

CALS ALUM FINDS FULFILLMENT IN 4-H AND EXTENSION CAREER

GROWING UP in Ripley, Mississippi, **Dr. Martha Ray Sartor** said 4-H was a big part of her life.

“My life revolved around the First Baptist Church, 4-H, school, and MSU sports—mainly football,” Sartor remembered.

Her clothing project won her a trip to the national 4-H conference in Chicago, Illinois.

“I still remember that first plane trip with forty other 4-H kids from Mississippi,” she said. “After that, I sought contests where I could win trips and I still love to travel.”

She focused on clothing and nutrition, and since her family had a small cattle operation, she also showed cattle.

“Having an understanding of livestock has paid off in my career,” she said.

Nowadays, Sartor’s life continues to revolve around 4-H and MSU sports—most recently baseball. While Sartor



Dr. Martha Ray Sartor (photo submitted)

traveled to Starkville and Jackson for every MSU football game as a kid, she managed to make it to Omaha to watch the Diamond Dawgs win big this past year.

As associate vice president of family and consumer sciences and 4-H youth development for the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture’s Cooperative Extension Service, Sartor oversees the university’s family and consumer sciences, or FCS, program and the Arkansas 4-H program.

The FCS program aims to improve the lives of Arkansans in the realm of home, food, and finances offering health and wellness programs, nutrition and food safety resources, financial training, and more. The 4-H program offers a wealth of experiential learning opportunities for more than 133,000 young people ages five to 19 across the state.

Sartor said she’s proud of a recent endowment she helped spearhead.

“I helped launch the Rick and Lynette Cartwright endowment and in six months, during the pandemic, no less, we raised almost \$60,000 for a 4-H scholarship,” she said.

She has also been hard at work ensuring 4-H and FCS programs remained accessible, despite COVID-19.

“We transitioned our programs online at the pandemic’s onset and still had record attendance,” she said. “In 4-H, in particular, we held campfires, officer elections, and state and district contests all online, including the most touching 4-H awards ceremony. We have a great communications department who helped us pull this off.”

Prior to her time at the University of Arkansas, Sartor enjoyed a lengthy career at her alma mater with the MSU Cooperative Extension Service. She was with the MSU Extension for 26 years, retiring in 2006. She joined the organization right after she graduated with a bachelor’s in home economics in 1980.

“My extension career was a gold mine for helping others. As a servant of the people, you get to develop programs that change lives. The people I met along the way gave me more riches than money could ever buy,” she said.

Her first job was in Marks, Mississippi—a town of about 1,500 people.

“I’d never lived in a place that small, not that Ripley was big, but the citizens of Quitman County were dear to me and they made sure I was a success in that extension office,” she said.

Sartor served at the county, district, and state level as 4-H youth agent, home economist, area agent, area family financial specialist, state 4-H specialist, and district director. She commuted to the University of Mississippi earning her master’s and doctoral degrees in secondary education and educational administration, respectively.

While serving in Bolivar County, she helped establish the National Rice Month lunch, a rice tasting lunch that showcases more than 300 rice-based dishes, which draws upwards of 1,500 attendees and recently celebrated its 30th anniversary.

Sartor’s best memories of MSU are the people—noting that MSU combined with her 4-H experience—set her on the path to success.

“I can’t overemphasize the value a 4-H program has on a child’s life—the public speaking, judging, and critical thinking skills developed in the program are invaluable. The networking I did at MSU paid off in dividends, as well. Never underestimate the value of people you meet—they could be the connection to your future,” she added.

She reminds current students and recent alumni that they’re laying the foundation for the rest of their careers.

“The people you meet today may be the ones who open doors later. You’re making a footprint and you need to be cognizant of what your footprint reflects,” she said.

She also encourages young people to apply for jobs that are off the beaten path.

“I’ll have jobs in rural areas and not many people will apply. Everyone applies for the jobs in larger cities but often the gems are found in the small places where the applicant pools are smaller,” she said. “Just because you start somewhere doesn’t mean you have to end there. It’s like the Bulldogs. It doesn’t matter what happened earlier in the season—it’s where you end up.”