

## From pre-law to poultry

**WHEN DR. RYN LASTER STARTED** out at Mississippi State, a career in poultry was the farthest thing from her mind. She pursued a Bachelor of Arts in English, minoring in foreign languages. She had hoped her undergraduate work would parlay into law school, which was something she'd dreamed of since high school.

"I went to law school for about three days when I realized it was truly not what I wanted to do," Laster remembers. "I grew up on a farm, and I decided I wanted to do something positive within the realm of agriculture. I looked at different majors, and chose poultry science because of the 100 percent job placement rate."

Laster earned a second bachelor's—this time in poultry science—in just three semesters. She graduated with that degree in 1993. She was offered an assistantship and stayed on for her master's degree in food science and technology, earning that in 1996.

After her master's, she held two jobs before finding a permanent home at Cal-Maine Foods. For nearly 20 years, she has served as director of food safety and animal welfare for the company, which is considered the largest producer of shell eggs in the United States. Cal-Maine Foods is headquartered in Jackson, Mississippi.

In 2005, two professors Laster knew well approached her about pursuing a doctoral degree. Since she'd taken more classes than required during her master's degree, she didn't have many courses left to earn a Ph.D. She and the professors, husband and wife, Drs. J. Paul Thaxton and Yvonne Vizzier Thaxton, formulated a program of study that allowed her to continue working fulltime at Cal-Maine while raising two children. She received her doctoral degree in food science, nutrition and health promotion with a poultry science emphasis in 2008.



At Cal-Maine, Laster oversees all of the company's food safety, animal welfare, *Salmonella* prevention, and biosecurity programs.

Laster says she is passionate about the role egg production plays in the bigger picture of food security.

"I serve on the Mississippi Food Network (MFN) Board of Directors. There are so many people who don't know where their next meal is coming from. Eggs, as a great source of protein at a low cost, are an important part of the equation when it comes to establishing food security in our state and across the country," Laster says. "We have an entire nation to feed with an increasing population. Finding ways to be a sustainable part of feeding our country is something I am passionate about."

In addition to her role with MFN, she was chairperson of the board for the Mississippi Poultry Association in 2010 and 2016. Laster also serves on the United Egg Producers Food Safety Committee and on the advisory board for the Department of Poultry Science. In addition, she is on the Senior Technical Advisory Committee for the Safe Quality Food Institute. Most recently, she was selected as an advisory board member of the newly formed Thad Cochran

Agriculture Leadership Program.

Laster has kept pretty busy on the home front as well. She says her family is her support system.

"My parents, Bob and Ann Laster live nearby, and I would not be where I am today without their support. My dad is an MSU alum, earning his undergraduate and master's degrees in industrial education. He worked for Siemens and the state department before retiring from Hinds Community College. My mother taught English at Hinds for over 40 years and is the author of a very successful technical English textbook. I have two daughters, Carlee, age 19, who is a freshman at MSU and Camryn, age 15, who is a sophomore in high school."

Laster credits her former mentor as helping pave the way for women in poultry and hopes she can pave the way even further.

"Yvonne Vizzier Thaxton was one of the first women in the poultry industry at the executive level. She truly shaped my career. When I was in the poultry science department as a student, there were only a few girls. Now, half of the students in the department are female. I am proud of that. There are tremendous opportunities for women, for everyone, in this field," she said.

