

# WORTHY of a PRINCE



*By Cole Sikes, Alabama Forestry Commission*

In the town of Woodland in Randolph County, the Prince family owns much more than their 96 acres. They hold a property of their own, built for and by their family. This forest land contains beauty, wildlife, and enough memories to last a lifetime. It is this reason why Ronnie and Brenda Prince were recipients of the 2016 Helene Mosley TREASURE Forest Award.

During Ronnie's childhood, he frequently passed by the property because he lived a mere mile and a quarter up the road. Each time he would notice an abundance of debris lying among the trees because the previous owner, who operated a construction business near Atlanta, littered the property with faulty or old equipment and supplies instead of properly disposing of them. When Ronnie and Brenda purchased the initial 52 acres in 1997, they recall objects such as tires, gas tanks, cement blocks, a dump truck, track loaders, trailers, a school bus, and even a

crashed helicopter. The Prince family worked diligently with a local salvage company to clear the land and bring it back to its former glory. After seeing the progress made, they decided to purchase an additional 11 acres. They eventually acquired a final 33 acres and their management goals were in sight. The Princes had a total of 96 acres to call their own.

The property's timber consists of roughly 60 percent longleaf pine trees. The remaining timber population consists of hardwoods and a few loblolly pines. Ronnie established longleaf to be the dominant species; therefore, loblolly pines were removed from the initial stands. A stream flows through their forest along with man-made fire lanes that run in every direction through the property.

A three-acre portion of the land was cleared and designated for the Randolph County Classroom in the Forest. This 'outdoor classroom' is held every year in late spring to invite fifth-grade

*“Leaving it in better shape than when you got it”*



students from across the county, along with their teachers and parents, to learn about the forests around them. Being a retired teacher and sports coach for over 30 years, Ronnie has a passion for inspiring young minds, which is why he has held the annual event for over a decade. Each year about 50 or more students have attended. The children get out of their usual classroom environment and immerse themselves in the outdoor world surrounding them. During this field trip, students are taught about everyday products that are made from trees such as hairspray, pencils, and makeup. Then they are guided on a walk in the woods where they practice marking trees for removal as an actual forester would. Not only is everyone fed a meal, courtesy of the Princes, but they also indulge in homemade ice cream after lunch! It is most rewarding each year to give a child the opportunity – who normally wouldn't have such – to come outside and learn about their forests.

Their primary TREASURE Forest management objective is wildlife habitat enhancement. Ronnie and Brenda's son, Ryan, is a wildlife biologist for the Alabama Forestry Commission. Ryan has been helping his parents for years by providing guidance, advice, and assistance with the health of all forms of nature within their property. The superior condition of local wildlife during Ronnie's childhood had deteriorated by the time he purchased it in 1997. Prince believes that the change in wildlife quality was because of food supply. Growing up in Woodland, his neighbors planted row crops such as peas and corn. These crops provided an efficient amount of food for all surrounding species. Row cropping was gradually discontinued which, in turn, made the

wildlife population decline. With Ryan's method of planting warm and cool season crops for song birds, eastern wild turkey, and whitetail deer, wildlife numbers have increased over time.

The Princes usually use wheat, crimson clover, arrowleaf clover, and imperial white-tail clover blends as a cool season crop. Warm season plantings have included corn, soybeans, iron clay peas, and brown top millet. Nest boxes and martin gourds were placed in other plots as nesting opportunities for eastern blue birds and purple martins. Brenda also enjoys placing bird houses along the tree lines to promote a safe habitat for all songbirds in the area. Fruit-bearing trees including apple, pear, and thornless blackberry were also added at other openings. Normally, most vegetation will dry up in late summer from heat exposure, and die off during the coldest temperatures of winter. However, Ryan's planting schedule allows wildlife to have a source of food year-round, even in the most stressed times when food is scarcest such as late summer and the latter half of winter. Management results have been positive ever since implementing this planting strategy, with populations increasing.

The Princes' second TREASURE Forest management objective is timber production. Results of timber harvesting on the property prior to their ownership left much to be desired. There were areas where there were no trees, and others overstocked with advanced pine regeneration. Through the assistance of cost-share programs through the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Alabama Forestry Commission, 45 acres of natural pine and hardwood stands were pre-commercially thinned. A herbicide application was also used in pine stands to help control hardwood sprouts from becoming an issue.

Prescribed burns are conducted in a two- to three-year rotation. Burning allows land to be thinned out with lost nutrients, such as organic matter, to be transferred back into the earth for future planting. Soil quality is improved immensely after this process. Fire has been utilized in all pine stands. The longleaf pines are burned on a two-year rotation to stimulate grasses and forbs within the stand. Remaining loblolly pines are burned on a three-year rotation for hardwood control and herbaceous plant

*(Continued on page 6)*



## WORTHY OF A PRINCE

*(Continued from page 5)*

growth. Hardwood components are burned on a four- to five-year rotation.

Ronnie and Brenda believe that the primary philosophy for TREASURED forests is “leaving it in better shape than when you got it.” This is a simple, yet accurate statement for a TREASURED forest landowner to uphold. This objective is exactly what the Prince family has accomplished.

To this day, Ronnie and Brenda are thrilled by having land to share with their family. “I never thought I’d own it, but now I do, and that means a lot to me,” said Ronnie. When the Prince family has free time, they spend it on their land at every feasible opportunity. Family activities include hunting, riding four-wheelers, and exploring while discussing future land additions.

Above all, Ronnie and Brenda want longevity. As we all know, we are not meant to be here forever. Therefore, they want to ensure their family is ready and capable of managing the property for the future. Ronnie and Brenda plan to continue working with Ryan, and holding the Classroom in the Forest for many years to come. They hope to maintain this treasure, spending every moment possible there with loved ones. Their Woodland gem has been born anew, and that is what makes it worthy of a Prince. 🍷