



Left, as chairman, Likins presides over Orange County Planning Commission meeting. "The same reason I'm in teaching is the same reason I'm on that Planning Commission. In the classroom it's got to be what's in the best interest of the kids. If you're sitting on the Planning Commission it's got to be what's in the best interest of the county."

## In the best interest of the county

### "You've got to walk the walk, not just talk the talk."

Will Likins puts his money where his mouth is. "The same reason I'm in teaching is the same reason I'm on that Planning Commission. In the classroom it's got to be what's in the best interest of the kids. If you're sitting on the Planning Commission it's got to be what's in the best interest of the county. Your interests have to move to the background. The people you're there for have to move to the forefront."

When Will Likins is not teaching Agriculture Education, he is Chairman of the Orange County Planning Commission. It would be an understatement to say he and his fellow Commissioners have been busy recently. Just last Friday, the revised Comprehensive Plan landed on their doorsteps. It took the better part of the weekend for him to carefully read it, once more, cover to cover.

This has been a long drawn-out process. "We were exhaustive. We worked for hours," he says a tad wearily. The Commission hosted two public hearings that drew a combined 500 people. They listened to six hours of comments from 99 people who spoke to the plan. They even took some verbal abuse, yet still, Will Likins says triumphantly, "It was just a GREAT experience."

He's serious. He's happy that people hollered at him! Afterwards, he wrote a letter to every single per-

son who spoke, thanking that person for participating in the democratic process. He paid for the stamps and stationery out of his own pocket.

The rewriting of the Orange County Comprehensive Plan was an exercise in democracy. "So many places just rubber stamp," says Will. "We could have written one and gone to that meeting and said alright, we're going to have the public hearing," adding quickly in the same breath, "Okay, it's over. We're voting tonight."

Then he pauses and says in deliberate, measured tones "Or, you can do what we did. You go out, you write an opening, you go to the public, they tell you all the things they like and all the things they don't like and then you go back and look at all the things that they don't like and say now how can we address these issues. What can we do to help them get what they want?"

The key phrase here is "what THEY want." Not what "I" want. "How do you help the county go where the PEOPLE want to go, not where you want it to go," elaborates Likins. "I think the problem with leaders is they are too focused on what I want and they forget you're really a conduit."

In this particular case, the people weren't particularly happy with the land use map the commissioners had drawn up. Too much residential area, they said. And although the hearings were conducted in a civil and polite manner, Will laughs, "They gave us a pretty hard time." But he hastens to add, "We took it as, 'Hey

you didn't like it and you're speaking out and that's great.' We wanted them to come out, and we wanted to listen. That's why I sent the letters out. I wanted them to understand they didn't hurt anybody's feelings; we just realized they were passionate about their views, and that's a good thing."

The revised plan reflects many of the wishes of those who spoke at the public hearings. It also has a surprise. "What we came up with was an Economic Development Area which is a new category. It's not smoke-stack industry, and it's not residential," explains Likins. "Instead, you can have various kinds of commercial entities, biotech, office complexes...all things that would generate a lot of taxes without generating any burden on the county."

Overall, Likins characterizes the Comprehensive Plan as "not anti-growth; not pro-growth. It's to plan for what's coming. We all know we're going to have change. What we tried to do with the document is to address how we're going to deal with the change."

Ask him what he fears most for the county, he will quickly reply, "if we spin off in a direction without planning for it...if we have uncon-

