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## FLORIDA CITY

# Farm Bureau adds youngest to Honor Hall

Katie Edwards, who was recently inducted into the Dade County Farm Bureau's Hall of Honor, is celebrating five years with the county's largest farming organization, as she prepares to begin law school.

By Rebecca Dellagloria

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In little less than five years' time, Katie Edwards has established herself as a formidable force at the Dade County Farm Bureau, once the all-boys' club of the farming industry in South Miami-Dade.

At the age of 27, Edwards was the youngest person and first woman to be inducted in the bureau's Hall of Honor -- a prestigious category traditionally reserved for the area's biggest farmers.

Not bad for a cattle farmer's daughter from Okeechobee.

"I think some people thought the board was crazy for making someone so young executive director," Edwards said. "I would say it's worked out well."

An ambitious college graduate with an economics degree, Edwards started working at the powerful farming organization in July 2003. She came on board as the bureau's communications director and less than a year later became its chief executive.

Next month, Edwards will celebrate her fifth anniversary with the Farm Bureau.

And this fall, she will embark on a new challenge: law school. Edwards, who was planning to leave the Farm Bureau to pursue her education, will remain on as director, while taking law classes at night at Florida International University.

Edwards says it has always been her life's plan to earn a law degree. In fact, when she enrolled in Clemson University, where she studied agricultural and applied economics, Edwards said it was her dream to go to Drake University in Iowa, "the only school in the nation that offers the specialized program in agricultural law," Edwards said.

But Edwards, a Florida native, didn't want to stray too far from home -- and warm weather.

The FIU program, she says, will be a perfect fit: giving Edwards the opportunity to pursue her law degree while continuing to work for the Farm Bureau.

"Things change and plans change and I like living here in Miami. I like working with the growers in South Dade," she said.

For Edwards, a law degree is a natural progression in her goal of helping South Dade farmers address issues including permitting, land-use and zoning, among others. Ultimately, Edwards says, she sees herself becoming a lobbyist because she "likes working for change."

Edwards, whose father was a one-time councilman in Plantation, loves the political process. And politics play a large role in her work for the Dade County Farm Bureau.

In many cities, counties and states, farm bureaus act simply as insurance agencies for farmers, under the umbrella of the American Farm Bureau. But in Miami-Dade, the bureau also functions as an advocacy group for farmers, said Miami-Dade County Agriculture Manager Charles LaPradd.

"Our crops, our growing season, our governmental relations tend to be a little different than all the other counties," said LaPradd, a one-time farmer who served on the Farm Bureau's board of directors in the mid-1990s.

Edwards' had a recent foray into politics as the campaign manager for Steve Losner when he ran for mayor of Homestead last year. Losner lost the race to Mayor Lynda Bell.

Since then, there has been little love lost between Edwards and Bell, who criticized the Farm Bureau for allowing its executive director to be involved in a political campaign.

"While it was certainly nothing personal, I thought her behavior during the campaign was extremely disappointing," Bell said of Edwards, without elaborating.

Edwards says she has tried to mend fences. "I went to her after the campaign," Edwards said. "I congratulated her and I sent her flowers."

Bell, along with the majority of the City Council, did not attend the Farm Bureau's recent annual fundraiser, where Edwards was honored for her service.

The event was Edwards' big send-off before leaving for school. Vice Mayor Jon Burgess stopped by to wish her well.

Edwards wasn't fazed, noting that most of the agricultural land in active production falls well outside the city of Homestead's boundaries. Past mayors and council members have not made it a point to attend the ceremony, she added.

Losner brought his family to the barbecue, where Edwards was toasted by U.S. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, County Commissioner Natacha Seijas, and numerous others.

Farm Bureau president Larry Dunagan said he was on the nominating committee for this year's Hall of Honor awards and when Edwards' name came up, ``all the nominations stopped."

"Any issue she takes on, she gives it her all," Losner added.

For farmer Teena Borek, Edwards is like her own "child going off to college."

"I've known Katie since she started at the Farm Bureau. Katie is an asset to this community; we've enjoyed watching her grow," said Borek, a former Farm Bureau president. "She's a really outstanding young person. Very astute for her age. That young lady is going to go places."