

2021 Hometown Heroes

John W. Bonner

Agriculture

John W. Bonner was born October 13, 1945. He is one of eight children born to John Moses and Laura May Jones Bonner. He grew up with one brother, Lester; and six sisters, Gladys (deceased), Charlene (deceased), Dorothy, Emma, Evelyn, and Sharon. The Bonner children also grew up with a dedicated family friend, Marne Reese Jones.

As the son of sharecroppers, John was raised on a farm. His family grew tobacco, peanuts and soybeans. He attended school in Dinwiddie County and earned his General Equivalency Diploma (GED) while serving in the United States Army. John Bonner served a total of 26 years in the Army and Army Reserves and spent one year in Vietnam.

Over the years, Mr. Bonner worked for Stone Container and Brown & Williamson. He was a Federal employee for 26 years, working security at Fort Pickett and as an Ammunition Technician at Fort Lee. He also worked as a truck driver for David Allen and Pet Dairy. John Bonner worked for the maintenance department of Dinwiddie County Public Schools, and has worked in food service at Fort Lee. At one point, he was a night manager at Virginia State University. At 75 years of age, he currently works part-time for Dinwiddie County's Department of Public Works.

While he held a variety of positions over the years, farming was always in the background. John worked alongside his father and brother on the family farm. He shared "As hard as I tried to get away from farming, it must have been in my blood, because I always came back home to farm. For as long as I can remember, my family has raised hogs."

John Bonner has been a lifelong advocate of farming, and is particularly passionate about the plight of Black farmers. He, his father and brother worked very closely with Dr. John Boyd, Founder and President of the National Black Farmers Association, in the fight for justice and equity for Black farmers; and they were among the original plaintiffs filing suit against the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in the 1990s for discriminatory practices. The USDA settled the suit in 1999 and agreed to make compensation to each black farmer participating in the class action.

On April 24, 1965, John Bonner married his high school sweetheart, Barbara Grandison. Together, the couple have three children: Robin, Kenneth, and Cheryl; seven grandchildren (one deceased), and eight great-grandchildren.

The Bonners attend Mount Level Baptist Church in Dinwiddie County, where Mr. Bonner is chair of the Diaconate Ministry.

John Bonner is committed to inspiring young people toward a career in agriculture. He presents workshops for young people on farming, and hopes to modernize his family's farming operation by incorporating greenhouse technology.

John Bonner credits his ability to continue working at age 75 to his military service, where he learned the importance of staying fit and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Mr. Bonner is not familiar with the term "idle time". He feels driven to stay active and work hard. That is his secret to a long-healthy life.