

## Russell Todd Jennings



Russell Todd Jennings, an agriculture teacher at Fluvanna County High School, in Fluvanna County Public Schools, is the Region 5 Virginia Teacher

of the Year. A teacher veteran of 17 years, he began his fifth year in Fluvanna County. He previously taught 13 years for Louisa County Public Schools. Mr. Jennings earned his Bachelor of Science in agriculture education from Virginia Tech in 2000.

The call to teach came early for Mr. Jennings. Factors that influenced his decision to become a teacher included dynamic teachers and Future Farmers of America (FFA) programs; his parents and grandparents; and an innate love of plants, greenhouses, and the FFA. From the age of 13, after his first agriculture science class and joining the FFA, he knew what he wanted to do for the rest of his life—be an agriculture teacher and FFA advisor. Mr. Carpenter, who taught agriculture at Hillsville Intermediate School, and Mr. “Pa” Combs, (as he was affectionately called), who taught agriculture production at Carroll County High School, were pivotal influences in Mr. Jennings’ career path and teaching style. Mr. “Pa” Combs did not accept subpar work. Russell experienced this firsthand when he had to take his sawhorse apart four times to ensure levelness and squareness. The sawhorse is still a treasure to Mr. Jennings, more for its symbolism of accomplishments rather than for its intended purpose!

Mr. Jennings also was influenced by his grandfather, “Pa.” Even though Russell’s dyslexia as a child was undiagnosed and misunderstood, his “Pa” saw his grandson’s potential. He would say, “Don’t worry about Rusty, He’ll do just fine.” Though

academics were a struggle, his parents taught him the value of commitment, hard work, and determination. They never would allow him to let his disability impede his dream of becoming a teacher. His teachers, grandfather, and parents cultivated Mr. Jennings’ love for others and for education.

Interested in civic and professional associations, Mr. Jennings has assumed a variety of roles. He is a board member of the Virginia State FFA Advisory Council Board of Directors and a member of the National and Virginia Associations of Agriculture Educators and the National and Virginia Associations for Career and Technical Education. He previously served as president of the Virginia Association of Agricultural Educators. He is a member of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church, where he assumed various responsibilities. He is a member of the Knights of Columbus Council and is the cofounder of the Knights of Columbus Lenten Fish Fry and Apple Butter Making fundraiser.

Creating a rich learning environment is important to Mr. Jennings. He wrote, “I have found the best way for me to transcend my classroom is to teach and run my greenhouse production class like it is a business. My students...come to class to learn and do a job every day. We have a 30 by 97 foot greenhouse from which I teach. In the spring we have a huge plant sale in which we sell plants that the students grew. This year greenhouse sales were over \$7,000. These profits are used to fund the program itself, pay for materials, and defer the cost of major student trips, like going to the National FFA convention and summer leadership camps. Students are involved in every aspect of greenhouse management. I teach them how to know what to grow, how much to grow, when to water, fertilize, and yes, even talk to the plants. I know not every student will go on to run his or her greenhouse, but I have found that it teaches them how to work with others, why it is important to complete tasks in a timely manner, and how to take initiative and pride in their work and projects.”

Mr. Chuck Winkler, Superintendent of Fluvanna County Public Schools, wrote, “...Russell has taken a program from infancy to that of highly superior quality in just a few short years. He has labored with great success to allow many of our students the opportunity to participate in local, state, and even national activities and event competitions. I have honestly developed a respect and admiration for many of Mr. Jennings’ personal and professional characteristics. He is truly a fine man with a wonderful integrity, solid ethics, and sincere values. Russell constantly demonstrates the qualities that I would attribute to the finest teachers I have ever known. He is extremely enthusiastic and energetic. He displays a deep, sincere investment towards the success of the students in his programs. ...He is a valuable member of our team in Fluvanna County with a clear commitment to our mission and vision.”

“...He has a passion for the field of agriculture like no other,” states Mr. Jason A. Lee, Assistant Principal of Fluvanna County High School. “The agricultural knowledge, experience and dedication that Mr. Jennings possesses is used to provide our students with one of the most authentic learning experiences that our school has to offer. In 2013 Mr. Jennings took ownership of our newly formed agriculture program with the aspirations of making his agriculture program one of the best in the area, and over the last four years he has exceeded expectations. Through his efforts and the hard work of his students, he has developed a self-sufficient program. The expansion of his agriculture program seems to have no end. A program that began four years ago with a teacher, a hoop house, and some anxious students is now a flourishing agriculture department where students are learning horticulture, welding, live-stock management, and small engine repair.”