



Growing Florida's greatest crop

By Jack Payne, jackpayne@ufl.edu, @JackPayneIFAS

Maybe Mark Wheeler was bound to be a leader. He grew up in a family where you had to be confident and assertive to be heard, and you had to be ready to back up your viewpoint against kitchen-table challenges.

It helped make him who he is today, says Wheeler. But it also created a bit of a self-acknowledged blind spot. Because he was so accustomed to being challenged, he interpreted silence as ascent, even approval.

Now, as the chief financial officer of Wheeler Farms in Lake Placid, he recognizes that his industry colleagues may not be as quick to spar with him as his sister and two brothers were.

He came to this realization in part through the kind of growth that good leadership training can provide.

THE WEDGWORTH EXPERIENCE

When he attended the University of Florida/IFAS Wedgworth Leadership Institute, the then 26-year-old Wheeler was among the youngest of what are now 250 alumni who work in citrus and other areas of agriculture.

Through the Wedgworth Institute, we didn't make a diamond out of coal. But we tested Wheeler, just in a different way than his parents and three siblings did at the dinner table. We sent him to a shelter in Miami, put a ladle in his hand and had him



Mark Wheeler with his wife Christi, son Leland and daughter Sarah Beth.

look into the weather-beaten face of a homeless man holding a plate. We put him in state prison — as a visitor, of course — to get a look at the state's electric chair and to talk to inmates.

Wheeler concluded that perhaps part of what made his life different from theirs was luck. It strengthened his capacity for empathy, which he said guides his business decisions and interpersonal interactions. It stayed with him as he served as Florida Citrus Mutual's board of directors president from 2012 to 2014.

We know how to grow things in Florida — oranges, grapefruit, limes, you name it.

Fortunately, we also know how to grow leaders.

CHALLENGE DEMANDS TALENT

Our agriculture and natural resources industries are facing massive challenges:

- How to feed Florida and the world
- How to adapt to climate change and sea-level rise
- How to protect the natural resources that make agriculture possible and make Florida a draw for visitors.

Throwing money at the challenges isn't feasible; these challenges are too grand. We have to throw talent at them.

It's a lot more cost-effective to produce homegrown talent than to bid at auction in a national job market.

And it assures us that Floridians will lead Florida.

So well-executed leadership training may yield the most important of the nearly 300 crops grown in Florida. It's the development of visionary, bold, honest, earnest, get-it-done people whose talent multiplies itself by bringing out talent in others.

Leadership training can also fuel the economy. The average Wedgworth graduate produces at least three jobs, a UF study found last year.

SUPPORT NEEDED

Wedgworth is at capacity. We have people clamoring for the tools they need to be better Floridians.

That's why we asked the Legislature for nearly \$900,000 this year to expand our leadership training. Overall, it would enable us to deliver the training that brings out the leader in hundreds of Floridians in the next decade. It would also allow us to serve an additional 100 client-based participants annually — that means citrus growers and other agriculture industry professionals who enroll in our courses.

The citrus industry has been a tremendous source of research support for UF/IFAS. We hope we can also count on your support as we seek to prepare the next generation of leaders equipped to face the complex challenges of agriculture. 🍊

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