

# LEADERS *from* AGRICULTURE

CALS leaders have global impact, invest in the next generation

BY VANESSA BEESON

**E**ACH YEAR, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, or CALS, honors alumni who are pioneering leaders in their fields, making impacts at the global, national, and local levels. Our leaders from agriculture this year include an entrepreneur, environmental economist, and landscape designer. From shaping companies to informing policy to building communities, this year's CALS leaders from agriculture are making a big difference in all they do. **Bryan Wilson** has spent more than forty years in agriculture and now does his part to help the next generation of agricultural leaders coming out of Mississippi State. **Naomi Taylor** answers pressing research questions to inform policy that improves lives. **Devlon Ward** is designing spaces for diverse communities across the Southeast.



## BRYAN WILSON: LEADERSHIP AND GENEROSITY IN GLOBAL AGRICULTURE

**R**AISED IN FULTON, MISSISSIPPI, BRYAN WILSON, this year's MSU National Alumnus of the Year, charted a course similar to his father, a dedicated educator and first-generation college graduate who used the G.I. Bill to achieve his higher education dreams after the Korean War.

Wilson absorbed these lessons of resilience and determination from his dad, who worked as a teacher and principal and spent summers scouting cotton until his crop consultant business turned from a seasonal job to year-round.

"Beginning at age eight I would help my dad in the field by driving the truck while he scouted the crop. At about 14, I started scouting cotton and did

so through college, paying my way through school," Wilson reminisced.

Wilson earned a bachelor's and master's degree in entomology from MSU in 1982 and 1984, respectively. His agricultural career spanned the globe, starting in field sales at BASF and growing into leadership roles in North America and Europe, eventually moving to the company's global headquarters in Germany.

"Living over there, we traveled all over Europe, learned a lot, and experienced diverse cultures. I also traveled extensively throughout Asia and also in South and Central America during my career," he said, reflecting on the broadening of his perspectives.

In 2002, Wilson helped turn around United Agri Products (UAP), guiding it to a successful NASDAQ listing. He later co-founded Tacoma Ag, a company that reached nearly \$125 million in sales, which he led until retiring in 2018 after its acquisition by Atticus LLC.

Wilson continues to shape the future of agriculture through his advisory role at

Inverness Graham and his board positions at FruitScout and Zeakal, companies pioneering in harvest timing and crop genetics, respectively. His commitment extends to community service, having chaired the CREATE Foundation and serving on several MSU boards, actively promoting growth and innovation in both Starkville and the broader agricultural community.

Perhaps most impactful is Wilson's dedication to fostering the next generation of MSU leaders. Alongside his wife, Cindy, a College of Education alumna, they fund scholarships supporting students in both colleges. Hosting dinners for scholarship recipients at their home, they have a special affinity for first-generation college students.

"We usually have about 15 students at the house annually, and it seems that every year we have one or two who are first-generation college students. Given my family's history, that means a lot to me. My father grew up very poor. He was the son of a share cropper raised during the depression. He fought his way through getting a bachelor's and master's from MSU and that helped pull the family out of poverty. Being able to help with that for other families is especially important to Cindy and me," Wilson emphasized.

Wilson also offers sage advice to current students, highlighting the importance of work ethic, mobility, relationships, and ambition.

"I tell students four factors that will contribute greatly to their success. First, you need a solid work ethic. Second, you need to embrace mobility. In today's world, being able to travel and gain experience is crucial. Every place I've visited has taught me something new and introduced me to different people and cultural practices, including in agriculture and food production. Third, constantly build and nurture relationships. The friendships I formed at Mississippi State have been invaluable throughout my career, offering mutual benefits along the way. And lastly, dream big. Set ambitious goals. In college, my roommate and I would dream of earning \$30,000 a year, which seemed like a lofty goal at the time. Whatever the dream is, aim high," he said.



Bryan Wilson. (photo submitted)

## NAOMI TAYLOR: ENRICHING LIVES THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL ECONOMICS

**N**AOMI TAYLOR'S journey into environmental economics and sustainability was sparked during her senior year at DeSoto High School in Southaven, fueled by her participation in her high school's first Envirothon team competition, where the team secured third place statewide.

"That experience got me excited about environmentalism and sustainability, and I knew I wanted to do something to help mitigate climate change," she said.

Her quest for an impactful career led her to Mississippi State University, where she pursued a degree in environmental economics and management.

"People listen when you talk about money and business, so exploring this side of environmental studies seemed

like an effective way to make an impact," Taylor said.

Her major in the Department of Agricultural Economics provided pivotal experiences that shaped her career trajectory.

One such experience was a summer in Malawi, Africa, with the United Nations, engaging with local communities on the impact of an irrigation project.

