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***Entertainer Dolly Parton recognizes work of her uncle and The American Chestnut Foundation in ceremony today***

Asheville, NC – World famous singer and entertainer Dolly Parton recognized the work of The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF), a non-profit organization based in Asheville, NC. The singer was honoring her uncle, singer Bill Owens, who has been a long-time member of TACF in a special ceremony at Dollywood Park in Pigeon Forge, TN.

TACF presented one of its potentially blight-resistant American chestnut trees to Bill. Dolly and Bill planted the tree near the stage where they both often perform. Bill and his wife Sandy established and currently care for an orchard of American chestnut trees at Dollywood Park.

Dr. Hill Craddock who grew the five-foot-tall tree in Chattanooga, TN, worked with Bill as well as Asheville resident Dr. Paul Sisco to establish the American chestnut orchard at Dollywood several years ago. According to Craddock, Bill Owens called him out of the blue, ‘a cold call’ if you will, about 12 years ago.

“I’d never met Bill but he introduced himself as someone who grows trees at Dollywood,” said Craddock. Dollywood was looking for a project that would mitigate environmental impact of the millions of visitors to the park each year. “Today, I see Bill as Dollywood’s environmental conscience and he’s been the key to this orchards,” said Craddock.

“It’s because of the passion of volunteers like Bill and Sandy who are out there every day that allows TACF to continue its mission of restoring the American chestnut. We appreciate Dolly helping us to honor Bill for his efforts in restoring this magnificent tree,” said Burhans, president and CEO of TACF.

Bill Owens has championed the cause of protecting the natural environment at Dollywood since 1986 and has made it his mission to help continue chestnut tree research, breeding, and public education work.

Owens is a strong believer that we can reclaim the land with trees. As a 16-year-old boy he became fascinated by the unusual chestnut tree stories told by his dad and Dolly's dad — including how a big old hollow chestnut tree was used by one of Dolly's uncles as a wedding suite and temporary home. He sees his work to restore the American chestnut tree not only as a way to help preserve America's heritage, but also as a means to provide future income for mountain folks by selling nut crops and timber.

American chestnut trees once dominated forests from Maine to Georgia, and west to the Ohio River Valley, accounting for nearly 25% of all hardwood trees. In their natural range, mature chestnuts could grow to 100 feet tall and 30 feet around. Then the chestnut blight struck, leaving nearly nine million acres of forestland empty of the American chestnut.

Most Appalachian mountain families depended heavily on the American chestnut for food and shelter. As the predominant hardwood in the area, the chestnut grew straight and tall and was rot resistant, making it desirable for building everything from humble log cabin homes to split-rail fences. The timber was used as a cash crop and wood from a single tree would fill an entire railroad car. The small nuts were sweet and nutritious and they fed families, wildlife and livestock. Families also depended on the nut as a cash crop and would bring bags of them to large cities to sell at Christmas time.

Owens is credited with giving Dolly Parton her start in the music business. He took her to Nashville right after she graduated from high school and introduced her to people in the music business.

The American Chestnut Foundation is a nonprofit 501(c)-3 organization with chapters in 17 states. Founded in 1983, its sole mission is to restore the American chestnut to its native eastern forests. For more information on chestnut restoration or the Foundation, visit [www.acf.org](http://www.acf.org).