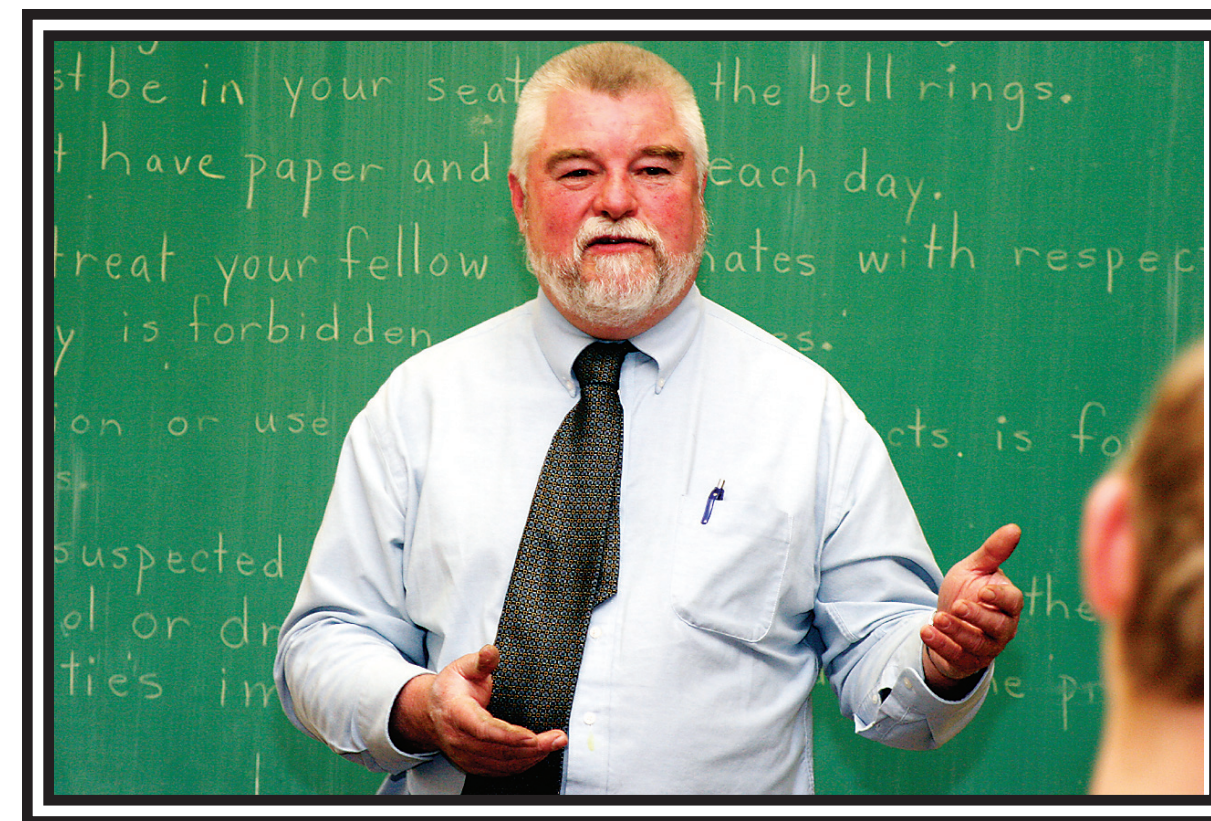
trolled growth, or if we have uncontrolled spending... any of those things." He takes a quick breath, "and what comes right behind that is uncontrolled tax raises...and you run out all the low and middle-income people and you're Stafford. And we don't want to be Stafford," he says shaking his head definitively from side to side.

**"Leaders have got to say 'it's not about what you want, it's not about what I want, it's about people and what they deserve. It's their county.'"**

The Planning Commission is an advisory board. It does not have the power to enforce county ordinances. That lies with the Board of Supervisors. Will Likins doesn't particularly like the word "power." The way he sees it, the Planning Commission is "the conscience. You've drawn attention to the matter and nobody can hide from it anymore." He says if the Commission recommends against something and the Supervisors approve it anyway, "Somebody's going to step up to the plate at the next election and say, 'You know what, you didn't listen to the people.'"

That's what it all boils down to for Will Likins. "Leaders have got to say 'it's not about what you want, it's not about what I want, it's about people and what they deserve. It's their county.' If you're in a leadership role, it's not your county. You've got to put your own self-interests aside. You've got to do what's in the best interest of the county."

# "We do stuff all the time."



## Will Likins

It was February of 1993. The entire state legislature in Richmond was on its feet clapping and cheering. The object of this standing ovation...a bunch of FFA kids from Orange County.

They were being honored for raising, no, earning the money to buy state-of-the-art shop equipment for the Ag Ed building out behind the high school. Their teacher, Will Likins, was a proud man that day because it didn't cost the taxpayers of Orange County one thin dime.

Does he take credit? Heck no. "Those kids did it," he insists. "People always say, 'You did it.'" He shrugs. "I haven't done diddly. I've done my job. I've done what they paid me to do. It's the kids that do it all."

Will's on a roll. "Walk in a hallway at Albemarle High School and just stand there when classes change, or Spotsylvania or Charlottesville High School," he challenges. "And then you come in here and watch our kids and how they treat each other and how they treat teachers and everything and come back and tell me who's got the better kids?" He pauses for a breath. "The kids in Orange are really special. There's something the parents are really doing right here because, for the most part, these kids are well-mannered and eager to learn."

Wow...you sure don't hear that too often these days and times.

There's more. It was 25 years ago and Will Likins and his wife Gill were

just about to accept teaching jobs at an Indian Reservation, when an advisor told Will to check out Orange. Apologizing for the lack of facilities, the advisor countered, "You won't find better kids." Six months into the job, Will confirmed, "You're right. There's no amount of money that matches these kids."

Will Likins is so passionate about his Agriculture Education students that he even worries nights who is going to replace him when it comes time to retire. "They'll easily get somebody who's smarter," he laughs. "They'll probably get somebody who is better trained," he adds self-deprecatingly. "But I just hope they get somebody who's here because they care about the kids and not the dollar, because if all they



care about is the dollar, it'll soak into the kids and turn them off fast."

