

PROSPERITY IN POULTRY

*CALS alumnus finds fulfillment
in poultry industry*

BY VANESSA BEESON



Steve McLaurin holds a baby chick. Photo by Vanessa Beeson.

As a \$7 billion dollar industry, poultry is Mississippi's number one commodity. The Mississippi poultry industry, which employs nearly 55,000 Mississippians, is ranked the fifth largest nationally. Nearly all graduates of Mississippi State University's Department of Poultry Science have a job waiting for them when they graduate and it has been that way for quite some time.

Steve McLaurin, MSU alumnus, saw tremendous opportunity in poultry science when he graduated in 1979. As he seized that opportunity, he also discovered a deep sense of comradery within the close-knit community. Reflecting on a career that spans 35 years, McLaurin says it's the people that make him love what he does.

"My favorite part of my job is interacting with so many good people every day," McLaurin said. "Our company has very high standards and a caring and nurturing atmosphere that allows you to grow in your job."

AN OPPORTUNITY SEIZED

McLaurin grew up on his family's farm in Jones County on the outskirts of Laurel, Mississippi. He always knew he would pursue some kind of career in agriculture and when it came time to declare a major, he chose poultry science because of the tremendous opportunity the industry presented.

"In late 1970s and early 1980s, chicken farms were being built every day. Growth like that wasn't necessarily happening across other agricultural sectors," McLaurin said. "I saw the poultry industry expanding at a fast rate and I knew I could grow and mature with it."

THE PROCESS

McLaurin is responsible for all live operations for the Peco Foods complex in Sebastopol, Mississippi. His responsibility begins with pullets, which are the genetically superior birds that are purchased and reared to become breeders. They move to the breeder farms at approximately 21 weeks. Once the eggs are laid, they are transferred to the hatchery. The broiler chicks then go to broiler houses on local chicken farms. McLaurin oversees the entire process from pullets through to the catch and live haul when the chickens are transported to the processing plant.

Oversight of the feed mill is also a part of his responsibility. A nutritionist formulates a proper diet for all of the chickens and the grain is mixed at the mill, which is attached to a loop track.

"We try to get all of the local grain we can," McLaurin said. "Beyond that, however, the grain is shipped in via railway. Once the grain arrives, the feed is mixed through a monitored, automated process and the grain is then delivered to the broiler houses."

COMMUNITY-ORIENTED, DRIVEN BY COMPASSION

McLaurin makes giving back a priority.

"I grew up with that farmer mentality of taking care of family, neighbors, and the land," McLaurin said. "It's good to give back."

He participates in raising money for the John Herman Hickman Foundation, an organization founded by Peco Foods, which provides aid to victims of natural disasters,



Steve McLaurin at the feedmill, in front of one of the trucks that transports feed to several Peco broiler houses. Photo by Vanessa Beeson.

scholarships for employees, growers, and descendants, and grants funds to charitable organizations.

Additionally, McLaurin has been an active leader in the Mississippi Poultry Association, or MPA, for more than 20 years. As vice-chairman, he oversaw this year's auction for the MPA Foundation, which raises scholarship funds for students interested in pursuing careers in poultry.

"Steve is a very energetic and supportive member of the MPA. As vice-chairman, he helped raise more than \$26,000 for our annual auction, which is the most we've ever raised in a single year," said Mark Leggett, MPA president. "He's been on our organization's board of directors for several years and on Jan. 1, 2015, he will be board chairman for the second time."

Last year, to honor close friend Henry J. Bustin, McLaurin and his wife established the Joe Bustin Memorial Endowed Scholarship at MSU.

ADVICE TO THE NEXT GENERATION

McLaurin thinks the poultry industry is as promising now as it was when he started in the field. He says a great education combined with an open mind and steadfast work ethic will help graduates succeed.

"The degree gives you a general understanding and teaches you the basics of the industry. It's a great starting point," McLaurin said. "It's going to take long hours and a lot of experience to move up through the ranks. I have six different segments that I am responsible for. It was critical for me to move from one segment to the next and learn about each individual process in order to advance. Instead of honing in on one perfect job, be open-minded to all the industry has to offer."