



Advocates for Community and Rural Education

ACRE honors “Champions of Rural Arkansas”

On March 28 about eighty friends, supporters, and members of Advocates for Community and Rural Education enjoyed a gala evening of fun, fellowship, and reminiscing about old times as the organization took time to recognize five outstanding individuals as “Champions of Rural Arkansas.”

The catered reception was held at the Arkansas Activities Association building in North Little Rock.

Planning to make the occasion a yearly event, ACRE leadership chose to honor one person from each area of the state. Honorees were chosen on the basis of their “outstanding and selfless dedication to the people, schools, and communities of rural Arkansas,” according to ACRE Executive Director Lavina Grandon.

This year’s honorees included Jimmy Cunningham, former Representative Harmon Seawel, Police Chief Efre Elliott, Congressman Mike Ross, and A.V. “Buster” Beardsley.

Jimmy Cunningham

Jimmy Cunningham was chosen as the honoree from Northwest Arkansas.

Currently superintendent of the Danville School District, Cunningham was president



Jimmy Cunningham, superintendent of the Danville School District, was honored for his strong leadership and commitment to rural schools and students.



Champion: An ardent defender or supporter of a cause; a warrior. At a gala reception at the Arkansas Activities Association building on March 28, friends, supporters, and members of Advocates for Community and Rural Education honored five “champions” who have given of their time, talents, and hearts to the people of rural Arkansas.

of the Arkansas Rural Education Association for two terms from 2003 to 2007.

His leadership and commitment at that time were key to saving many rural districts from consolidation as well as crafting improvements that benefited many rural children. According to Grandon, he is “the person most associated with rural education in Arkansas.”

Cunningham is in his twenty-second year as an Arkansas educator. Born in Russellville in 1952, he graduated from Plainview-Rover High School in 1970 and then earned a B.S. from Arkansas Tech in 1975, a Master’s in Education from Mississippi State University in 1976, and an administrator’s certificate in 1990.

A patient and tireless worker with a vision for better educational opportunities for Arkansas children, Cunningham says, “It’s not just about my children or your children. It’s about *all* children.”

Besides being past president of the Arkansas Rural Education Association, Cunningham is an officer in the Arkansas Association of School Administrators, a member of the National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition, and the Rural School Administrator Representative to the National Rural Education Association.

He and his wife, Kerry, have two children, Ashley and Lance (deceased 2002), and a granddaughter, Alanca.

As noted at the reception, “Few people have affected rural education in Arkansas as Jimmy Cunningham has.”

Harmon Seawel

The honoree from Northeast Arkansas was former State Representative Harmon Seawel of Pocahontas.

Seawel, a former educator and education leader, preacher, and State Representative, now writes books

about the humor and history of rural Arkansas.

Born in Northeast Arkansas in 1943, Seawel earned a B.A. from Harding University, a M.Z. from the University of Mississippi, and an administrator’s certificate from Arkansas State University.

He returned to his hometown of Maynard in 1969 to serve as that community’s K-12 principal and superintendent for the next 30 years.

Seawel was president of the Northeast Arkansas Administrator’s Association for nine years and secretary of the Arkansas Rural Education Association during the 1990’s.

While serving as State Representative from 1999 to 2004, he was elected Majority Leader of the Arkansas House of Representatives. Fellow Representative Shirley Walters calls him “a great leader and a wonderful mentor for [the] young legislators of that period.”

Seawel was also a true friend of rural Arkansas. Along with Representatives Don House, Johnnie Bolin, and Larry Prater, he brought together rural school supporters to mount a campaign against Governor Mike Huckabee’s consolidation plan. (see CHAMPIONS on p.2)



Rep. Harmon Seawel receives his award for championing rural schools and people in his education career, legislative service, and authorship of books on Arkansas history.

CHAMPIONS, cont.

After being term limited in 2004, Seawel retired to his home in rural Randolph County, where he lives with his wife, Susan. The couple has two sons, Chester and James.

His two books, *I Shorely to God Do Dread It* and *The Fourche River Valley*, detail the humor and history of Randolph County, which he calls “truly a microcosm of the upland South.”

Efrem Elliott

Fellow community member Ellis Berry presents Alzheimer Police Chief Efrem Elliott (left) with his “Champion” award as honoree from Southeast Arkansas.

Rural Arkansas has many unsung heroes who go out every day doing the hard jobs of caring for people and making their community better.

This description fits no one better than ACRE’s honoree from Southeast Arkansas, Chief Efrem Elliott of Alzheimer.

