

# Entrepreneurial Agency of the Month

## Elliott County Extension Office Elliott County, Kentucky

<b>Population:</b>	700 in Elliott County; 6,700 in Sandy Hook
<b>Location:</b>	160 miles east of Louisville
<b>Agency:</b>	Elliott County Extension office
<b>Agent:</b>	Gwenda Adkins, Extension Agent for Family and Consumer Sciences
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## Tobacco to Tourism: Kentucky County Changes Economic Base, Outlook on Community Development

Gwenda Adkins grew up in a four-room house with no running water and a family of 10 on a tobacco farm in southern Kentucky. She describes her childhood as “being a ‘holler’ girl, playing in the creeks and on the farm.”

In her pleasant southern drawl, Adkins acknowledges the important role tobacco farming played in her home state while also pointing out the need to transition to other economic options.

“Tobacco put me through college,” Adkins said. “And I’ve taken every opportunity I can get to further my education in order to help local farm families find new opportunities.”

With an undergraduate degree in clothing and textiles and a master’s in outdoor recreation with an emphasis on natural resources, Adkins has dedicated her career to improving the lives of her fellow Kentuckians, especially those in Elliott County, where she is a County Extension agent for Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS).

Adkins started as a traditional Extension agent nearly 30 years ago, presenting educational programs on health and homemaking for the community, but that didn’t always work well. She turned to creative ways to facilitate community and economic development -- programs and projects that fostered community pride and boosted citizens’ self-confidence in their own potential – rather than relying on factories and industry for employment.

She added, “We’re trying to make life better for families by creating entrepreneurial opportunities.”

### Moving Beyond Barriers to Emphasize Assets

In 1979, Adkins arrived in Elliott County as a University of Kentucky FCS Extension Agent.

“At that time, there was a lot of turnover in Extension,” she said. “And the area was facing a lot of out-migration. People weren’t taught the importance of volunteering and didn’t have a strong sense of community. We had to create leadership in a place where people had been beaten down by the press and stereotypes as well as a changing industry.”

In the late 1980s, according to Adkins, Elliott County was designated the poorest in the U.S. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the county had a population of about 6,500, a poverty rate of 38 percent, and an unemployment rate of 11 percent. Its economy has historically depended on tobacco. There were almost no local industries; most citizens outside of agriculture commuted to jobs outside the county.

Elliott County – and much of rural Kentucky – has historically been shaped by agriculture, and more specifically, the tobacco industry. In the 1930s, Congress passed a program of price supports for farmers, subsidizing tobacco growers similar to other farm subsidy programs and setting quotas to stabilize the volume of leaf available for industry and maintain grower incomes. Due to decline in demand for tobacco, in 2004 the federal government eliminated the tobacco program and began paying farmers to give up their quota.

According to the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension, the Bluegrass state comprised more than one-half of the nation's tobacco farms during the pre-buyout era. Ranking number two to North Carolina in terms of total tobacco production, Kentucky historically has been the largest burley and dark tobacco producing state and the most tobacco-dependent state. Tobacco cash receipts in Kentucky have fallen from a record high \$924 million in 1998 to around \$400 to \$450 million in recent years. This changed the landscape as small tobacco farmers left the industry or diversified.

Meanwhile, Adkins was struggling to fulfill her duties as an Extension agent. She remembers one conference call where a participant mentioned “letting go of sacred cows.” That was a critical point for her, and she decided that her position has to be more about building community. Her director gave her freedom to shape a new program and a new way of thinking for citizenry.

“We started looking at each community – county governments, agencies and organizations came together to ask, ‘What do we have and what can we do with that to make things better?’” she said.

The Kentucky Industrial Development Council along with University of Kentucky specialists and other agencies entered the discussion and suggested the best industry for Elliott County is asset-based development emphasizing Eco-Agritourism.

Dr. Allan Worms, retired tourism specialist with the University of Kentucky, coached Gwenda and her co-worker of 20 years, the Late Larry Rogers, county extension agent for agriculture until 1999 when he transferred to the neighboring county.

“Once we decided to take advantage of our assets, we had to start by reminding people of the positives,” Adkins said. “We took picture slide shows of local rock formations, gorges, streams and farms around the community. People didn’t even realize where the pictures were taken. They didn’t realize the beauty all around them.”

## **Tapping into Local Treasures: Nature, Culture, Art and Agriculture**

“Changing mindsets is slow,” Adkins said of convincing her fellow citizens to embrace their local treasures to tap into economic opportunities. “We started back in 1993, and we’re still working on it.”

One of the first triumphs for Adkins and team was the building of a culture center in 2003.

Located three miles north of Elliott County seat, Sandy Hook, population of about 6,700, the Laurel Gorge Cultural Heritage Center is a tribute to the county's beauty, culture and wealth of natural resources and displays a snapshot of life in southern Appalachia.

Funded in part by a state grant, the Center is the culmination of teamwork among countless agencies and volunteers. Before the Center was built, architecture students from the University of Kentucky came to Elliott County to help with landscape planning. Adkins used that plan as leverage

for a grant from the Steele-Reese Foundation, which provided money to fill the Center with art and artifacts from area history, including moonshining, folk art and Native American heritage items. The U.S. Corps of Engineers agreed to let the county use their property to build the Center.

“When the culture Center went up, people thought, ‘We are important,’” Adkins said.

During development of the Culture Center, the County built a series of nature trails, traversing pristine streams and gorges. Grants continue to support additional trails as well as a shelter house, footbridges, a recreation area and canoe launches on the Little Sandy River.

