

# **Tom Parsons, the Inveterate Volunteer, Recipient of Shining Star Award**

*By Tim Tesconi*

Tom Parsons, 63, a longtime director and past president of the Youth Ag & Leadership Foundation who is a driving force in advancing Sonoma County's 4-H and FFA programs, is the 2023 recipient of the Shining Star Award.

The Shining Star Award, given by the Youth Ag & Leadership Foundation of Sonoma County, recognizes a person who has made significant contributions to the foundation and the county's youth programs. For more than 20 years, Tom has donated time and talent to develop the next generation of leaders in agriculture and the community.

A fifth generation Sonoma County resident, Tom is the owner of Parsons Construction. He and his wife Kelley have a ranch in Santa Rosa where they raise livestock, wine grapes, hot house tomatoes and keep a team of driving mules. Their children, Brooke and Mitch, were both 4-H Club members.

Fellow directors on the foundation board praise Tom as the organization's unsung hero because he is the first to roll up his sleeves to get any job done, no matter if it's hauling trash from fundraising events or negotiating contracts for building improvements at the foundation's youth center in Rohnert Park.

"I believe in 4-H and FFA and the values it instills in young people to get involved and be part of the community. I am always impressed how 4-H and FFA members look you in the eye, shake your hand and talk to you in such a grown-up way," said Tom. For many years he was involved in interviewing students for foundation

scholarships, finding inspiration in the goals and aspirations of the young people embarking on their advanced education.

Mike Nonella, a director and also past president of the Youth Ag & Leadership Foundation, said Tom has an innate sense of what it means to be an effective leader and volunteer, never declining a request to contribute.

“Tom’s unending personal contributions of time, talent and treasure to 4-H, FFA and the foundation are truly a shining example of what our youth and upcoming adult leaders should aspire to as our community shepherds agricultural education and leadership into the future,” said Nonella.

Nonella said when Tom was president of the foundation his leadership style was instrumental in successfully guiding the foundation in its transition to financial independence from the University of California Cooperative Extension.

“As a private non-profit foundation, we could continue the mission of the founders to provide agriculture education and leadership programs for our youth in Sonoma County,” said Nonella.

Nonella noted that Tom and Kelley Parsons are the reasons his family became involved in 4-H.

“Like our family, many other families followed Tom and Kelley’s example of enthusiasm and leadership, instilling a work ethic and accountability in kids while not overshadowing the importance of having a good time along the way,” said Nonella.

Tom has been a director of the Youth Ag & Leadership Foundation for 15 years and plans to continue giving back.

“It’s an honor to receive the Shining Star Award. I will keep shining on behalf of the 4-H and FFA kids,” said Tom.

He was a member of the Rincon Valley 4-H Club and then a member of the Santa Rosa High School FFA where he was on the livestock and state championship vine pruning team. He graduated from Santa Rosa High School in 1977 and then earned a degree in animal science from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, graduating in 1982. He founded Parsons Construction in 1988. It was also the year he married Kelley and bought the ranch on Wood Road.

Tom will receive the Shining Star Award at the Youth Ag and Leadership Foundation's annual fundraising barbecue on Aug. 26 at Richard' Grove and Saralee's Vineyard in Windsor.