

LEADERS IN **Agriculture**

CALS ALUMNI
HELP FEED,
CLOTHE, AND CARE
FOR THE WORLD

By Vanessa Beeson

EACH YEAR we profile CALS alumni who are leaders in agriculture. While their work and influence span a variety of industries, their passions are the same—to help farmers prosper so they can better feed and clothe the world. Brandon Gibson, an ag business management alumna, is a senior advisor to the Governor of Tennessee, focused on improving the state's rural communities. Michael Ledlow, entomology alumnus, oversees the Mississippi Plant Bureau, which protects farmers from plant pests. Abbott Myers, a long-time farmer and agricultural engineering technology and business alumnus, serves as chairman of the board of Mississippi Land Bank, helping farmers gain better financial footing. Sherman Miller, as Cal-Maine's COO, ensures the largest table egg company in the country provides quality protein for America. This year's CALS leaders in agriculture all strive to improve agriculture in their communities, their state, and beyond.



1. Abbott Myers, a long-time farmer and chairman of the board of Mississippi Land Bank
2. Michael Ledlow, director of the Mississippi Bureau of Plant Industry
3. Sherman Miller, Cal-Maine's Chief Operating Officer
4. Brandon Gibson, swearing in as senior advisor to the Governor of Tennessee



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."

PROTECTING PLANTS FROM SEED TO SOW

CALS alumnus oversees Mississippi's Bureau of Plant Industry

MICHAEL LEDLOW, director of the Mississippi Bureau of Plant Industry, might cover anything from agricultural aviation to apiaries on any given day. The '88 entomology alumnus oversees the regulatory and service division of the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce.

The Flora, Mississippi native manages nearly 40 employees across four departments, all tasked with protecting the agricultural and horticultural interests

of the state from the introduction and spread of destructive plant pests.

"The bureau administers state and federal laws, regulations, and programs that deal with plant pests, pesticides, honeybees, plants, professional plant and pest control services, animal feeds, seed, fertilizer, lime, and amendments or additives to soil and plants," explained Ledlow, who pointed out that the bureau also maintains agreements with the Environmental Protection Agency and the USDA in administration and enforcement of state and federal laws.

Ledlow has spent his career with the organization, serving 26 of those years in the south Delta as a district entomologist. In 2014, then-agricultural commissioner Cindy Hyde-Smith appointed him to the position of state entomologist. In 2017, she appointed him director of the bureau as well.

"Our job is to protect our producers, who are on the front line of protecting the environment," Ledlow explained. "We hear from producers, stakeholders, and people in the industry about the issues that are impacting them and once they determine a regulatory need, I present the findings to our advisory board that will in turn adopt, amend, or deny regulations as they see fit."

Recent regulations adopted include restrictions on the use of Dicamba and 2, 4-D auxin herbicide technologies.

"When these technologies were released a few years ago, former Commissioner Hyde-Smith put together a task force to determine effective regulations. From there, our advisory board adopted regulations requiring training, setting a 10-mile per hour wind restriction and making these products state restricted use," Ledlow said. "While we still had our fair share of issues in the state, we were ahead of the curve. The next year the federal government implemented similar regulations nationally."

Ledlow said that while his career has covered all aspects of agriculture, his entomology degree has come in handy at times.

"In the field, we conduct termite inspections and occasionally a complaint would come in when a producer expected herbicide drift but it was actually damage caused by insects," Ledlow said.

He said his degree has influenced his life outside of work as well.

"I married into a farming family and have served as the farm's agronomist for my father-in-law's operation for years," Ledlow said.

That operation encompasses 7,500 acres of row-crop production across Yazoo, Madison, and Holmes counties.

"I make decisions on insecticide, fungicide, herbicide, fertility, and variety choices of the different crops," he said.

As far as his job is concerned, Ledlow said he likes the variety the role affords.

"In this position, you never know what a day is going to bring. It can be challenging because we cover such a range of issues. In the long run, though, to help the state's agriculture and its producers makes it all worthwhile," he said.



PERSISTENCE IN POULTRY

*CALS alumnus helps
lead country's largest
table egg producer*

SHERMAN MILLER'S work ethic dates back to his days growing up in Ethel, Mississippi, where he helped raise cattle on his family's farm. The tenacity served him well during his collegiate years, first at Holmes Community College, then at Mississippi State where he graduated summa cum laude with a bachelor's degree in poultry science in 1997.

A Cal-Maine Foods internship his junior year was all it took for Miller to find his place.

"I recognized that Cal-Maine was an innovative company with high expansion potential," said Miller, who began his career as processing plant supervisor for the company's facility in Edwards.

Miller said that the company began the intern program in 1995.

"I was the second intern in 1996. We have since expanded this internship program for fifteen to twenty students each summer," Miller explained. "It is a great way for students to see our industry through hands-on experience. Many of these students graduate and take on leadership roles in our company with many of our general managers and vice presidents having started with our company through a summer internship."

Now chief operations officer for Cal-Maine Foods Inc.—the country's largest producer of table eggs—Miller's journey in the poultry industry has spanned more than two decades.