He's had plenty of job offers for more money at larger school systems. He shakes his head. "To get me to leave these kids...there's no amount of money."

Many of us only know Will Likins as our mild-mannered, patient-as-Job Planning Commission Chairman. But you ought to see what he does for a day job. On a typical day, he'll teach his "kids" three 90-minute blocks about agriculture and agribusiness. Then in the afternoon he'll go out in the field and check up on the boys and girls he's placed in related jobs, or he'll write letters on behalf of his "kids" who've gone on to college, or he'll help with a student loan application, or he'll split a load of firewood for someone who can't do it for themselves.

There is a tendency everywhere to think that Ag Ed students are a bunch of hayseeds who do and learn little more than how to shovel manure and milk cows by hand. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Look at the curriculum for Ag One, for example, with its teaching units for biotechnology, hydroponics, biological pest control, plant physiology, animal anatomy. Move on to Ag Two where they learn mechanics, wood and metal working, welding, electronics, small engines, plumbing and hydraulic systems, masonry, structure building. Or how about the Agribusiness curriculum which delves into such, ahem, old-fashioned technologies as cloning and gene splicing, or the risk/benefits of commodities trading or the peculiarities of international free trade and economic law. Heady stuff.

"Agriculture is a huge field. It's steady growing," says Likins. "We didn't leave anything out, we just added. It's just gotten bigger and bigger. There are 300 careers that have been identified that we train our kids for. We train kids to fit in at any phase of the agriculture business world."

It's not even referred to as FFA anymore. Future Farmers of America became The National FFA Organization in 1988 to "reflect that broadening field of agriculture." Who is the typical Ag student of today? "I always call it 'thirsty,'" says Will. "They want an education but are not sure what they want or why they need it."

"The kid who tells me I'm interested in dairy, we put him to work out on a dairy farm. He gets paid to learn," he says of his after-school employment program. "You can teach beef from now till doomsday, but that kid will learn more in a week on a beef farm."

On this particular day, Will Likins is talking to a class of sophomores about one of those 300 career possibilities: animal technicians. "For some of you who don't know exactly what you want to do yet but you like working with animals," he prefaces, using his hands to illustrate his point... "we can get you through Virginia Tech in two years, not four. You come out



Will Likins shows his students just where to put the screws in wooden cutouts for a project they are building for Ducks Unlimited. An evaluator once characterized Will Likins' teaching style to engaging his students in a conversation, not a lecture.

Photo by Phil Audibert

fully certified as an animal technician." This sparks interest from his student audience. Hands fly up.

The 90-minute class is almost over when he hits his students with a small bombshell. "My goal is always, if you make more than I make, then I've been successful... I don't want you to live as well as I do, I want you to live better than I do."

Later in his office, he expands. He asks his kids, "What can they do that they like doing that will pay for the lifestyle they'd like to have. And once you cross that bridge it's easy from there on because they're focused." He leans forward in his chair. "They realize that going to school for four years and graduating is not going to solve their problems. Going to school four years, finding out everything they need to do to get to the next step to get to the money they want to live the way they want; that's the key."

And he'll make sure of it. "Every one of my seniors I try to guide them before they get out of here. So, we don't just say 'Okay you graduated. Bye.'" Although the Ag Ed department official goal is to send 50 percent on to higher education, Will Likins estimates 65 to 70 percent of his seniors will go on to college or trade school. And he makes no distinction between college and trade school. It's all the same to him.

Oftentimes, when a student tells Will he's thinking about going to Germanna Community College,

for instance, he'll trot the kid right down there to take the placement exams, fill out the applications and do the paperwork. "If you've never been to college and no family member has ever been, sometimes it's hard for them to get over that little doorstep." Will Likins is the guy who gives them that gentle nudge.

And he'll continue to follow up. Their first semester in a college or trade school, Likins will write his former students a note, asking how they're doing, if he can cut some red tape for them, help them with an application of some kind. He relates numerous success stories of persuading kids who couldn't get out of Orange fast enough to go to college. The payoff is when they come back to Orange with their new skills, with a fresh outlook on their home county.

Born in Caroline County, Will Likins grew up raising cattle and swine and helping with crops on his grandfather's farm. Ever since he was in the ninth grade, he wanted to be an Ag teacher. "And, I made a mistake of telling the teacher that," he groans. "As soon as he found that out, I was up in front of the class almost every day. He pushed and pushed and pushed. He was the best teacher I ever had."

Will had a plan. He went to VCU to learn about business, and to Virginia Tech and Virginia State to learn about agriculture, and to JMU to learn how to

teach.