Moving into his position in 2004 after working for Congressman Mike Ross and Senator Hank Wilkins, Chief Elliott decided he wanted to give something back to the community and to bridge the gap between police and community.

Since that time he has organized annual Christmas toy drives, now serving over 800 children annually. He also organizes Kops for Kids Weekends, a local summer fun festival, “Rap Sessions” to connect with local youth and give them hope, job fairs, scholarships, and outreach to the elderly.

Elliott, a Chicago native, graduated from the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. His wife, Tracy, is an Alzheimer native. The couple has three children, Tiarriah, Terrie, and Efrem (E-Two).

At the reception, a letter was read



Rep. Mike Ross speaks with Alenora Williams of Elaine and Dorothy Singleton, ACRE organizer from Alzheimer, about consolidated schools.

from his pastor and mentor, Senator Hank Wilkins, praising Elliott’s dedication and his efforts on behalf of children in his community. Elliott himself says he regards his work as a ministry to help heal broken relationships.

Mike Ross

Congressman Mike Ross, product of rural schools, spoke of the importance to the state of public education.

Congressman Mike Ross of Prescott was chosen to be the honoree from Southwest Arkansas.

Constituents from his Fourth District have the highest praise for Congressman Ross’ energy and efforts on behalf of rural Arkansas’ economy, youth, and environment.

Ross was first elected to the U.S. Congress in 2000. Currently in his fourth term, he serves on the House Committee on Energy, the House Committee on Science and Technology, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s Parliamentary Assembly.

A fifth-generation Arkansan, Ross is the son of public school educators, Dr. and Mrs. Gene Ross. He and his wife, Holly, have two children, Sydney and Alex.

Ross was elected to the Arkansas State Senate at age 29, serving for 10 years. As a fiscally conservative U.S. Congressman, Ross has consistently both introduced and voted for legislation that benefited rural Arkansas.

“Buster” Beardsley

As Master of Ceremonies Don House observed, any movement needs supporters from all walks of life, and one of rural education’s most devoted and effective supporters has been A.V. “Buster” Beardsley of Little Rock, the Champions



ACRE leader Sandy Collins and Senator Bobby Glover, longtime rural school supporter, both of Carlisle, greet each other at reception.



ACRE Executive Director Lavina Grandon presents Central Arkansas “Champion” award to A.V. “Buster” Beardsley.

honoree from Central Arkansas.

Beardsley is the president of First Security Beardsley Public Finance, which he formed in 1992 to serve the financing needs of Arkansas school districts.

Previously Beardsley worked as a consultant in various capacities, serving 118 school districts as financial advisor and issuing approximately one billion dollars in bonds in the course of his career.

Beardsley has lived in Little Rock since he was five years old. He graduated from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville with a degree in Finance. His life has been marked by responsibility, service to others, and commitment to public education.

A life member of the PTA, Beardsley and his wife, Billie, served as co-presidents at two elementaries, two junior highs, and one high school in the Little Rock School District from 1973 to 1998. He has held all the local offices, most of the state offices, including Governor, and two international offices for Optimist International.

He and his wife of 42 years have two children, Scott and Lori, and six grandchildren.

A well-known and outspoken advocate for rural schools, Beardsley can often be found advising superintendents and school boards, encouraging supporters such as ACRE, and informally lobbying legislators on their behalf.

A very special “Thank you” goes out to former State Representative Don House for acting as Master of Ceremonies, to Great American Financial Resources and Dayspring Behavioral Services of Arkansas for corporate sponsorship, and to Minnie Brooks for her wonderful decorating talents.



Master of Ceremonies, former Rep. Don House of Walnut Ridge, visits with ACRE treasurer Renee Carr during a break.

CATCH THE VISION!

The theme for the ACRE summer conference 2008 is Catch the Total Community Vision. As ACRE members we want to do the best for our schools *and* communities. Find out how you can access help for your community in the areas of education, economic development, natural resources, housing/infrastructure/family services, and development of cultural, natural, artistic, and historic heritage assets. Help us meet ACRE's mission of "helping rural schools and communities survive and thrive." Spaces are limited. Register today.

REGISTRATION FORM

ADVOCATES FOR COMMUNITY AND RURAL EDUCATION ANNUAL SUMMER CONFERENCE

July 25-26, 2008
Hilton Garden Inn
Conway, Arkansas

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

PHONE _____ CELL PHONE _____

E-MAIL _____

Are you an ACRE member? () Yes () No If not, please include check for \$10 registration fee made out to Advocates for Community and Rural Education.

