

BACK TO HER ROOTS

CALS alumna focused on Tennessee's rural communities

BRANDON GIBSON grew up on a soybean farm. She's now returning to those roots as senior advisor to newly elected Governor Bill Lee of Tennessee where one of her focus areas will be the governor's rural renewal initiative.

The Dyersburg, Tennessee native lives in Gadsden, in Crockett County—just one county over from where she grew up.

She said the governor's roots are rural as well.

"Governor Lee lives on a farm and raises Hereford cattle. His mother still sells the beef they raise at the local farmer's market so he's very invested in agricultural communities," Gibson said.

One of her goals is to reduce the number of distressed counties in the state. Currently, the Appalachian Regional Commission has designated fifteen of Tennessee's counties as distressed.

"We will focus on aspects such as economic development, building on initiatives similar to what Governor Haslam has already done to get broadband access to rural communities," Gibson explained. "We also want to make sure our rural schools provide the necessary education to students and that those students have plenty of access to post-secondary education, whether that's vocational or technical training, community college, or a four year institution."

She says this next step in her career—which she describes as a winding journey—is a bit full circle for her. As an attorney at Pentecost & Glenn, Gibson worked with many of the communities she will now serve.

"Not only am I able to return to my agricultural roots, I also get to connect again with all of those counties I represented in West Tennessee in a completely different way now," Gibson said.



Gibson was the fourth generation to grow up on the family farm back in Dyersburg.

"We raised soybean, wheat, Angus cattle, and alfalfa hay. My dad worked in a factory and my mother was a school teacher and we had the farm as well. We didn't have many summer vacations because we were too busy working the fields. While it was a wonderful childhood, it was also a lot of work," Gibson recalled.

When it was time to pursue a degree, Gibson stuck with what she knew and chose to pursue an agricultural degree.

"At the time that I majored in ag business, there weren't a lot of women in the field so I suspected it was a good opportunity. The professors were wonderful. Their energy and love for the topic were infectious," Gibson said.

After earning her bachelor's in 1996, she remained at MSU earning a master's in ag business management in 1997. From there, she decided to attend law school at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, earning her degree in 2000.

"My ag business degree helped inform me about agriculture and business across the spectrum. It was a good base of knowledge that's helped me throughout my career," Gibson said.

After practicing law for several years, Gibson was appointed to the Tennessee Court of Appeals in 2014. As one of twelve judges, she served as the court's only woman, writing approximately 60

opinions per year, addressing a range of issues from employment disputes to divorce and child custody issues to healthcare liability cases and more.

Gibson also volunteers as the national director for the Tennessee High School Rodeo. She and her husband, who received a bachelor's in agronomy and a bachelor's and master's in agricultural economics from MSU, have one daughter—a high school sophomore—who competes.

"I volunteer as Tennessee's representative of the National High School Rodeo because I love my daughter and I love the other kids," Gibson said. "It's funny because my job as an appellate judge was similar to my role as the national director of the Tennessee High School Rodeo because I'm the rule enforcer."

In her role for Governor Lee, in addition to rural renewal, she will focus in the criminal justice arena.

"We are in a unique place where we can see Tennessee move forward in the nation. The opportunity to be involved in helping our rural communities is thrilling for me," Gibson said. "The ability to come full circle from growing up on a farm in a rural area to the education I received at MSU to implementing my law degree and being able to help advise our governor on both rural and legal issues is beyond exciting."