Adkins, who did a three-year tourism internship, also works with a tourism specialist from the University to continue to develop opportunities to bring new people to the area and employ the locals.

“People haven’t yet seen the full picture of what we can do with tourism,” Adkins said. “But the County is a lot cleaner already since they have more visitors. People are cleaning up buildings downtown, fixing sidewalks and cleaning up around their barns.”

Clean barns, in fact, are the center of another foray into tourism and beautification of the County: the Kentucky Quilt Trails.

The project started in 2004 as a part of the Clothesline of Quilts, a tri-state effort to decorate Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee byways with traditional quilt designs painted on the sides of barns. The Kentucky portion of the Clothesline is now officially called the Kentucky Quilt Trails.

The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension works hand-in-hand in many areas with RC&Ds to promote and construct the 8 by 8 foot blocks, painted by local high school and college students.

People who are interested in having a quilt block on their property must fill out an application, which is reviewed by a site committee. The committee makes sure the block can be seen from the road and that the owners won’t mind people pulling off the road and taking pictures of it. The barn or building must also be in good condition and be accessible to the heavy equipment needed to install the block.

The price for a quilt block varies from area to area, often depending upon whether grants or donations have been received by the sponsoring agency. Adkins said Extension program money paid for the first block in Elliott County because she wasn’t sure if the idea would catch on. It did. That prompted her to apply for a grant from the W. Paul and Lucille Caudill Little Foundation, which paid for installing many of the first blocks in Elliott.

Seventy quilt squares now blanket barns in the county.

At the beginning of the project in Elliott County, the people ordering the quilt blocks were not the ones Adkins expected.

“The men wanted a quilt square on their barns in memory of their moms’ quilting,” she said. “It surprised me, because I thought women would want it because it was women who quilted. But that wasn’t who called at the beginning. It was the men who called and said, ‘I want one of those. It reminds me of my mom and the way she always sat around and made our quilts for us.’”

Now artists are also painting large cultural murals on their barns, depicting local history, such as a man plowing tobacco. Fifteen murals are expected to be up by the end of summer 2008.

With her upbeat attitude, Adkins added, “The way I feel, we are just getting started. People are just now seeing the potential.”

Adkins is well-versed in tourism, having completed a three year University of Kentucky Tourism internship as well as traveled around the world as a part of the Kentucky Entrepreneurial Coaches Institute (KECI) to observe successful tourism ventures and teach in other rural areas. She brings a wealth of knowledge and ideas to her Elliott County position.

Elliott County is not alone in tapping tourism for economic gain. With Adkins’ leadership, six Eastern Kentucky counties have formed the Eastern Kentucky Foothills Eco-Agri/Tourism

Corporation (FEAT). It consists of elected officials, farmers, students, vocational agricultural teachers and county Extension agents.

The KECI fellows have also joined forces to assist farmers who want to start an agritourism business on their farm.

The history of KECI began in 2000, when Kentucky created the Kentucky Agricultural Development Board. Supported by a network of 120 Agricultural County Councils, the State Board was bequeathed 50 percent of the Master Tobacco Settlement Funds to support agricultural and rural diversification. In 2003, the State Board funded KECI, a leadership program of the College of Agriculture at the University of Kentucky. The objective of the Institute is to encourage diversification of the economies in rural Kentucky.

In keeping with that theme, this fall Adkins is organizing the first ever FEAT agritourism bus tour, featuring stops for cultural activities and local foods. She hopes the pilot program will show farmers the potential for on-farm businesses.

The budding tourism industry in the County has helped other businesses bloom, such as the new family owned and operated Laurel Gorge Inn in Sandy Hook.

“We know our potential now,” Adkins said. “And one of the best indications of our success is that young people are actually staying here now to make a life for themselves.”

To defeat the poverty and economic downturns in rural Eastern Kentucky, Adkins and team have had to first build up self-esteem of citizens. In their approach they used ‘appreciative inquiry,’ focusing on the positive aspects of their area and leveraging them to correct the negative.

“We don’t talk about the negative things, like ‘hillbillies’ and some of the other Appalachian stereotypes,” Adkins said. “We look at our selves as strong and entrepreneurial, having a rich history.”

Adkins added that in the beginning even many of the local artists didn’t have the confidence in their work to present it to a wider audience, much less consider selling it. She tells the story of a local master quiltmaker who was embarrassed that her work was not good enough to be displayed at a local show. After consultation with and support from Adkins, that quiltmaker now judges quilt shows and started a popular local quilting club. She shows her quilts regionally and has her sights set on the Kentucky State Fair.

“What we try to do is just get people to imagine things differently, in a positive light,” Adkins said, adding that the entrepreneurial spirit of residents has amazed her over nearly three decades in Extension. “But I couldn’t do any of this without the people.”

*-By Lisa Bauer, 03/08*

### **For more information on...**

... the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to <http://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org>

... the Elliott County Extension office, go to <http://ces.ca.uky.edu/elliott>

... the Laurel Gorge Heritage and Culture Center, go to

<http://www.kaht.com/multiple/tygartscreek/laurelgorgeculturalheritagecenter.htm>

... Kentucky Quilt Trails, go to <http://www.kentuckyquilttrail.org/>

... the Kentucky Entrepreneurial Coaches Institute, go to

<http://www.uky.edu/Ag/CLD/KECI/welcomekeci.html>