

**OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE,
FOOD AND FORESTRY**

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**Johnnie Keel named 2018 Ag in the Classroom
Teacher of the Year**

Johnnie Keel was once quoted as saying, “It’s so important for us to know and have that background about where our food comes from.”

However, the elementary school teacher with 22 years classroom experience doesn’t stop at the “where” of agriculture.

Through her Oklahoma Ag in the Classroom activities she shares with her students about “who” the individuals are that

devote their lives to provide food and “how” those individuals take care of not only people, but the earth.

Keel, who has taught for 12 years at Truman Elementary in Norman, has been selected as the 2018 Oklahoma Ag in the Classroom Teacher of the Year. She has such a solid reputation for teaching AITC curriculum that she has presented multiple times at the state AITC conference and this year will present at the national AITC conference.

Why is Keel so good at teaching these lessons to those from primarily non-agricultural backgrounds? Possibly because Ag in the Classroom is how she learned about agriculture.

“My ag story doesn’t begin with life on the farm, visiting grandparents as they care for the ranch or helping family plant and harvest the crops,” Keel said.

In 1995 Keel switched careers from an office job in the oil business to an occupation she had desired to pursue for years, teaching. She made this transition with the goal of being “the best educator possible.”

So, Keel attended the Ag in the Classroom workshop at the Cleveland County fairgrounds where Jamey Allen, now market development director for the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (ODAFF), was the presenter.

“Her (Allen’s) enthusiasm and professionalism were contagious,” Keel said. “I was plowed over with ideas of ways to integrate curriculum, with a harvest of lesson ideas that were relevant and meaningful, bountiful with fun activities to engage students.”

The seed planted in that first workshop yielded so much more. Keel and daughter Lori Newmark, a fellow teacher, attended every AITC workshop in the district and the state summer conference.

“I ask my students how many of them eat, wear clothes, live in a home, take medicine,” Keel said. “After the giggles, I tell them all of these things involve agriculture. I’ve planted the seed of curiosity and it’s now my opportunity to teach them how ag effects their daily lives.

Today, Keel is the Gifted Resource Coordinator for her site, which includes providing school-wide enrichments to all third, fourth and fifth-graders as well as weekly enrichments to more than 146 students in the gifted and talented program. She also teaches advanced math class for fourth and fifth-graders.

“Starting ag education early helps students get a perspective on their lives and the world around them,” Keel said. “They learn not only about nutritional aspects of agriculture, but develop respect for the earth, sustainability, and understanding limited resources.”

At a state summer conference, Keel and her daughter used plastic soda bottles to present a workshop demonstration titled, “Mud in the Water.” They said the objective is for students to “learn about soil erosion and water pollution by building a demonstration model from pop bottles” and observing the results. Keel said this model is a way to show that when she added water to each of the three bottles, the flowers with roots will hold more soil than the other two and the one with mulch will hold better than soil alone.

This is just one example of how Keel brings agriculture into the classroom. There are plenty others.

“I have received several Pork Council grants that provided pumpkins for our annual Pumpkin Palooza, where kids estimate, weigh, measure, count and learn about the pumpkin cycle and end by making pumpkin pie in a bag,” Keel said.

In addition to these and many other hands-on activities, Keel puts a face to many of her lessons as she invites guest speakers to come to the school throughout the year. Those guests include a beekeeper, a Native American storyteller sharing about crops and agriculture, the Southwest Dairy Farmers Mobile Dairy Classroom and others.

Robye Kay Jackson, principal at Truman Elementary School, said she would describe Keel’s learning environment as a “masterpiece,” where powerful activities, innovative instructional methods and magic moments are the norm.

Melody Afill, an AITC coordinator, said, “The kids love Johnnie. When you walk in and ask students who teaches them about

agriculture, it's her. She is a teacher in a suburban school who exposes students to agriculture and its importance through activities that are both fun and engaging.”

Keel will be honored at Ag Day on April 10. The annual celebration of agriculture will begin at 10 a.m. at the state capitol in Oklahoma City. Teachers and students from across the state will be recognized as winners of the 2018 AITC “Oklahoma Agriculture” contest. This celebration is open to the public and is free. Sponsors for Ag Day include the Oklahoma Beef Council, Oklahoma AgCredit, Oklahoma Farm Bureau Women, Oklahoma Soybean Board, Dairy MAX, Southwest Dairy Farmers and ODAFF.

“It is still hard to believe I have this honor,” Keel said. “I am very humbled to be representing so many exemplary teachers in our state and to share the message of AITC.”

As mentioned, Keel will attend the national AITC conference, June 26-29, in Portland, Maine. Oklahoma Ag in the Classroom Finalists Tammy Will from Morrison, Kathleen Kendall-Walker from Kendall Whittier Elementary in Tulsa, and Christie Puckett from Maysville will also be attending the national AITC conference in Maine. The Oklahoma AITC Teacher of the Year and the finalists are able to attend the national AITC conference

because of the sponsorship of Oklahoma AgCredit, Farm Credit Associations of Oklahoma and CoBank.

This summer, Keel will also be on the road with Oklahoma AITC June 5-7 touring “Ag on Route 66.” Teachers from across the state travel Oklahoma from Kellyville to Miami to learn more about agriculture by touring beef farms and ranches, berry and mushroom farms, and more.

To learn more about Ag in the Classroom curriculum, visit www.agclassroom.org/ok or contact Audrey Harmon at (405) 740-0160 or audrey.harmon@ag.ok.gov .

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Photo caption 1: Johnnie Keel has been selected as the 2018 Oklahoma Ag in the Classroom Teacher of the Year. Keel is shown here with some of her students at Truman Elementary in

Norman.



Photo caption 2: Johnnie Keel (center) holds a gift basket of teaching resources she received during an awards ceremony as the 2018 Oklahoma Ag in the Classroom Teacher of the Year. Assisting with the presentation at Truman Elementary in Norman where Keel teaches are (l-r) State AITC Coordinator

Audrey Harmon and AITC Coordinator Melody Afill.