"Knowing the subject and knowing how to relate it, are two different things," he says sagely of his educational odyssey. "You can't be shy. Talking is your trade. If you can't talk and get your message out there you can have all the knowledge of the world in your head and it's useless."

One time, an assistant principal dropped in to evaluate Will's teaching. Will was a little nervous, until he heard her comments. "You don't lecture in your class. You have a conversation. I watched those kids' faces; you had every kid involved." And I said 'no, you've got it backward; they had ME involved.'

When Will went to Virginia State, he was the only white student there. "And my Ag teacher, my mentor, was a black man. And he always said to me, 'You've got to make sure when you walk into a classroom, that you have no biases, no prejudices.'" Will looks back on the experience. "That made me sure... I was not welcomed with open arms, but that was as much a learning experience as anything else."

And so 25 years ago, Will first walked into that drab brick cube that's always been known as the FFA building out behind Orange County High School. Its physical appearance has changed little to this day.

His office is lined with cheap wallboard. The portraits of his two heroes, George Washington and Ronald Reagan, hang on the wall. The same dorky metal windows, dating back to the 50's, still gaze out from one side of the shop. On another side, they've welded metal grating to the windows, presumably to stop stray tennis balls from the courts nearby. The lone shade-darkened classroom sports rickety two-student wooden desks and chairs that date back to heaven knows when.

When the county renovated the high school several years ago and built the sports complex, it conveniently overlooked the Ag Ed building. There it sits, forlorn and dowdy, like a nerdy relative at a fancy dress ball.

But Will is not all that upset about it. "We don't believe in being negative. Instead of going out and complaining, we just fix it ourselves," he says of this neglected wallflower of a building. His "kids" have already put in air conditioning themselves. They built a welding room complete with a plasma cutter, a MIG welder and several stick welding booths for a fraction of the \$75,000 estimate. All the really good equipment, the band saw, the table saw, the joiner, the drill presses, they bought them-



Pictured above are Orange County FFA members Ian Kisamore, left, and Delano Maynard donating a copying machine purchased by the FFA to the Orange County Boys & Girls Club, represented by Sheila Donnelly, director of the Boys & Girls Club.

selves with money they raised. "There's not a penny of taxpayer money in it," says Will proudly.

Will is adamant that they not look for donations. "Our philosophy is if you want something, you go out and earn it. I don't believe in begging." Every year at Christmas, Will's "kids" buy a tractor trailer load of good quality citrus fruit for about \$12,000. They sell it for about a \$3,000 profit. "We earn it," he repeats. "If we raise money and do it ourselves, it's a double whammy; we didn't have to get it from the taxpayers, but more importantly, when it's done, the kids take ownership, and it's theirs. And

then when they grow up, they realize you don't always have to go to the government to ask for something."

A renowned penny pincher, Will continues, "I'm proud of the fact that we're cost-efficient. If we can do it less expensively and still meet the needs, why would we ever want to make it more expensive?" When it used to take three teachers, he now handles the curriculum by himself. "The worst thing you can do to your program, if you have a good program, is say, 'let's make it bigger.' And then it's dead," he says dejectedly. "My philosophy is if it works, then leave it alone."

Education runs in Will's family. His wife, Gill, whom he met at JMU, teaches at Lightfoot Elementary; his daughter, Emily, at Unionville. Emily's is one of those success stories that hits close to home. Having graduated with straight A's from JMU with a degree in Education...like her parents... Emily was offered better paying jobs elsewhere. Still, she came home to Orange. "Orange County got her to where she is at; she wanted to give something back," explains Will. He leans back in his chair and flashes that game-winning grin. "Those are my favorite stories, where they don't have to leave; they get something to bring back."

And then there's community service. A couple of weekends ago, the FFA kids were stacking and racking firewood for a county citizen who had just undergone heart surgery. During the holidays, they made wooden Christmas tree cut-outs and gave them to the second graders at Unionville to paint and decorate and wrap and give to their astonished parents. They participate in the blood drive and Toys for Tots. They're making wooden ducks for Ducks Unlimited, squirrel feeders for Katrina victims; Adirondack chairs to raise money to, well, fix up this building of theirs.

On the classroom wall hang at least a dozen Building Our American Communities awards, regional, state, and national. "Some people don't think we do anything." Will remembers a student grousing recently. "Well...we do stuff all the time."



Pictured above are Blair Bartlett, FFA president and Vicky Batten, FFA vice president, preparing a recent donation of over 750 pounds of canned goods for the Love Outreach Food Pantry. Every year for the past 20 years the Orange County FFA has collected a minimum of 100 pounds of canned goods each month for the needy in Orange County. The food drives are one of the highlights of the Orange FFA each year with every member contributing at least one pound of canned goods each month.