a home builder in South Nashville. Erin’s husband, Bryan Thomas, is a construction law attorney, and between them, we have five grandchildren

from the ages of one to twelve whom we enjoy immensely.” He added, “They like coming back to the farm to play, hunt, and help out when needed. Our daughters are active volunteers at their kids’ schools and church.” Marsha Parker retired after thirty years of working for UK Extension and helps on the farm, especially around planting and harvest times.

Parker Farms began with 200 acres of rented land. Today Wesley Parker operates 1650 acres, with 1250 rented and 418 acres owned. His yields are as follows: 633 acres of yellow corn yielding 225 bushels/acre; 167 acres of white corn yielding 240 bushels/acre; 843 acres of soybeans yielding 59 bushels/acre; 802 acres of wheat yielding 90 bushels/acre and 7 acres of Burley tobacco yielding 2600 lbs/acre. He also raises five beef cows and has one bull; five feeders of 600 lbs/average are sold annually.

Parker’s corn, soybeans, and wheat are marketed in a combination of cash sales, and hedge to arrive contracts, and storage hedges. Tobacco is raised on a contract basis with Philip Morris. And the calves are sold as feeders in the fall of each year.

As his operation is a combination of owned and rented land, Parker said he works with a variety of landowners, some out of state, who have varied professional backgrounds. “One of them lives in Hawaii, one in Florida, and one in Tennessee. I’ve learned over the years,” he stated, “to find out what’s important to them and what their goals are. That way I can look out for their interests to the best of my ability, as well as my own. It’s an important lesson to learn in life: take care of the people around you—your family, friends, church members, and business colleagues. If you do that, everything else falls into place.”

As a Conservation District Supervisor, Parker is exposed to many ideas and practices that help conserve the land and natural resources. He commented, “I’ve tried many at different times: cover crops, grass waterways, no-till, minimum till, ditch crossing, and tree plantings. I also raise a lot of wheat to help hold the ground together.”

And speaking of holding the ground together, December 11, 2021 delivered a physical thrashing to the western region of Kentucky and northwestern Tennessee in the form of an EF-1 tornado. Winds of 100 mph a half-mile wide stayed on the ground for roughly three hours with deadly and catastrophic results. Parker recalled, “We were blessed to survive it, and our house sustained only minor damage. But it destroyed shops, barns, and four out of five of our grain bins on both our land and on several of our rented farms.”

“That weather event,” he added, “certainly made it a very difficult year, both physically and mentally. But we came through it intact, so we know God was watching over us. The cleanup, rebuilding, and repairing are works in progress.”

In recent years, Parker has identified and accomplished a number of farming goals. These include evening out the fertility across the farm by starting grid sampling and use of variable rates of fertilizer and lime. He also wanted to improve the wildlife habitat on the home farm and took steps to preserve trees and woods, leaving some crop in edges of field for winter feed.

Parker added, "Lately I've been able to more timely plant and harvest by keeping a newer line of equipment. In order to increase grain drying and storage to facilitate harvests I built a dryer and two bins in 2009 and have added a bin every couple of years since." He also stays abreast of new technology by exploring varieties of crops, investing in equipment, computers, and studying crop genetics.

Parker's consistent participation in community and industry associations has been a hallmark of his farming activities. On the county level, he has served in various leadership capacities on the Christian County Farm Bureau's board of directors and is currently chairman of its policy development and budget committee. He is chairman of the board of directors of Southern States and vice chair of the Christian County Conservation District; he is also a member of the Christian County Pork Producers and Cattlemen's Associations. On the state level, he was awarded the Kentucky Farm Bureau Farmer of the Year award in 2021 and serves as a voting delegate at the Kentucky Farm Bureau's annual meeting. Parker hosted KFB Young Farmer Summer Convention two different summers. On the national level, he served as a delegate for the KFB Congressional Tour to Washington, DC in 1990, 1999, and 2013 with his wife, Marsha.

Marsha Parker has been active since 2009 with Jobs for Life, an organization that helps jail inmates and women in drug rehabilitation. She is also a member of the Christian County Farm Bureau board of directors and serves on the Building and Fair Committee. On the state level, Marsha is a presenter for IFAL (Institute for Future Agricultural Leaders) and is a Kentucky Farm Bureau annual meeting voting delegate. In the past she's also participated in many National Extension Association FCS meetings and received in 2011 its Distinguished Service Award.

The Parkers are very involved in Southside Church of Christ in Hopkinsville where both have taught Sunday school for decades and have been active in a number of leadership roles. In 2018, they had the opportunity to go on a small-group mission trip to Costa Rica. Marsha recalled, "We were so taken with the open-mindedness and warm hospitality of the people there. It was one of the friendliest places we've ever been, and it was a truly rewarding experience."

When Wesley and Marsha Parker take time out from farming, once or twice a year they hitch up their fifth wheeler and go exploring beautiful spots in their state and down into Tennessee. They've also taken longer trips out West. Parker said, "We've visited Glacier Park in Montana, Mount Rushmore in South Dakota, and Yellowstone National

Park. There's something wonderful about the great open spaces out there where the sound of elk bugling may be the loudest thing you hear all day."

As to future expansion, Parker plans to keep the family farm stable with the hope that the kids or grandkids will carry on if they so desire. He said, "I try to continually improve things as they are, but wouldn't turn down expansion opportunities if they were close by. Our efforts over the last twenty years have paid off in terms of consistent improvement in crop yield and prices. There's a lot of satisfaction in that, and we are certainly grateful for all those blessings."

A distinguished panel of judges will visit Wesley Parker, along with the other nine state winners via zoom at a later date this summer. The judges include John McKissick, long-time University of Georgia agricultural economist at Athens, Georgia; David Wildy, Manila, Arkansas, the overall winner of the award in 2016; and Joe West, Tifton, Georgia, retired dairy scientist and assistant Dean of the University of Georgia Tifton Campus.