

# LEADERS *from* AGRICULTURE

CALS alumni serve  
the world while staying  
true to their roots

BY MEG HENDERSON





**E**ACH YEAR, we profile CALS alumni who are leaders in their respective fields. Our leaders from agriculture this year have made substantial marks on the national and global agricultural industry, but they all credit their achievements to their educational experiences at MSU. **Michael Maxey**, a retired four-decade USAID employee with numerous directorships over his career, has led large-scale community development efforts from Latin America and the Caribbean to the Middle East. **Robert Hosford**, Executive Director of the North Carolina Agricultural Finance Authority, has managed government projects and policy on behalf of farmers in the U.S. and abroad. **Josh Moore's** 20-year career with Cal-Maine Foods, Inc. has taken him from the processing floor to Vice-President of Operations for Ohio and Kentucky. Although she is relatively early in her career, **Rachel Lee** is assisting Louisiana farmers as USDA-FSA County Executive Director.

## LOCAL SOLUTIONS, GLOBAL IMPACT

**G**RENADA NATIVE MICHAEL MAXEY attended MSU, majoring in agronomy. He had read about Brazil as the last frontier and in his classes was able to meet Brazilian students. Curious to experience the country himself, he joined the Peace Corps and was assigned to Brazil as an agriculture extension agent for two years. He returned to MSU and completed a master's degree with some of the same Brazilians – this time, speaking with them in Portuguese and better understanding the challenges they faced in strengthening their national agriculture sector. Peace Corps showed Maxey the importance of listening to local farmers to better understand their constraints and aspirations.

This international experience preceded a long career that would take him back to Latin America and the Middle East. Maxey began his nearly four-decade career with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1978,



Michael Maxey (photo submitted)

serving as an agronomist managing a national seed production program in Guinea-Bissau, West Africa. He later became a commissioned foreign service officer and a career USAID agricultural specialist. His assignments included nine countries—Barbados, East Caribbean, Honduras, Costa Rica, Peru, Nicaragua, Iraq, Gaza, and Yemen. Throughout his career, Maxey focused on helping local communities in a way that could be scaled to a higher level for maximum impact.

This focus on local solutions was evident in Maxey's tenure in Peru as director of the USAID Alternative Development Program. His work found legal and economically sustainable crop alternatives for Peruvian coca farmers to replace the plant used in cocaine production.

Based on an agricultural survey of the coca production areas, large expanses of heirloom varieties of Arabica coffee were discovered. Teaming with Jim Stewart, Seattle's Best Coffee founder, a gourmet coffee program was launched to provide small-scale farmers access to premium markets and higher returns for their production. This work directly linked Peruvian farmers to the U.S. gourmet sectors for the first time and resulted in the design of a global coffee strategy under an agreement between USAID and the specialty coffee industry signed in 2000. Based on this agreement, coffee projects were funded in Colombia, Guatemala, Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Laos, and other countries.

"That was the first time Peru had been on the map in the gourmet coffee sector," Maxey said. "Now it's readily available at any Starbucks or Whole Foods."

After Peru, Maxey served in different countries but always with a focus on finding ways to help small-scale farmers create a better life for themselves and their families.

Maxey's service was meaningful and important, but it took him to dangerous places. While serving in Lima, he faced a near-death experience while attending an event at the residence of Morihisa Aoki, then the Japanese ambassador to Peru. On December 17, 1996, he was taken hostage, along with over 600 others, by the Movimiento Revolucionario

Tupac Amaru (MRTA), a Peruvian Marxist guerilla group. Maxey spent five days in a small room with 27 colleagues and foreign diplomats. He endured gunfire, tear gas, heat, and constant fear.

"When I was released, I wanted to leave immediately, but my family and I ended up staying for the next six years," he said.

Assignments followed in Nicaragua and Washington D.C. with Maxey retiring in 2007 only to be reappointed the following year as a foreign service officer assigned as USAID Representative on an Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team (ePRT) in Iraq. During this 10-month counterinsurgency operation, his team established economic development programs including job training, small business financing, infrastructure improvements, and expanding schools, health clinics, and a regional fish farm. As a result of investing in local communities, violence against U.S. forces decreased. The ePRT team leader, Howard Van Vranken, described Maxey as a "rain-maker" who could deliver logistical solutions to address large-scale problems.

