

SAYING GOODBYE TO A GREAT FRIEND: JULIAN JOHNSON

Editor's Note: When the Conservancy planted its millionth longleaf seedling in the Sandhills this spring, it did so in honor of Julian Johnson. Julian's wife Margaret and son Jay helped plant the ceremonial seedlings.

Anyone who met Julian Johnson realized just how much he loved his family, his farm, and his country. By putting his Hoke County farm under a conservation easement with The Nature Conservancy, he embraced all three. The farm, which had been in his family for four generations, will remain a farm for future generations of Johnsons. In conserving the land, Johnson helped to ensure that incompatible development—things like subdivisions and strip malls—wouldn't impede military training in the area. Johnson has been a strong supporter of Fort Bragg, his immediate neighbor. His son is a long-serving active duty soldier, and Julian allowed the military to train on his farm.

Johnson, who passed away this winter, helped to spur conservation around Fort Bragg. "He was one of the first people to put his land in a conservation easement. At the time there was still a good measure of distrust related to conservation," explains the Conservancy's Director of Longleaf Restoration Jeff Marcus. "By taking that leap of faith, he showed his neighbors and family that they could do conservation easements and the world wouldn't come to an end. He could keep using the land the way he wanted to. He led family members and neighbors to put their land into conservation as well." His son also owns land protected by conservation easement, and in 2017 his niece and nephews placed a conservation easement on a portion of the family land.

Although conservation easements, which limit future development on land, are common today in the Sandhills, they weren't in 2004, when Julian and his wife Margaret placed

their 544-acre farm in an easement. Emotions were still running strong because of a federal declaration that the population of federally endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers at Fort Bragg was in trouble and needed to be recovered. At first people resented this small, seemingly insignificant bird because they were afraid it was going to hurt the local economy.

But Johnson embraced conservation and the woodpecker. He was one of the first private landowners to enter into a Safe Harbor agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. These agreements remove uncertainty for landowners who are willing to manage their land in a way that maintains and attracts endangered or threatened plants and animals. Property owners don't have to worry that by attracting these animals and plants to their land they may face additional land use restrictions down the road. If their land management unintentionally kills or harms a protected species, they will not face legal action.

Johnson promoted conservation easements and Safe Harbor across the Sandhills—hosting visits to his farm to show how well the programs work. In recognition of his commitment to conservation, he was a recipient of the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, which is the state's highest civilian honor. "I can't imagine a recipient who was more deserving of this honor," says Chapter Executive Director Katherine Skinner. "He loved longleaf pine."

Johnson could have made good money selling his farm outright. "I have lots of offers to sell this property," he once said. "And since I'm not Warren Buffet and independently wealthy, they were tempting."

His was a working farm. He raked and sold pine straw, but he did it in a sustainable fashion—using hand tools to avoid damaging plants, dividing the acreage into several units and rotating raking so that only a portion of the forest is raked every year. Some longleaf stands were kept out of pine straw



production and managed primarily for habitat. And he worked tirelessly to convince other farmers to use similar sustainable practices, serving on the board of the Pine Needle Producers Association.

"He demonstrated how a landowner can find the balance between conservation and making money," says Marcus. "He leaves a strong legacy—showing how you can work in collaboration with the conservation community without giving up your ability to make a living off the land."

Julian Johnson at his Hoke County Farm. Photo © Debbie Crane/TNC