Within two years of moving up to processing plant manager, he was dispatched to a new facility in Delta, Utah. When that was operational two years later, he became the general manager for the company's Kansas facility. Miller spent the next 10 years in the Sunflower State, and during that time, he was promoted to vice president of

operations for Kansas, Ohio, and Utah.

In 2011, Miller was asked to return to Mississippi to serve as chief operations officer at the company's Jackson-based headquarters. He is now part of an executive team that oversees operations that include 38 million laying hens across 14 states. The company has 40 million layers, two hatcheries, 44 processing facilities, and 22 feed mills.

Beyond Cal-Maine, Miller has helped lead the industry as a whole. He is past chairman and current member of the board for the U.S. Poultry and Egg Association. He is also a member of both the Board of United Egg Producers and the American Feed Industry Association.

Miller says it's important for students to be involved as well, encouraging them to consider summer internships to find the fit for an ideal career.

"Twelve weeks during the summer is a great way to determine which segment of the industry best meets particular passions and goals for a life-long career,"

said Miller, who pointed out the poultry industry employs several professions including accountants, lawyers, nutritionists, and veterinarians in addition to poultry scientists, just to name a few.

"While any career in agriculture is rewarding since agriculture provides the basic needs for a population, I personally love the poultry industry," Miller said. "I can truly say that one of the best decisions that I have made was walking in the doors of the Hill Poultry Science Department building and meeting Dr. Tim Chamblee, the poultry science advisor. He assured me that the industry had jobs waiting on graduates. I believe that this is even truer today."

Miller said he is proud to help produce a product that helps feed the world.

"I believe that eggs are an extremely valuable food item that will nourish people for generations to come," Miller said. "Many people in the world rarely have access to high-quality protein. I think egg production will continue to expand as an efficient means of filling this void."





OPTIMIST, FARMER, COMMUNITY LEADER

CALS alumnus builds upon tradition in the Delta

ABBOTT MYERS is both a third generation farmer and a third generation bulldog. His son, Abbott Ransome Myers, Jr., continues in his footsteps in farming. The father and son work alongside each other day in and day out farming more than 7,500 acres of row-crops near Tunica, Mississippi. Now, Abbott's grandson, also his namesake, has taken an interest in the land. Abbott, Sr. says building upon this family legacy is the driving force in his life's work.

Abbott's grandfather started the family farm with land in Helena, Mississippi after he graduated from Mississippi State University as an agriculture major in 1915. Myers' father graduated in 1943 as an engineering major, before heading off to fight in World War II. After that, he returned home to work on the farm. Abbott, a '72 agricultural engineering technology and business alumnus, also had a knack for engineering, originally setting out to become an aerospace engineer. During his sophomore year, however, his father suffered a detached retina, which brought Abbott home early that summer to help out on the farm. That

decision changed his life's trajectory.

"To be honest, I hadn't planned on farming and that summer I made the biggest mess on the farm. But each night, I was able to talk with my father and he'd tell me what to do. After that I found I enjoyed making the decisions and being the boss," Abbott said.

Once he returned to MSU, he switched majors to agricultural engineering technology and business.

"Mississippi Land Bank loaned me money and I bought a little piece of ground when I was in college," said Abbott, who raised his first crop in 1971 before he graduated from MSU in 1972.

After college, he returned to farming full-time, raising 33 crops with his dad. Now he's raised about 17 crops with his son. Much of the farm is dedicated to rice.

"While we grow corn and soybeans, rice is our largest business. Everything is bought, planted, and developed around rice. We began with 60 acres of rice in 1979 and we harvested 2,250 acres last year," he said.

Myers also said he's spent his farming life working to make the land better

and acquiring more of it when he could.

"It doesn't make a difference whether you rent or buy, you pay for the land you occupy so it's better to own it. We've been able to buy land when we could and make it more productive," he said. "We land-formed all of this land ourselves at different grades during different times. I have the farm now just about like I want it."

He attributes much of that land acquisition to his relationship to the Mississippi Land Bank.

"Mississippi Land Bank has been one reason we've been so blessed. They've stuck by me and encouraged me to buy land," Myers said.

As a way to give back to the organization, Myers became chairman of the board of the financial institution.

"Banking is totally different than anything I do and is something I enjoy. Mississippi Land Bank's business is agriculture and they've been mighty good to me. I'm just trying to pay back what they've done for me," Myers said, who explained that the board's job is to set policy and hire the CEO.

Myers is also the chairman of the board at Coahoma Electric Association and an elder at the Tunica Presbyterian Church. In the past, he's served as president of the Tunica Academy, Rotary Club, Soil Conservation District, and served on various councils and boards including the Delta Council, the Rice Council, and the Yazoo Mississippi Delta Joint Water Management District.

Myers makes it clear his greatest joy is family. In addition to his son, Ransome, Myers and his wife, Sheryl—married nearly 50 years—have a daughter Katie, two grandsons and one granddaughter. He also says it's a blessing to work with his son.

"He shows up for work before I do and is always in a good mood, which makes me in a good mood," he said.

Myers said it's important to remain an optimist as a farmer but it's also important to save for the tough times.

"You have to be an optimist to farm. We have good and bad years and my father taught me that if you make a good crop, you better save that money because you are going to need it."