National Agriculture Day celebrated in Watsonville

By ERICK CHALHOUB
or the Register's Watsonville Staff

WATSONVILLE — When Cabrillo College began its culinary arts program in 1997, only five students made up its first class. Fast forward 18 years later, where the program now boasts 250 students and recently garnered national attention when it was featured on the Cooking Channel’s reality TV show “The Freshman Class.”

Cabrillo College President Laurel Jones was joined by Culinary Arts program chair Sue Slater to discuss the program to a record crowd at the National Agriculture Day Spring Luncheon on March 18.

The annual event, presented by the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau and Ag Institute, was held at the Santa Cruz County Fair Heritage Hall in Watsonville. National Agriculture Day serves as a way to not only honor the organizations’ annual award winners, but to shine a spotlight on the benefits of the agriculture industry, said David Van Lenter, president of the Farm Bureau.

“The National Ag Day program leads every American to understand how food is produced and the role agriculture plays in our strong economy,” he said.

This year’s Al Smith Friend of Agriculture award was presented to Ciel Cirillo for her support of local agriculture.

“I’m just so honored,” she said. “I’ve been an incredible supporter of the agriculture industry.”

The former city of Santa Cruz Development Director, she helped rebuild downtown after the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake. Later, she spearheaded the preservation of the Salt Tanney by creating the Tanney Arts Center.

Cirillo has also supported agricultural land preservation, and is a graduate of Focus Agriculture Class XX, an annual program put on by Ag-Culture that is designed for community leaders to learn about agriculture in the county through seminars and farm tours.

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Cirillo, a ninth-grader at Cottonwood School, was the first year winner in the poetry contest. The former city of Santa Cruz Development Director, she helped rebuild downtown after the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake. Later, she spearheaded the preservation of the Salt Tanney by creating the Tanney Arts Center.

The program was designed for community leaders to learn about agriculture in the county through seminars and farm tours. “We are the breadbasket of the world,” she said.

The award is named after Al Smith, founder of Orchard Supply Hardware, who donated the 3,000-acre Swanton Pacific Ranch on the north coast to Cal Poly.

Cirillo, a ninth-grader from Bradley Elementary School in Cottonwood, won the 2015 National Ag Day Poster Contest. For the second year in a row, ninth grade student Autumn Burchell from Cottonwood School in Santa Cruz won the Poetry Contest and read her poem at the event.

Titled "The Best of the Best," Burchell said the poem was inspired by her love of fruit. California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo student Matt Cline was awarded the Jimmie Cox Memorial Scholarship.

He was accepted to Cal Poly after graduating from St. Francis High School in May 2014. He received scholastic honors every year of high school and also played football as one of the team’s captains. At Cal Poly, he is majoring in Agricultural Business. The recipient of the Jimmie Cox Memorial Scholarship also receives an additional $2,000 award from the American AgCredit Scholarship Program. This brings the total scholarship amount that Cliffon will receive to $4,000.