



Hurner (second from right) helped organize volunteers to wash the clothing of those working to restore power after Hurricane Irma.

Going above and beyond

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The 1989 freeze wiped out Hurner Groves in Sebring. It also strengthened the resolve of one of its would-be heirs to continue the Hurner family line in citrus. She just didn't turn out to be a grower.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Laurie Hurner spends plenty of time in other people's groves as the citrus agent for Highlands County. It's where she harvests the ground truth to supplement the discovery that comes out of the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS).

What makes Hurner such an effective clearinghouse for citrus science is her willingness to share credible information, no matter what the source. That's why she frequently invites growers to "campus," the Highlands County Extension office.

Her citrus roundtables have become can't-miss gatherings for the local citrus community. It's such an open discussion that there is no posted agenda. Hurner runs them as a forum to mix science with growers' raw observations.

When a grower at a roundtable

observed that his yields were up since he joined a citrus health management area, Hurner reinforced his message by reporting that his experience was consistent with UF/IFAS researchers' findings. She added that other research indicated that coordinated spraying saved on chemical and labor costs.

This is the kind of two-way street that Extension is all about. It doesn't happen automatically. Ray Royce of the Highlands County Citrus Growers Association said Hurner had to earn the community's confidence in Extension.

She did it by doing what a good agent does, Royce said. She provides helpful programming. She extends knowledge from the Citrus Research and Education Center to the grower. She connects people who need information to the sources of that information.

STAYING IN CITRUS

Some of what makes Hurner an exceptional agent isn't in her job description. It's in her genes. She's the fifth Hurner generation in citrus and a second-generation citrus agent. Her father, Tim, worked for 30 years in the jobs she has now.

Hurner lives close to the house her

parents still live in, the one they brought her home to from the hospital in 1970. She grew up in Sebring as a 4-H kid, went to Sebring High and attended Florida Southern College in Lakeland with a dream of becoming a lawyer.

Then she attended a citrus barbecue on campus that rekindled her love for citrus people. Citrus was where she belonged, she decided.

After a career that included nearly a decade as a grower liaison for Florida Citrus Mutual, Hurner became a citrus agent five years ago. She added county Extension director to her duties two and a half years later.

HELPING AFTER HURRICANE IRMA

The memories of 1989 continue to drive her. Even among the many accounts of selfless service by Extension agents in the wake of Hurricane Irma last year, Hurner's efforts stand out. Again, none of this is in her job description.

Hurner helped organize a laundry brigade to wash the clothing of the men and women brought in to restore power. Concerned that the volunteers were spending too much of their own money at the laundromat headquarters of the operation, she called a fellow alumnus of the Wedgworth Leadership Institute to ask for help. The next day, someone showed up at the laundromat, and with no further explanation than "I'm from Wedgworth," handed over \$200 worth of quarters and left.

With the rallying cry of "Please feed the babies!" Hurner played a key role in getting food to agricultural worker families who were living without electricity and without their main breadwinners, who were working 'round the clock to help farms bounce back.

Leadership like Hurner's matters. It helped her attract and identify a young, competent staff of agents that has Highlands County agricultural leaders hailing the office's performance.

It's the good fortune of UF/IFAS and of the citrus industry that there's a job description that combines two of Hurner's great loves — citrus and Highlands County. 🍊

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