



THE GOLDEN SLATE

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Honoring Charles Parker's 45 Years of Service

By Viviana Velazquez, Reporter, Bear River FFA Chapter & 2025 State FFA Conference Press Corps Member

After more than four decades of dedicated service to California FFA, Charles Parker is retiring from his role as State FFA Advisor and Program Manager for Agricultural Education at the California Department of Education. His retirement marks the close of a remarkable chapter—one defined by a career that has impacted thousands of students, educators, and agricultural communities across the state. Parker's journey, filled with van rides, laughter, leadership, and a love for ag education, stands as a true testament to a life lived in service.

Hooked From the First Semester

Although Parker grew up on a cotton farm, his journey in agricultural education didn't begin until middle school. It all started with a simple decision in eighth grade—one that would shape the course of his life.

"A friend convinced me to take an ag class," he recalled. "He dropped it, but I was hooked that first semester." What captured his interest wasn't just the curriculum—it was the influence of his first agriculture teacher, Gary Cheatwood. "He became a father figure. He was critical when I needed it, and encouraging when I deserved it. He helped me come out of my shell."

It didn't take long for Parker to realize that he, too, wanted to become an agriculture teacher—and he pursued that goal with purpose and enthusiasm.

From the Classroom and Beyond

Parker spent 13 impactful years teaching at Kingsburg High School before a summer conference volunteer opportunity opened new doors. "I raised my hand to drive the regional officers to an event, and that one ride changed everything," he shared. That simple act of service led to years of building relationships with regional supervisors and state staff—learning through listening, observing, and showing up wherever he was needed.

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Eventually, Parker joined the California Department of Education, where he served in a variety of leadership roles over the years. He spent 17 years as Assistant State FFA Advisor, seven years as the San Joaquin Region Supervisor, and two years serving the North Coast Region as their advisor. His journey culminated in his appointment as State FFA Advisor and Program Manager for Agricultural Education—a role he held for the final six years of his career, until his retirement.

Moments That Matter

When asked about his most meaningful memories, Parker doesn't hesitate. "The van rides. Always the van rides," he said with a smile. "The opportunity to build trust and have meaningful conversations with students—it was special."

Another highlight was working closely with state officers and coordinating the State FFA Leadership Conference, held in Fresno during his time as Assistant State Advisor. "That was the best job I ever had," he shared. "I got to work with six of the best students in the state." While his more recent role kept him focused on other duties, he missed the everyday interactions with FFA members. Still, he found joy in seeing them at field days and during the annual state conference.

He also cherishes the time spent with fellow educators. One of his favorite stories? A staff meeting that ended in a pie feast. "We couldn't agree on what kind of pie to order, so each of us got our own whole pie," he said, laughing. "We sat around, ate pie, and just talked and laughed and had a great time. Those are the memories with friends that will always be there."

And his favorite pie flavor? Without hesitation: "Pecan."

Embracing Change, Facing Challenges

Throughout his career, Parker has witnessed significant shifts in agricultural education. "When I started, 90% of ag teachers were men. Now, 67% are women. That's a huge shift—and a good one," he noted.

He's also seen the growing academic rigor within ag classrooms, particularly with the introduction of UC and CSU credit-bearing courses. Alongside that, he emphasized the need to modernize curriculum to keep pace with today's technological advancements in agriculture.

"We're seeing autonomous tractors, drones, electric engines," he said. "Industry is changing fast, and we need to catch up."



At the same time, Parker remains very aware of the pressure ag teachers face. “It’s hard. They’re gone every weekend, every night,” he acknowledged. “They’re balancing classroom instruction, FFA, community service, and their personal lives. We need to support them so they can sustain this work.”

Looking Ahead

As he enters retirement, Parker is looking forward to traveling with his wife, visiting her ancestral homeland in the Azores Islands, reconnecting with an exchange student in Germany, and driving coast-to-coast across Canada. “For some reason,” he chuckles, “I just want to do it.”

Although he doesn't plan to publish professionally, Parker has found a new creative outlet in writing novels. “I’ve written a murder mystery, just for fun. I’m working on a second, and the third will be inspired by notes left behind by our late son. It’ll be a book we co-write, in a way.”

Despite stepping away from full-time work, Parker will remain connected to FFA as the keeper of its historical documents, ensuring that both the legacy of the organization and his own contributions live on.

Parker anticipates that his retirement will be bittersweet. As he steps away from a career that has spanned over four decades, he can’t help but feel emotional about closing this chapter. Yet, one thing brings him peace—the future of the program is in good hands. “When we hired Jill Sperling as the new State Advisor, I knew it was the right time. She’s better prepared than I ever was, and she’s going to take this program to new heights.” For Parker, the end of his career isn’t about closure; it’s about continuity. “A good leader wants the program to thrive long after they leave. And I know it will.”

As he reflects on his decades of service, Parker’s legacy is not only in the lives he’s touched but in the strength of the program he helped shape—one that will continue to inspire and lead future generations.