"This was my first time out of the country. It was an amazing experience conducting research firsthand, and seeing the impact of the programming of the Food and Agriculture Organization in Malawi made me realize this was what I wanted to contribute to in the future," she said. "Mississippi State helped me to figure out exactly what I wanted to do and gave me the right education and experiences to help me accomplish that."

Taylor was also a Demmer Scholar while at MSU, which opened the door to an internship at the Foreign Agricultural Service of the USDA. This experience was crucial, as it allowed her to apply the theoretical knowledge gained at MSU in a practical, impactful setting. Taylor transitioned to RTI International

in Raleigh, North Carolina, where she has been making significant contributions as an economist for over six years.

At RTI, Taylor's work in the Center for Applied Economics and Strategy is pivotal in consulting on international projects that focus on climate change, food security, and economic development. Her daily tasks vary from rigorous data analysis and economic modeling to conducting comprehensive literature reviews and preparing detailed reports.

"We work with government and non-profit organizations to answer big research questions that help inform policy," she said.

She said every day is an opportunity to learn something new, and she invested further in her future by earning a master's degree in economics from North Carolina State University this year. She also finds creativity in her role.

"I like communicating what these numbers mean and why they matter for the correct audience—whether it is for policymakers, other economists, or the general public," she said.

Taylor is a mentor and role model, particularly to young women in her field.

"One thing that's super cool about where I work is that we have so many women economists. I'll be in a meeting and notice all of us in the meeting are women. We're also fortunate because you can come right out of college and start at RTI, so we have a lot of young women joining our team," she said.

Taylor's dedication is fueled by a passion for making a tangible impact on the world. The projects she undertakes at RTI often involve forecasting the outcomes of policy changes or land use on environmental issues both in the U.S. and globally. These initiatives are critical in shaping policies that aim to mitigate the impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities around the world.

"RTI's mission is improving the human condition. We're hopefully helping other scientists learn and discover new things while also informing policymakers on ways to improve lives. We're answering research questions that contribute to changes that can impact billions of people on the planet," she said.



Naomi Taylor (photo submitted)

## DEVLON WARD: SCULPTING SPACES, SHAPING FUTURES

**D**EVLON WARD is making his mark in the world of landscape architecture, where design meets functionality and art intersects with ecology.

Ward's journey into landscape architecture was serendipitous but deeply rooted in his early experiences. Growing up in Starkville, Ward was initially drawn to art and construction. His early years were spent on job sites, where he learned the intricacies of building from his father who was taught by his grandfather.

The exposure to construction and a scholarship in art from the University of Southern Mississippi initially set him on his path. However, it was at Mississippi State where Ward's career trajectory took a definitive turn. Transferring to MSU, he soon discovered a passion that bridged his artistic talent and construction knowledge—landscape architecture. MSU's program offered him the tools and knowledge to explore this discipline that uniquely blended his interests.

Ward credits his father—a general contractor who is now semi-retired—with helping inform his career.

“Landscape architecture is a creative and multidisciplinary field that integrates design, ecology, construction, engineering, and human needs, but to turn the landscape vision to reality the landscape architect must be able to collaborate with professionals involved in the construction process, including architects, engineers, and contractors. Working with my father taught me the responsibility of day-to-day oversight of a construction site, which helps me now through my design work to be able to facilitate and manage projects,” he said.

Since graduating in 2013, Devlon has applied his expertise in landscape architecture across a variety of projects that span residential, commercial, and public spaces. As a designer for HNP, a landscape architecture firm in Birmingham,



Devlon Ward. (photo submitted)

Alabama, a role he's held since 2018, his work has included plazas, parks, athletic facilities and fields, and more.

Ward has been involved in projects like the Randall Family Park and Trailhead—a trailhead, recreational path, playground, and pavilion—in Tuscaloosa and the National Pan-Hellenic Council Legacy Plaza at Auburn University, constructed to commemorate 50 years of Black Greek Life at Auburn University.

“I enjoy the process of designing and solving problems creatively. I think I'm able to hone my professional skills to create inspirational outdoor spaces,” he said.

Ward is dedicated to increasing diversity within landscape architecture. His work with BlackLAN, a network aimed at increasing visibility and support for Black professionals in the field, underscores his commitment to shaping a more inclusive future. Through this platform,

he mentors young minority landscape architects, guiding them through the initial stages of their careers and helping them navigate the professional landscape.

“Our mission is to increase the visibility, support interest, and foster the impact of Black landscape architects around the globe,” he said.

He also seeks to elevate the profession as a whole.

“I seek to bring more attention to professional landscape architecture and our expertise and what we can contribute to the design and the construction process as a whole because a lot of times landscape architects are overlooked,” he said.

He encourages aspiring landscape architects to focus on four aspects when looking for the perfect job.

“Find a role that excites and engages you, where you can add value, which helps you grow professionally, and offers opportunity for advancement,” he said. 🐾