

LEADERS *from* AGRICULTURE

CALS alumni serve
communities, improve lives
and livelihoods

BY VANESSA BEESON



EACH YEAR, we profile CALS alumni who are leaders in their respective fields. Our leaders from ag this year include a United States Senator, university administrator, and bank president. Each works tirelessly to serve their constituents, customers, and community members. **Senator Marsha Blackburn** strives to improve the lives of Tennesseans as the senior U.S. Senator of the Volunteer State; **Dr. Martha Ray Sartor**, as an associate vice president of the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture's Cooperative Extension Service, trains tomorrow's leaders in agriculture and family and consumer science; and **Craig Shideler**, CEO of Mississippi Land Bank, is focused on helping farmers gain the financial footing to grow their operations.

FROM 4-H TO THE HALLS OF CONGRESS

IN 2018, U.S. Senator **Marsha Blackburn** (R-Tenn) was elected as the first woman to represent the Volunteer State in the United States Senate. From serving in the U.S. House of Representatives for Tennessee's seventh district in 2003 to being sworn in as a U.S. Senator in 2019, Blackburn has proudly served the people of Tennessee as the fourth woman elected to Congress from the state.

Blackburn parlayed skills developed in 4-H and honed as an entrepreneur into a public service career on the national stage.

"I really appreciate the opportunity to solve problems for individuals and make certain that the federal government is working for them," Blackburn said.

As the senior senator from Tennessee, Blackburn serves on the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee; the Judiciary Committee; Veterans' Affairs Committee; and the Armed Services Committee.

Veterans issues, in particular, are near to Blackburn's heart. In both the Senate and the House, Blackburn has worked to address health care access and caregiver support for the country's veterans, with an emphasis on supporting and recognizing the country's female veterans, which account for 10 percent of those in service.

"We are honored to have the opportunity to work every day on behalf of our veterans to ensure they have access to all of their benefits," she said.

During her tenure as a U.S. Representative, Blackburn was also a champion for musicians, spearheading the Music Modernization Act, passed in 2018, which updated the music licensing landscape to provide protection for musicians and songwriters in the digital age. That

passion stemmed from Blackburn's start in public service as the executive director of the Tennessee Film, Entertainment and Music Commission in the mid-90s.

"When we look at things we've accomplished on the legislative front for our entertainment community in Nashville, I was able to achieve a tax policy change that helped our entertainers. I was able to achieve a legislative policy change that redefined the federal definition of small business to include our entrepreneurs, sole proprietors, independent contractors, and self-employed," said Blackburn, who minored in classical piano performance at Mississippi State.

In both the Senate and House, Blackburn has also focused on leveraging technology to improve the lives of the 60 million people who live in rural America with less access to services like health care. As cosponsor of the Rural America Health Corps Act, Blackburn aims to close service gaps and reduce health disparities across rural America. Additionally, her **SOFTWARE Act**, which passed in 2014 as part of 21st Century Cares, directed the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to modernize its approach to approving health care software to increase accessibility to innovative health care apps and tools for all Americans.

"I was responsible for developing, passing, and getting signed into law much of the legislation that deals with health IT, telemedicine, and the **SOFTWARE Act**, which puts many of these definitions in statutes," said Blackburn, who also noted her investment in increasing access to broadband for rural Americans.

As a U.S. Representative, Blackburn also served on six committees—Budget,

Education and the Workforce, Government Reform, Judiciary, Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming, and Energy and Commerce in which she helmed as chair of two subcommittees: Communications and Technology and Select Investigative Panel of the Committee on Energy and Commerce.

Prior to her time in Congress, she served in the Tennessee State Senate beginning in 1998, where she led efforts to defeat a proposed state income tax. Prior to public service, she was the director of retail fashion and special events for the Castner Knott Company and founded Marketing Strategies, a marketing company focused on retail and media. She said her experience knowing how to lead serves her well in public service.

"One of the most important concepts I have always felt you can take from the private sector to the public sector is realizing that you lead people and manage assets," she said.

The Laurel, Mississippi native earned a national 4-H scholarship and chose to attend MSU.

"The program offered me the ability to study merchandising and marketing. When I attended, consumer economics and merchandising was in the Department of Home Economics," said Blackburn, who said many of her marketing courses were in the College of Business, where she is still a member of the advisory board.

Blackburn earned her bachelor's in 1973, working her way through college as one of the first female sales associates of the Southwestern Company, selling books door-to-door during summers.

Later as one of the company's first female sales managers, Blackburn



Senator Marsha Blackburn (photo submitted)

encouraged other women to sell for the company.

“I brought in friends from Mississippi State—women who are still friends to this day—who sold books and had a great time learning how to build their own business,” she said.

Blackburn said she appreciated the support of faculty and staff during her time at MSU.

