

KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

A passion for entomology spans generations

BY MEG HENDERSON

IN THE CATCHOT FAMILY, there is a shared love of learning—specifically, learning about insects.

Dr. Angus Catchot, Jr. and his wife, **Beverly**, both earned degrees in entomology at Mississippi State and are working for MSU in that field. Their two sons are now following in their parents' footsteps: **Angus III** working on his Ph.D. while also working for MSU Extension, and **Ty** pursuing his undergraduate degree and working for a crop consultant.

Angus is an extension professor in the Department of Biochemistry, Molecular Biology, Entomology and Plant Pathology, specializing in row-crop pests. One might say that he inspired the rest of his immediate family to pursue entomology after working in the field for nearly three decades. But he was, in turn, influenced by family, years before he decided to take his first entomology class.

He recalls from childhood a visit from his uncle, who had graduated from MSU with a master's in Entomology, as he reflected, "I knew nothing about it at the time other than that, but I remember him telling me, this agriculture thing can be pretty rewarding, and you need to get an upper-level degree."

After working as an electrician for a number of years, Beverly asked him to consider moving to Starkville. "She had finished her degree at Southern Mississippi and encouraged me to get my degree as well," he said.

They made the move, and Angus enrolled in the engineering program. However, on the first day, he recalled, "I walked into orientation in engineering and realized it wasn't what I wanted to do, and

I remembered my uncle's words. Later, I went to agricultural pest management and was surrounded by people who came from farms, and I immediately felt at home."

A general entomology course, taught by Dr. Larry Corpus, hooked him during his first semester.

"That class did it for me, and a lot of it had to do with the guy teaching it," Angus said.

He went on to earn his master's from MSU and had plans to pursue his Ph.D. at Kansas State University. But, at a friend's suggestion, he instead took a job with Monsanto, whose tuition reimbursement program led him back to MSU for a doctoral degree, allowing him to work full time while taking classes and conducting research. After graduation, he continued to work for Monsanto until he got a call from MSU about an open position in the entomology department. He took the job and has been at home in the department for the last 17 years.

Just as the words of encouragement from his uncle and wife sparked a long and fruitful career in the study of insects, Angus, in turn, had an impact on Beverly's mid-career move to entomology. When Angus was working on his master's degree, in the late 1990s, Beverly had found work in the insect rearing lab.

"I was in social work, and I was just looking for something to do until he finished up," she said.

In the following years, she left the lab to teach elementary school. But when her children got older and the pace of family life started to ease, she thought about the next step in her career.

"Back then, I had a job where my schedule was fairly consistent with my children,"

she said. "When my oldest son, Angus, graduated high school in 2012, I was ready to transition."

Beverly discovered an opportunity in the same insect rearing lab where she had worked more than 15 years before, under her former supervisors, Dr. Fred Musser and Kathy Knighten. She began the position in 2014 and in 2016, with encouragement from Dr. Musser, enrolled in the master's program in entomology while continuing her work in the insect rearing lab. She graduated in May 2020.

Where Angus specializes in preventing insect damage to row crops, Beverly's work focuses on producing insects.

"Our main purpose is to provide healthy insects for research year-round," she said. "We have to go out in the field and collect insects. Then we bring them back to the lab, and we try to set up our facilities to be as close to their natural habitats and diets as possible."

The couple's eldest son, Angus III, studied entomology at MSU and is now working for the university as an extension associate while pursuing his Ph.D. He manages roughly 100 bee colonies for the university as well as 25 colonies of his own at home.

"I am currently studying entomology just as my father did as well as my mom, but that is where the similarities end," Angus III said. "A few years back, I was introduced into the world of honeybees, and I fell in love with working with bees."

The younger Angus caught the entomology "bug" in seventh grade, when he had the opportunity to work for a crop consultant over the summer.

"I worked for Tucker Miller from Drew,

The Catchot family (left to right): Angus III, Beverly, Angus Jr., Ty. (Photo submitted)



Mississippi,” he said. “That summer we checked cotton, corn, and soybeans, monitoring for weeds and insects. I didn’t know it at the time, but that summer would lay down the path for my career in entomology.”

Angus did not intend to set his sons on a particular career path, but he did want them to gain work ethic and life skills.

“I didn’t necessarily want them to be in agriculture, but I did want my sons to learn how to work at an early age, and they seemed to enjoy it,” he said.

Although the Catchots all decided to pursue careers in entomology, their areas of study are quite diverse. That diversity is something that all four believe makes entomology such an accessible field. Angus III encourages young people to consider entomology as a career.

“Insects play such a vital role in the world, and not just in agriculture,” he said. “There is a wide range of entomologist jobs, such as medical and veterinary entomologists, just to name a couple.”

Beverly commented that, although women are a minority in the field, there are many opportunities for them to find their niche.

“In Mississippi, poultry, forestry, and agriculture are our largest industries, and they are all affected by insects,” she said. “There are so many aspects of entomology: there are medical veterinary entomologists, we have artists, outreach in schools, and there is so much diversity.”

Angus added, “There are so many specialties, from identifying and naming insects, or studying a specific insect. If you have the desire, and you find insects fascinating, entomology is a broad

enough field that you can find your niche.”

For the Catchots, studying insects does not end when they leave the office; curiosity about insects is present in their daily lives. On a recent trip to the river, the family saw some insect casings and saw a dragonfly emerge.

“We try to share with family and teach them and encourage them to be interested in insects,” Beverly said. “We share videos and pictures with each other, and we’re always looking for insects in different places we go.”

Their enthusiasm for studying insects is evident, as is their pride in being Mississippi State alumni.

“There’s a lot of pride when you graduate; you get involved in life in a college town,” Angus stated. “I was very

proud of being an alum of MSU. I love school and always had a desire to learn.”

That love of learning was clearly passed down to the next generation.

“I wouldn’t say it was a given that I would attend Mississippi State University, but the path was pretty clear at a young age,” Angus III said. “After working summer jobs through high school in agriculture, I knew entomology was going to be my career path and that I would attend MSU.”

Looking back, the move from Wiggins to Starkville so many years ago, and the continuous decision to make MSU home, has come full circle. As their sons branch out to find their own paths in entomology, the Catchots continue to keep it in the family at Mississippi State. 🐾