

MARK E. KEENUM

FROM PROVIDING CRITICAL INSIGHT for Mississippi's fledging catfish industry in the 1980s to molding MSU into the globally-relevant research engine it is today, **DR. MARK E. KEENUM** is passionate about feeding the world.

The Starkville native, who grew up in Corinth, earned three agricultural economics degrees in MSU's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, graduating with bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in 1983, 84, and 88, respectively.

Keenum, who grew up in an ag family with a dad who worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture for 30-plus years, originally sought to earn an accounting degree but chose another major a few classes in.

"A friend told me about the agricultural business major in the agricultural economics department, which intrigued me because it married my dual interests of agriculture and business," Keenum said.

The switch proved auspicious as he would continue on earning his master's and doctoral degrees in the subject while working as a marketing specialist for the MSU Extension Service and a research associate for the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station.

For his master's and doctoral degrees, Keenum studied the economics of aquaculture, specifically, Mississippi's catfish industry, which was just taking off at that time.

"My dissertation resulted in two publications on Mississippi's catfish industry, including an extensive cash flow analysis. We published 20,000 copies of that analysis because there was a huge demand for economic information about the catfish industry," Keenum said.

Upon finishing his doctorate, he joined the agricultural economics department as a faculty member until a role as an advisor for U.S. Senator Thad Cochran took him to Washington, D.C. Keenum

went on to work for the senator for 18 years, eventually becoming his Chief of Staff and noted that his service in this position, in particular, molded him into the leader he is today more than anything else.

"I watched Senator Cochran make decisions in good times and bad, working with him through 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, and other major economic crises in our country," Keenum said. "He kept an even keel, and listened to and treated people with respect and dignity always. I admired his ability to manage and lead and it was a real blessing to get to spend as much time with him as I did."

While working with Senator Cochran helped hone his leadership skills, Keenum's time as Undersecretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, under President George W. Bush, ignited his passion for global food security.

"My role included oversight of the Foreign Agricultural Service and its humanitarian feeding programs, so I traveled to developing countries and saw how our work fed people who, in some cases, would not have survived had it not been for the support of our U.S. citizens and the programs we were administering. That created in me a burning passion to do more to feed people and help them feed themselves globally," he said.

One program Keenum spearheaded in that position was the Stocks-for-Food Initiative administered by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service and the Farm Service Agency. The Secretary of Agriculture at the time asked Keenum to find a way to help California migrant workers who were displaced by a severe drought.

Since Keenum was also in charge of the Farm Service Agency, which manages domestic agricultural programs, he oversaw stores of government-owned commodities including corn, cotton,

soybeans, rice, wheat, and peanuts that had been put up as collateral for marketing assistant loans to farmers. Keenum and his team devised a way to trade these commodities for finished food products, the first transaction of which included trading tons of raw peanuts for thousands of jars of peanut butter.

"The response was overwhelming. We were able to create a barter system where we swapped the raw commodity for a processed finished product that could be delivered directly to a USDA food distribution center," he said.

The Stocks-for-Food Initiative worked so well, \$120 million in bulk commodities were traded for finished food products the first year. Eighty percent of the food was distributed domestically through the USDA while 20 percent was dispersed internationally through the McGovern-Dole Food for Education Program.

"I'm very proud of the Stocks-for-Food Initiative. They say necessity is the mother of innovation. There was a need and we figured out how to meet that need through a unique method that had never been done before," said Keenum, who received America's Second Harvest's highest honor, Hunger's Hope for distinguished public service, in 2008 because of his involvement initiating the program.

As MSU president for the past 12 years, Keenum continues to make global food security a major priority for himself and for the land-grant institution he helms.

In 2010, Keenum helped create a partnership between the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization, or FAO, and MSU. For the past decade, the collaboration has addressed animal and veterinary public health, plant health, fish health, food safety, and nutrition programs while providing the opportunity for MSU students to engage in FAO-sponsored programs around the

Dr. Mark E. Keenum (photo by Megan Bean)



world. In 2014, FAO recognized MSU as a Center of Knowledge and a member of the Global Aquaculture Advancement Partnership. In 2018, the university was selected to be a Candidate FAO Reference Center on Aquaculture Biosecurity and Antimicrobial Resistance. MSU is also engaged in meaningful work with the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, which selected MSU to lead the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Fish that same year. For several years, the university has been an important partner of USAID's Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Soybean Value Chain Research at the University of Illinois and is engaged in the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Livestock Systems at the University of Florida.

Currently, Keenum serves as chairman of both the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research and the Board of International Food and Agricultural Development.

"It is a real labor of love for me to be involved in working in innovative fields of science focused on how we can produce more agricultural products, including row crops, livestock, and aquaculture in a more efficient and effective way so that we can feed the world," Keenum said.

As he continues to help lead the fight in global food security, Keenum says there is still more to do.

"When I talk to high school and college students today who are products of the 21st century, I tell them while they'll see many exciting advances in science,

technology, and medicine, they will also see the world change and evolve," said Keenum, noting that the world population is expected to increase from 7.5 billion to 10 billion by 2050.

"We have a hard time feeding everyone on our planet in 2020. How we feed another three billion people that will be coming to our global dinner table in the span of three short decades is going to be a huge challenge for these young people. This is their future and what they'll be challenged with."

Keenum said agriculture will continue to be a key aspect in solving that challenge.

"Research our world class scientists are doing right here at MSU will help advance agricultural production to meet these growing needs," he said.