“The faculty and staff at Mississippi State opened doors of opportunity because

everyone learns differently. By taking the time and personal interest and not being fearful of trying something different or letting someone individualize a study course for themselves, the MSU faculty and staff helps people learn and develop skills that will help them throughout their life,” she said.

She encourages new graduates and alumni to build a reputation of being effective.

“Do a good job of the daily tasks in

front of you. Build a reputation in your chosen career field for having the ability to innovate and bring newness to that field,” she said.

As she looks toward the horizon ahead, she remains focused on serving fellow Americans.

“My focus is on preserving faith, family, freedom, and hope, to open the door of opportunity to every American, so they have the chance to build and achieve their version of the American Dream,” she said.

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.”

LENDING A HAND TO MISSISSIPPI FARMERS

CRAIG SHIDELER, CEO of Mississippi Land Bank, might be a numbers guy but it's the people that have driven him to grow the farm credit union to a billion-dollar enterprise with 50 employees.

The Sardis native said he grew up in "the shadow of Ole Miss," and while his four sisters attended the University of Mississippi, he knew MSU was the place for him.

His father and brother, also MSU grads, were both veterinarians and while Shideler was a pre-vet major his freshman year, he quickly switched to agricultural economics and found his calling.

He grew up on a farm—a cattle and horse operation in addition to his father's vet clinic—and developed an understanding of how farms operate and the business decisions farmers face.

"MSU really prepared me for my career," he said. "I could not have been better prepared to become a lender and, ultimately, an administrator of Mississippi Land Bank. Every class I took from economics to marketing and statistics to farm management prepared me to become a high performing lender."

Armed with his training from MSU after earning his bachelor's in 1977, Shideler hit the ground running and was hired by the Federal Land Bank Association of Tupelo right out of college. Soon after, he was offered a promotion at the Federal Intermediate Credit Bank's headquarters in New Orleans, Louisiana but opted to stay in the place he called home.

At the age of 26, he was tapped to become president of the Federal Land Bank Association of Senatobia. His tenure was not without challenge and the farm recession of the mid-1980s impacted the association significantly, with the Federal Land Bank Jackson District, of which Shideler's bank was a part, going into receivership in 1988.

"That was a very hard time in my career, but I learned so much," he remembered.

The association reorganized in 1990 and six new associations were created across Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana, including Mississippi Land Bank.

Shideler became chief credit officer over the branches and was promoted to president in 2012.

Mississippi Land Bank serves the northern 32 counties of Mississippi, providing financing for agricultural, recreational, and residential land and properties. As part of the nationwide Farm Credit System, the bank is actually a financial cooperative owned by member-borrowers.

"Anyone who is a loan holder with us is also a stockholder, so if we do well they receive dividends as long as they have a loan with us," Shideler explained.

Shideler said one of his favorite aspects of his position is investing in his team.

"I love growing team members and giving them responsibility and opportunities to make decisions. This leads to an awesome work force, which has been a key to our growth and success," he said.

He also helps drive a corporate culture that understands the importance of investing in those still in school.

"Mississippi Land Bank wants to help others where we can, including through scholarships, which we provide for all the universities and community colleges in the counties we serve, including MSU," he said.

Shideler knows firsthand how important those funds can be to college students.

"I was number five out of six children. I remember how tough it was at times and I never forgot that. God has been good to Mississippi Land Bank and if we can help someone a little along the way financially, we will do that," he said.

They also support research in the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station (MAFES) and have an internship program to give students hands-on experience.

"I love the MAFES research award. We have wonderful professors and grad students and want to keep them in Mississippi. We're happy to help recognize their great work and encourage them," he said.

As for the internship, he says the team tries to give interns the opportunity to experience the breadth of the company.

"We immerse our interns in all aspects



Craig Shideler (photo submitted)

of our operations. It helps them understand and apply principles from their coursework in a real-world setting. Some continue on to become employees," he said.

He advises current students to approach their classes and studies as a job that must be done first while still saving time to be service-minded.

"When hiring, I look for people with enthusiasm, a strong knowledge base, and a solid work ethic who have been involved in something outside of themselves. I like to see that they've been officers in student organizations, which shows me they have leadership skills," he said. "Also, be 'all in' and positive at any job you do. My father taught us to always 'ride for the brand,' in other words, be supportive of your employer and give them your best effort. Throughout my career I've kept that in mind."

Shideler met his wife, Calvert, while at MSU. The freshman from Yazoo City majoring in accounting would ultimately earn her CPA. Their three children, Nathan, Lauren, and Josh are all MSU grads.

For his part, Shideler said his time at MSU was an anchor in both work and life.

"MSU was and still is a major influence for good in my life. My best friends came from relationships developed at this school. Also, I will be forever grateful for the ag econ professors who took an interest in me all those years ago," he said. 🐾