

Longtime GAPT member William Bland retires as Screven County School Superintendent

By the time William Bland retires in June of this year as Screven County School Superintendent, he will have traveled many miles in his county and his career. With a career that spans 37 years in just one school system, Bland's resume began as a Vocational Agriculture Teacher at Screven County High School in 1982.

"I've always had a love for agriculture, which is why I started my career as a Vocational Agriculture instructor," said Bland. "As a young child, I worked in our own family garden every summer, and by middle school, I was working long hours every summer weekday with a local farmer and family friend. Sun-up until sundown, practically. I came in covered in so much dirt and soil that I was barely recognizable."

That early passion morphed into a career decision. Bland attended Georgia Southern University for core classes and then University of Georgia to complete his degree in Ag Education. With a degree in hand, he stepped one county over from his hometown of Statesboro, Georgia and joined the payroll of Screven County Board of Education. He continued his education by earning two Master Degrees and an Education Specialist Degree in Administration and Supervision.

Bland applied the same hard-working ethics he'd used as a youngster in hot, humid South-Georgia fields to teaching agriculture to rural students in Screven County.

"My favorite part of teaching was watching the light come on in my students' eyes and to see the same passion develop in them that I tried to convey in the subjects I was teaching," said Bland. "It was so rewarding to make home visits with students in the class and help them with their Supervised Occupational Experience Program projects."

"One of my highest held honors was when I received the American Farmer Degree, the highest degree an FFA member can achieve. I took great pride in helping other young individuals accomplish this same goal."

Bland's desire to see high school students reach their potential and gain success grew as quickly as the plants his students took care of in the on-site greenhouse. Just three years after beginning his teaching career, Bland accepted a position as Assistant Principal of Screven County High School.

At the same time, he began working part-time as a county law enforcement officer with the Screven County Sheriff's Department. He worked in that position until 1992, when he began serving in auxiliary duty status as a certified and sworn peace officer, and maintains that status through the present.

"Stepping into the position of Assistant Principal was an easy transition as far as the responsibilities, but I did miss the teaching aspect of my new position," said Bland. "It was here I began my relationship with transportation as I handled most of the bus discipline referrals."

While serving as Assistant Principal, he was named the Assistant Principal of the year for the State of Georgia by the Georgia Association of Secondary School Principals. Bland kept the title of Assistant Principal until June of 1997, and in July, the nameplate changed to Director of Operations for Screven County Schools. “That meant a lot of hats,” explained Bland. “I had three departments I was responsible for, maintenance, transportation, and grounds. I also managed all of the SPLOST projects for our school system.”

With his new position, Bland joined the Georgia Association for Pupil Transportation (GAPT) to assist and guide him in the new role, and it’s a membership he has proudly maintained throughout the remainder of his career. He also served on the Board of Directors with GAPT for many years.

“GAPT was a tremendous asset to me in those early days when I was, well, tossed under the bus, shall we say, in my new position,” joked Bland. “I not only learned the transportation world, but at each yearly conference, I met even more peers to develop a network of transportation experts to call upon. The June GAPT conference holds many fond memories from the Buccaneer Hotel days to the difficult call to move to Callaway. My kids loved going to the family-friendly conference and made many friends around the state.”

Though Bland’s title changed once again in 2004 to Assistant Superintendent of Operations for Screven County Schools, many of the same hats stayed on. He just added more.

“I held leadership over five departments this time,” said Bland. “Maintenance, transportation, food service, grounds, and tech support. I still managed the SPLOST projects, but I also added the management of the E-rate program, and I assisted principals in the day to day school operations.”

Sun-up to sundown pretty much summarized his workload then, too. “Again, another rewarding part of my career,” said Bland. “But I will say that I thoroughly enjoyed having such a variety of challenges and tasks managing five different departments. Basically this job covered everything within a school system with the exception of curriculum and instruction.”

Perhaps equally rewarding to Bland was the fact that he was completely immersed in the school system that was educating his three kids. Lindsay Bland Robinson, married to Ryan, graduated from Screven County High School (SCHS) in 2003, from the University of Georgia (UGA) in 2006 with a degree in Public Relations, and completed her Masters there in Public Administration in 2011. She is currently the Assistant Director for Design in Marketing and Communications at UGA.

Jason Bland, married to Jessie Turk Bland,, graduated from SCHS in 2005, attended ABAC and graduated from UGA in 2011 with dual degrees in Forestry and Wildlife Management. After completing a 36-week Public Safety training course and working as a Georgia State Patrol

Trooper, he now serves on the SWAT team with Georgia Department of Public Safety based in Atlanta, Georgia.

Matthew Bland, married to Kaitlyn Long Bland who is also a Screven County native, graduated from SCHS in 2006 and graduated from UGA in 2011 with an Ag Engineering degree and completed a Masters degree in Applied Engineering from Georgia Southern University. He works in Sylvania as an Engineering Group Leader with Koyo Bearings North America.

“It was great to have such an active role in the school system that I knew was providing my children with a stellar education and preparing them for a future in the real world,” said Bland.

The briefest hat Bland wore during the career was from July of 2012 through November of 2012 and was basically a transition time. He served as Deputy Superintendent of Screven County Schools during that time, until the retirement of the previous Superintendent. Bland began the Superintendent of Screven County Schools position in December of 2012 and retires six-and-a-half years later in June of this year.

Bland thinks back on some of those hot summer days in the fields as a kid and admits that he had no idea at that point in his life that he'd choose a career in agriculture. Equally so, he had no idea that a career in education that began as a teacher would travel a road that ended as a school superintendent.

“It's been a great career,” said Bland. “I wouldn't trade any of the hats, the positions, the learning experiences, the organizations I participated in, or the long hours. The friendships I've formed and opportunities I've had are invaluable and are aspects of my career I'll treasure into retirement.”

Speaking of retirement, guess what Bland plans to do? “Get back in the field,” said Bland with a huge smile.

“I live on a small farm and plan to spend time working in the fields and garden and just playing with my tractors,” he said.

Bland has an affinity for tractors that has only grown since he was a youngster. “The farm I worked on used Oliver tractors, not a very common brand around south-Georgia, and they actually stopped production in the mid 1970s. I have a goal to find the series of Oliver tractors produced in 1960, my birth year, and 1961, my wife's birth year, and restore them to parade-ready. I have two Oliver 770s that I am now in the process of restoring. I recently purchased an original Oliver wagon chassis that I plan to build a platform to use for hayrides during special events.”

Bland doesn't plan to let go of all his professional commitments just yet, either. “I serve as Executive Director for an organization called GASFA, Georgia Association of School Facility

Administrators. We currently have almost 200 members and host a conference and trade show in October.”

Bland said the organization that he’s been a member of since 1997 and served as an officer some years back consists primarily of school employees that are the decision-makers of school facilities and grounds, mostly in the area of maintenance. “I plan to spend more time working with this organization with a goal of gaining representation from all 180 school systems in the state of Georgia.”

Lofty goals for retirement, but then again, Bland never did anything halfway. A hard-worker from a young age until, well, not-so-much-a-young-age.

Perhaps his grandest plan for retirement, however, has to do with the loving family who has supported him throughout all aspects of his exceptional career. Bland and his wife, Helen Bland, who is a professor in Public Health at Georgia Southern University, have seven children between the two of them, with only two living closeby.

“My wife and I plan to do some traveling, especially to see our kids and family members who are scattered all over the country.”

And, as every good grandpa should, Bland wants to spend much time with his own next generation of students. “With two grandkids and one on the way, I plan to spend a great deal of retirement days just being ‘Grandpa.’ That might just be my favorite hat of all.”