ACCOMMODATIONS are assigned on a double-occupancy basis. If you prefer to not share a room, include a \$40 room charge. Please respond below:

_____ I will share a room with _____.

_____ I am willing to share a room with a new friend.

_____ I prefer not to share a room. I am enclosing my \$40 room charge.

_____ I live in the area and will attend but do not need accommodations.

To ensure your attendance, please return this registration form and any fees that apply no later than July 10 to:

Renee Carr
633 Highway 9
Fox, AR 72051

For more information, call Renee Carr at 870-363-4411 or 870-615-2195.
E-mail cpa@mvtel.net

Advocates for Community and Rural Education is a family-friendly organization.
Please feel free to bring your family with you, including young children.

More "Champions of Rural Arkansas" memories —

Left: Representative Harmon Seawel and wife Susan converse with old friends.

Center: Lavina Grandon displays Razorback basketball donated for auction by Ron Crawford.

Right: Calvin and Melony Darrough of Wabbaseka, Clyde Williams of Elaine, and Minnie Brooks of Wabbaseka.



Advocates for Community and Rural Education

Save our schools

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**Helping rural schools and
communities survive and thrive**

**Check out our website at
www.aracre.org**

Where we've been.... And where we're going

Advocates for Community and Rural Education (ACRE) began in 2003 as people in rural communities in Arkansas united to oppose school consolidation, motivated by the conviction that consolidation adversely affects rural children, families, and communities.

Through mobilizing our communities, we were able to reduce the number of school districts targeted for closure from 275 to 57. Still, many of our most vulnerable communities lost their most powerful economic engine, largest employer, and center of cultural and social activity: their school. These closures and the threat of more have impacted rural communities all over the state, but disproportionately majority African-American communities in the Arkansas and Mississippi River Deltas, as documented by two studies by Dr. Jerry Johnson of the Rural School and Community Trust.

Much of our members' work has been to resist further school closures, run qualified candidates for school board, help people understand school funding to avoid losing their schools to strict fiscal accountability laws, advocate for students in stressful situations (overcrowding, excessive bus rides, unsafe and hostile environment, excessive use of suspensions and expulsions, etc.), and recruit qualified personnel.

Time has shown, however, that loss of enrollment and the threat of consolidation of schools is but a symptom of deeper problems in rural communities, such as lack of job opportunities, services, and housing; lack of resources for community development; and absence of defined goals around which the community can coalesce.

Therefore, the ACRE mission has evolved so that we are combining our original education advocacy with a community-driven development process that empowers residents to revitalize the economies and cultural and civic life of their rural communities. To promote authentic and sustainable change, our Community Revitalization Project involves the whole community, focusing on engaging youth and families as leaders in every step of the process.

To date some of ACRE's major accomplishments have been to engage about 650 members in 34 different communities; train 200 individuals to be community leaders and activists in each of the past two summers; effectively stopping further consolidation bills in the Legislature in 2004, 2005,

and 2006; and helping individual chapters with such actions as running school board members, passing millage increases, recruiting qualified personnel, getting off fiscal distress, attracting more students, and improving school climate.

Our most recent accomplishment has been to assemble a coalition of 10 organizations and agencies to offer expertise and assistance to community members in our Rural Community Revitalization Project.

Through this initiative and our education advocacy efforts, we are fulfilling our mission of "helping rural schools and communities survive and thrive." If you have need of ACRE's expertise, assistance is just a phone call or e-mail away.

For information contact lavinagrandon@aracre.org or call 870-429-6543.

State Board Actions in April

The State Board of Education continues to treat the concerns of the parents of the Marvell-Elaine School District with less than the respect they deserve.

Two months ago the parent group asked to testify before the State Board about the lack of student safety and climate conducive to learning in their school after a forced merger between the Marvell and Elaine school districts.

In March their scheduled testimony was postponed at the last minute. In April they were given nine minutes after the meeting had officially adjourned.

Is this an honorable way for a state agency to treat people who have turned to them when all else has failed to secure the safety and continued education of their children?

Congratulations to Omaha, Midland, and Helena/West Helena, Turrell, and Hughes for shedding the dreaded "fiscally distressed" label. Lest we get complacent, however, eight additional districts are being considered for the state's fiscal distress list: Concord, Gentry, Murfreesboro, Jonesboro Westside, Hartford, Mineral Springs, Greenland, and Hermitage. Meanwhile, several districts are nearing or have fallen below the 350 minimum enrollment. Thus, the Omnibus Act and Act 60 continue to change the face of rural Arkansas, and not for the better.

ACRE on You Tube

To view an informative video on ACRE, check out this link:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhwgCMIv_3k