

# OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, OK 73105-4912

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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Betty Thompson, 405-522-6105, [betty.thompson@ag.ok.gov](mailto:betty.thompson@ag.ok.gov)

## Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture Highlight: Dana Bessinger

Agricultural roots run deep.

For Dana Bessinger of Watonga, she has spent her entire life getting back to those roots in one way or another.

“We’re all connected to agriculture,” Bessinger said, “and no matter where you are when you start talking about agriculture, people want to have a connection.”

Bessinger takes pride in the fact that she comes from a long line of agriculturalists. Her great-grandfather, Pleasant Hare, was a cattle buyer. Her grandfather, Uhlan Hare, was a foreman for the Amarillo Stockyards as well as a stock market reporter. Her dad, Patrick Hare, was a county agent for Oklahoma State University extension. Her mother, Sharon Hare Simmons, and her side of the family grew up farming, gardening and showing livestock, and her husband, Barry, is a senior vice president and branch manager for Oklahoma Ag Credit.

Bessinger grew up in Cordell, with a horse trainer and cattle pasture right across the road from her childhood home. She was active in 4-H as well and spent summers working for OSU extension and attending 4-H camps. She knew agriculture was where she was supposed to be, so she decided to major in horticulture at OSU.

“I knew when I was young that it just fit me, that little piece plugged into my heart, and I knew I belonged in the ag college,” Bessinger said, filled with passion.

After getting married and moving to Goodwell, she decided to complete her degree at Oklahoma Panhandle State University. Unfortunately, they did not have a horticulture degree. Since she had already taken numerous horticulture, agronomy, entomology and general agriculture courses, she was on the perfect path to become a science teacher. In 1985 she received her bachelors of science in education and began a very successful 21-year teaching career, including becoming National Board Certified in Early Adolescent Science.

### **Career change**

When her youngest son was graduating from high school, Bessinger knew she needed a change. After a couple years in Stillwater, she received her master's degree in general agriculture. Luckily, an opportunity to work for the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (ODAFF) with the Ag in the Classroom program arose.

"I always had agriculture at the heart of it," Bessinger said. "I loved teaching and I loved getting to know students, but agriculture was really more of a passion to me, as much as teaching was. So when I got the opportunity to put those two together, it was just perfect for me."

Part of her master's degree was a creative component that she worked on collectively with ODAFF. She received a grant from National Ag in the Classroom and created a video called "Action Agriculture" that put music and exercise with agriculture and aligned it with the state physical education standards. She traveled across the state filming farmers and ranchers planting, harvesting and caring for their livestock.

Bessinger laughed as she looked back on her favorite memories from the video, which included filming her son, Jay, cutting down a tree with a 100-year-old saw.

"That saw was quite the challenge," she said.

She also remembered the struggles she faced shooting the video during the winter when it wasn't hay season and the reaction of her committee when they watched and participated in her agricultural exercise video for children.

Bessinger laughed as she recalled their reaction, "They said, 'Man we've never had a presentation like this where we've had to get up and exercise.'"

The DVD can still be found on the Oklahoma Ag in the Classroom website, and it is still used by teachers today – seven years after its creation.

"Promoting the ag industry to teachers all over the state was the perfect fit for me," she said. "Teachers don't always get treated like they're somebody special and I think that was one of the best parts, to me, of being involved with Ag in the Classroom was promoting the ag industry while making teachers feel like, 'Hey, you're doing a very important job.'"

At ODAFF, Bessinger developed activities and lessons that brought agricultural awareness to hundreds of students.

She worked hard to bring the right people and organizations together to make a difference. A few in particular were Oklahoma Ag Credit and CoBank, who have become great sponsors of Ag in the Classroom. She also had the opportunity to work with higher education institutions.

"One of the things I liked the best was meeting with college students ... getting ready to go do their student teaching or in one of their methods classes because I'd been in the classroom," she

said. “I had lots of great resources and a way to teach some not-so-easy skills in a very fun and a way that students will really connect.”

Jamey Allen, ODAFF Director of Market Development Services and past co-worker of Bessinger, said, “Dana brought class, style and creativity to Ag in the Classroom. She was the first to address health and nutrition in the curriculum and worked hard to acquire grant money for the program. She was the first to arrive and the last to leave and was truly an asset to our team. She’s unselfish, always including others and lighting up every room she walks in. Everything she touches looks better afterwards, and the fact that Ag in the Classroom has remained an outstanding program after she left says something about her.”

### **Community activities**

Dana’s commitment to agriculture did not stop with her career.

“I was really fortunate to be able to be a part of Oklahoma Ag Leadership Program,” she said. “It gave me the time to serve on the CASNR Alumni Board, and it just allowed me to reconnect, I guess I can say, even though I’ve always stayed close to agriculture. I took some time where I was more in the education world, and then going to work for the department of agriculture and the market development division just allowed me to reconnect to my agricultural roots.”

Even though she is retired now, Bessinger continues to stay involved in agriculture and stays available to help whenever she can.

“It is my passion – that and OSU,” she said.

She’s a volunteer for 4-H Cloverbuds and helps with Philanthropic Educational Organization programs in her area when needed. High school FFA advisers and district supervisors contact her at times for help. She’s also judged specialty crop grants for ODAFF, the CattleWomen Beef Ambassador Contest, and state 4-H record books. She continues to present workshops when needed and still stays in touch with Ag in the Classroom.

“I don’t ever see myself not promoting the agricultural industry in every way that I possibly can,” she said.

Today, she spends time with her two sons, Travis and Jay, her daughter-in-law, Natalie, and her grandson, Kamden, who is “always begging for an animal or 4-H project.” The Bessingers purchased some land near Stillwater where they are starting to grow blackberries and apples. Dana is happy to be getting back to her horticultural roots.

### **Why it matters**

“For some people, the only portion of the ag industry that they see comes from someone involved in agriculture like I am – the promotion side of it,” Bessinger said.

Job security is huge in the agricultural industry because every day there are people who are oblivious about where their food, clothing and shelter come from, she said.

“I want to make sure I represent those farmers and ranchers in the best way possible and show what kind of integrity goes into when you put a seed in the ground and trust that it’s going to, you know, turn into a corn plant or a wheat plant and it’s going to provide food for everyone, not just themselves but for our state and our nation and even our world,” she said. “I just always felt like I have to make sure I represent them right.”

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**Editor’s note:** This is part of a continuing series of stories on Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture. The project is a collaborative program between the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food & Forestry and Oklahoma State University to recognize and honor the impact of countless women across all 77 counties of the state, from all aspects and areas of the agricultural industry. The honorees were nominated by their peers and selected by a committee of 14 industry professionals. If you would like to make a nomination, visit <http://okwomeninagandsmallbusiness.com/>.



Photo caption: Dana Bessinger (above) is being recognized in the Significant Women in Oklahoma Agriculture series. After a 21-year teaching career, she worked as an Ag in the Classroom Coordinator for 9 years. Now retired, she spends time with her family and continues to give back to agriculture. Dana Bessinger is shown with her son, Jay (below), after an Ag in the Classroom state conference.

