



Northwest restores tractor fit for the King by T.J.Jernigan

Shane Louwerens' "Special Project" class, part of the Agricultural Technology/John Deere Tech program at Northwest Mississippi Community College, has fixed a lot of broken and damaged pieces of John Deere equipment in the past, but this year the class took on a project that will link them to local history forever.

Under the leadership of Louwerens, a group of four graduating sophomores in the program participated in a preservation project that involved restoring a 1963 model John Deere tractor that was used at Elvis Presley's Circle G Ranch in DeSoto County and Graceland for many years.

After putting nearly 400 man hours into the project, the students finally were "let in on the secret" of who the tractor belonged to when officials from Elvis Presley Enterprises, Inc. and John Deere Corp., came to pick up the tractor and recognize the students for their work.

The tractor was moved to a newly-prepared exhibit space May 8 at the Elvis Presley Auto Museum - located at the national historic landmark Elvis Presley's Graceland.

In the "Special Project" class, students are required to work hands-on with broken equipment so that they can learn how to deal with a variety of problems that tractors can have. The class does a project every year that deals with either restoring or preserving an old tractor.



Earlier this year, corporate representatives from John Deere's Atlanta branch contacted Louwerens to ask if he would be interested in preserving an old tractor with the help of students.

"When the group came to tour our facility, I felt like I was in a job interview at some prestigious company," he said. "They made sure our location was secure and that we had the ability to do the project to their specifications. I was baffled when they asked me not to replace any parts unless absolutely necessary, and any parts that were replaced had to be saved, bagged, and returned to them."

Instructor Shane Louwerens (left) and Ag Tech/John Deere Tech students Aaron Jolley, Andrew Fortune, Timothy Reed, and Blane McGuire pose proudly in front of "Stella," a 1963 model 4010 John Deere Tractor that once belonged to Elvis Presley. The four students and Louwerens worked for a month to preserve the tractor which was placed on display with Presley's cars and airplanes at the Elvis Presley Auto Museum in Memphis on Friday, May 8. (Photo by T.J. Jernigan)

After Elvis Presley Enterprises decided that Northwest had the ability to complete the project, Louwerens was told the secret of why the project was so important.

He said that when he learned that the tractor had belonged to Elvis Presley, he was in awe and

realized how special and historic the project really was.

However, for security reasons Louwerens decided to keep that fact a secret from anyone not directly involved with the project, and he did not even tell the students who were working on the tractor every day.

A team of only four students, including Andrew Fortune of Falkner, Aaron Jolley of Ider, Ala., Blane McGuire of Falkville, Ala., and Timothy Reed of Ackerman worked on the project every day with Louwerens, never knowing who or what the 'special' tractor was for.

"It was hard to keep it a secret from the guys after a while because they knew that something was up from the beginning," Louwerens said. "They wanted to know why I was being so tedious and careful with everything."

According to Louwerens, a project like this usually takes at least a year to complete, but he and the group of students worked over 385 hours in just 30 days to get the job done in a month.

"The tractor was in typical condition for a 1963 model, and required disassembly, pressure washing, and a ton of other detailed work too long to list," he said.

In all, only about 10 pieces of the tractor were replaced, leaving the majority of it in original condition. Some dents and scratches were left on purpose in order to preserve the tractor's historical and sentimental value.

Students even used jeweler's polish to restore the original gauges and light covers so that they could be used.

Louwerens said, "Every one of our projects get a nickname. We called this one Stella."

The students were required to keep daily journals of any work performed on the tractor, and Louwerens took photographs of the entire process from the time it arrived on campus until the time it was completed.

The tractor was sold for about \$3,000 in 1960 when it was first produced. Presley obtained it in 1966 when he bought the Circle G Ranch. After he sold the ranch the tractor was used for years at Graceland in landscaping projects, maintenance, and farm work.

Presley's John Deere 4010 tractor, a Series 213, general-purpose diesel tractor, was built at the John Deere Waterloo Tractor Works, in Waterloo, Iowa, and shipped to a John Deere dealership in Tunica. Presley also purchased a 46A John Deere loader for his tractor, which makes this one very unique.

John Deere and Elvis Presley Enterprises, Inc. will make a die-cast replica of the tractor based on photographs that Louwerens took of the finished product. He said that everything on the replica will be "true to life," and it will even have the same dents and even the unique 46A loader that is rarely found on die-casts.

The replica will be available for sale at authorized John Deere dealers nationwide, on ShopElvis.com and at Graceland in November.

While at Graceland, the students were taken on a VIP tour of the mansion and auto museum, and were treated to lunch with employees from the John Deere Corporation. The four students were also given a framed photo of themselves posing with the tractor and a gift bag from the Graceland gift shop.

All four of the students who worked on this project will graduate in May to pursue careers in the field of agriculture equipment mechanics.

"The best thing about this project is knowing that I've been a part of this—a part of history," said Andrew Fortune of Falkner.

The Agricultural Technology/John Deere Tech program is a two-year curriculum plan designed to teach students about agricultural mechanization and train John Deere Service Technicians.