Recalling a comment by General David Petraeus during a briefing in which Maxey was explaining the community development programs his team had put in place, Petraeus said, "If you can give the people just a glimmer of hope about the future, they can change the world." This approach flowed from lessons that Maxey learned growing up in Mississippi, attending MSU, and working with small-scale farmers on four continents.

Today, Maxey resides with his family in Fairfax, Virginia and focuses his efforts on his family's foundation, which provides scholarships to Hispanic youth in Fairfax County for higher education or vocational training.

Looking back on the start he got at MSU, Maxey encourages students to investigate all the opportunities a university offers.

"Be intentional about what you do during those years," he said. "Also, the early years after graduation are a time to take risks and do things that you might not get to do later. Those choices could change the course of your life."



## HELPING FARMING FAMILIES GROW STRONG

**B**ORN INTO A FARMING family in Natchez, **Robert Hosford's** Mississippi roots run deep. While today, he resides in North Carolina with his daughter, his family was one of the first to settle Adams and Jefferson counties in the 1700s, and the family still lives on the property in Jefferson County. His grandfather, Joe Bullen, lived in Old Main and graduated from MSU. He was a USDA employee for over four decades and raised beef cattle and row crops on the family farm in Canton.

After graduating from MSU in Agricultural Communications, Hosford moved to Washington, D.C. to work for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association as associate director of agricultural policy.

"Going into that role, I thought I knew something because I grew up on a ranch," he said. "But I quickly learned that what went on in D.C. affected my family and neighbors, and it felt good to play a role in advocating on their behalf."

In the late 1990s, Hosford moved to Fort Worth, Texas to direct government relations and public affairs for the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, a three-state organization with 20,000 members.

"I found myself leaning heavily on what I learned at MSU when I began this job since I was constantly working with media outlets, congressional delegations and state legislatures in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Washington, D.C.," he said.

While in Texas, Hosford began taking on private clients in industries including transportation, energy, and agribusiness interests but returned to Washington D.C. when he received a presidential appointment in the George W. Bush administration. For the next five years, Hosford served as Chief of Staff for the USDA's Farm Service Agency. His last four years at USDA were spent working for then



Robert Hosford (photo submitted)

Undersecretary for Farm and Foreign Agriculture Service (USDA/FFAS) Dr. Mark Keenum.

"As a policy maker, administrator, and statesman for American agriculture, Dr. Keenum embodies a life of service and leadership. Mississippi State is in great hands under his leadership" Hosford said.

At the end of the Bush administration, he was offered a position with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services working with their international marketing staff. He traveled the globe with North Carolina agricultural producers, opening new markets in 29 countries.

"This was an incredible opportunity because I had seen the farming and policy sides of the industry, but then, I was looking squarely at the international market," Hosford said. "I learned how to work with other cultures and how markets and supply chains vary in different countries and regions."

One of the greatest challenges of Hosford's career came during his tenure, when he was appointed by the Trump administration as State Director of USDA's North Carolina Rural

Development Agency, where he led a team of 200 professionals and oversaw more than \$4 billion in state projects.

"When the pandemic hit, it presented my team with a number of challenges because most of our projects are infrastructure-based," he said. "However, we were able to complete projects in rural communities, such as rural hospitals, fire stations, police headquarters, town halls and schools in 80 out of the 100 counties in the state of North Carolina. I feel like that job brought me full circle because it often took me into rural communities like the one I grew up in."

Today, Hosford serves as Executive Director of the North Carolina Agricultural Finance Authority, where he manages all financial operations for state-based farm loans.

Looking back to his days at MSU, Hosford brings decades of perspective and sound advice for today's students.

"Find opportunities to volunteer through 4-H and FFA, but also seek out an internship over the summer. You're already building your network and your relationships," he said. "Who you know can be just as important as what you know."

## LEARNING A BUSINESS FROM THE GROUND UP

**J**OSH MOORE grew up surrounded by agriculture in his hometown of Laurel. In high school, he was active in his high school's Future Farmers of America club and worked for his uncle's custom lumber cutting business. After receiving his associate degree in forestry from Jones County Junior College, Moore transferred to MSU's forestry program, ready to follow in his uncle's footsteps.

Moore studied forestry for a year, but at the time, the job market in that industry was tight. No longer certain about his career path, Moore went home and worked the next semester, hoping to refocus and return to school.

"A friend of mine encouraged me to enroll in the poultry science program with him. Although I did not know much about the industry, I knew that it was large in Mississippi and was confident that I could find a job in the field," Moore said.

Moore enrolled in the poultry science program and enjoyed his classes, especially those related to bird health and husbandry. He graduated with a bachelor's in poultry science, becoming the first in his immediate family to earn a college degree.

"While I enjoy all aspects of my job, my original enjoyment of the field began with my classes that focused on bird health and husbandry and then working in live bird production, caring for the flock, and overseeing their wellbeing," he said.

After graduation, he began taking graduate level courses in the poultry nutrition program. However, when

he heard that a fellow MSU alumnus was hiring interns at Cal-Maine Foods' Edwards, Mississippi facility, Moore was eager to start working and took the job.

"I started with Cal-Maine in 2001, and it's been the only job I've had ever since," he said. "Even though we have many locations across the country, it's a close-knit company that truly feels like a family."

After taking various roles in processing and supervising production, Moore was promoted to production manager in 2002. Six years later, he and his wife, also an MSU graduate, moved to Lake City, Florida to take a promotion to general manager. In 2013, he took another promotion to general manager of the Rossburg, Ohio facilities, and in 2019, he moved into his current role as vice-president of operations for the Ohio and Kentucky egg laying and processing facilities.

"I've done everything from picking up and packing eggs to sweeping chicken houses to high-level sales," Moore said. "It was good to start at the ground level because I understood the daily operations of the people I would later supervise."

Looking back on his 21 years at Cal-Maine Foods, Inc., Moore said that one of the greatest rewards of his career has been watching young people begin their careers with the company.

"Seeing young people enter the industry and grow is one of the most enjoyable parts of my career," he said.

Moore encourages today's students to think broadly and not limit their options when it comes to applying their degree to a career.

"A lot of students don't understand how their degree can prepare them to work in many different industries," he said. "Explore your opportunities, and don't limit your choices. You might end up working in an industry you had never considered before."



Josh Moore (photo submitted)



## EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES TO SERVE FARMERS

**A**N ALUMNA of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences in both her undergraduate and graduate degrees, **Rachel Lee** serves as the county executive director of Madison Parish, Louisiana, a position with the United States Department of Agriculture.

Lee is from Macon, a rural community just down the road from Starkville. While her parents were not farmers, she grew up surrounded by farming and agriculture. As a high school student, she did not have a particular career path in mind but had an opportunity to shadow a regional manager who worked with her mother at the local Farm Bureau office.

“I really enjoyed the shadowing experience and getting a deeper look at the management aspect of agriculture,” Lee said.

Another formative experience during those years came with volunteering for the MSU Extension Service in Noxubee County.

“I enjoyed working with the community, especially the children,” she said. “I think those combined experiences influenced me to become more involved in agriculture and helped me find my focus.”

Lee wanted to become an extension agent, and her degrees in agricultural information science and agriculture and extension education would have provided a solid foundation for that career track. However, a move to Louisiana for family sent her in a different but equally impactful direction.

She took a job as a program specialist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service. In this cooperative program, Lee worked with organizations such as the Louisiana Farm Bureau and Louisiana Cotton and Grain Association to educate local cotton producers and persuade them to participate in protocols to market and ensure the sustainability of cotton to retailers and consumers.

Two years later, Lee began her



Rachel Lee (photo submitted)

current position, where she manages the application of ad-hoc and permanent farm bill programs and policies within her parish (county).

“I bridge the gap between the USDA and farmers,” she said. “This job allows me to study USDA policy and put it into action.”

Looking back on her time at MSU, Lee felt that her classes gave her invaluable preparation for her current job.

“My classes helped me find my passion, but they also helped me understand the larger impacts of agriculture, from the global economy down to everyday people,” she said.

Lee’s study abroad experience in Guatemala during her last semester of graduate school solidified her appreciation for agriculture as a global industry. The Extension-based program included a

creative component, and Lee focused on educating children about the nutritional aspects of the foods growing in their backyards.

“I gained new perspectives on the industry and impacts of agriculture,” she said. “This program changed my life, and I would highly encourage students to do a study abroad program through MSU.”

As a young professional who has risen quickly to a leadership position in her field, Lee advised current students to take advantage of the opportunities within their university or community.

“Seek out opportunities to learn new things and find how you can use them as experience for your future career,” she said. “MSU has opportunities to learn, prepare, and try that you won’t have at any other time in your life.” 🐾