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SEPC to honor Rick Estess at Southern Exposure

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The Southeast Produce Council will present Rick Estess of RPE Inc. with its highest honor during the SEPC Southern Exposure conference and trade show at the end of February.

Estess, business development manager at RPE, a vertically integrated category expert in potato and onion growth, will receive the Terry Vorhees Lifetime Achievement Award at the keynote brunch during Southern Exposure, set for Feb. 27-29, 2020, in Tampa, FL.



Rick Estess

David Sherrod, the council's president and chief executive officer, had the opportunity to tell Estess that he would receive the award when their two families were having dinner just a few days after the SEPC board of directors had officially chosen Estess.

"It took about a second, but you could see his excitement and then the tears running down his face," Sherrod told *The Produce News* Nov. 19. "And I don't think it was about him. It was about his friendship with Terry. That's what I think hit him the most -- the fact that he was receiving the award that bears Terry's name."

Asked to elaborate on the selection of Estess, Sherrod said, "Rick was the third president of our organization, so he came into the leadership role right during the period where our council actually started taking root. And he started doing some of the things that we're known for today. Programs like STEP-UPP and our membership scholarships were started during those times with Rick, and started to take hold and shape what the council would eventually be known for. Under his leadership, those programs started becoming defined."

Sherrod continued, "He and Terry were really close friends. That seems to be a common denominator for the award winners. Everybody believed in what Terry's vision was, and it became everybody's vision. And Rick took that on, and took it on in a big way. One of the greatest things about Rick is that he never quits. He's been part of this organization from day one, and his passion for the SEPC is even stronger today. He just keeps on working for what that vision was a long time ago."

He added, "He gives us his time, and he works tirelessly on so many of our flagship programs."

Sherrod and Estess have been best friends for close to 30 years, and even worked together back in the day. "It's great to have people who have been here since the start who are actually helping mentor the younger people who are becoming a big part of the organization as well," said Sherrod. "The good thing about Rick is, he doesn't really ask what he can do; he just gets in there and starts doing it. That's the thing about Rick. It's kind of like he just belongs here. That's a testament to him and how much this council means to him. He's always willing to get in there and do what it takes to make this council better."

He added, "Rick, Julia and Corbin have been so close to me and my family. Our boys have grown up together over the last 20 years, and my daughter, Hannah, even calls him Uncle Rick. His friendship means the world to me."

Sherrod also quipped, "And he's probably the biggest LSU fan that I know!"

Rick DeWayne Estess was born June 30, 1955, in Monroe, LA, in the northeastern part of the state. He was raised there, and graduated from West Monroe High School in 1973.

He attended Northeast Louisiana University, where he studied communication and marketing, but left to join the work force. He continued his education at Louisiana State University while working, and got his first produce job around 1986 at Bradley Candy Co.

"One day, a gentleman called me up by the name of Doug Wolsey, who owned a company called Linsey Foods," Estess recalled. "You might know them by their brand, 'Et Tu Caesar.' From there, I went to work with Dave Stornetta at Apio around 1994. I also worked with one of the brightest produce guys I've ever been around, Nicholas Dacosta. He was Dave's right-hand guy."

Estess worked at Apio for about 10 years.

Around 2009 he joined RPE, which is headquartered in Bancroft, WI, as Southeast regional sales manager, and his current title there is business development manager.

Asked what he enjoys most about the produce industry, Estess stated, "I've had the opportunity, not once but twice, to bring new products to the market that have changed consumers' eating habits. Once was with Apio, when we made an expensive category affordable to just about everybody -- and that was the cut veg. Second was when I went to work with RPE, we introduced 'Tasteful Selections.' We made gourmet potatoes affordable. And we gave the consumer a cooking and eating experience."

He reiterated, "A lot of people don't get that opportunity once. And I have been blessed to have it twice."

Estess spoke proudly and fondly about his entire working career, but when asked specifically about his current company, he referred to RPE as "the best company, the best people, that I've ever worked with. The most joy that I've had is what I'm doing now with RPE."

Rick Estess has devoted himself to another passion, of course: the Southeast Produce Council. It is a passion that goes back to the very earliest days of the council, which came about following a meeting of a small group of pioneers in Atlanta in 1999.

With the hard work and dedication of the founders -- Estess especially mentioned Ken Lanhardt, Tom Page and Terry Vorhees -- the Southeast Produce Council was born, and Estess has been directly involved ever since.

"I started out working on the committees, especially the attendance committee," he recalled. And he led the council as president in 2004 and 2005. But his contributions go far beyond that. One key contribution was the Southeast Training Education Program for Upcoming Produce Professionals.

As Estess related, "In 2009, when we had the 10-year anniversary, I started jotting down some notes, and those notes became the foundation for STEP-UPP. We had a lot of great people coming together and helping. You had Tom Page, and you had Steve Williams. And most importantly, you had Faye Westfall. We got that first class up and going, and Faye has just done the most unbelievable job in keeping that going. I think it's probably one of the better retail produce training programs in the entire industry. And it was done not by me but by an outstanding team of people."

Estess was also directly involved in helping to launch Southern Roots, the council's leadership program for women in produce. "We had talked a little bit about Southern Roots," he recalled. "I was in a room with six unbelievable produce women at a two-hour roundtable discussion. That discussion has now led to 11 events. Thank you Teri Miller for letting me be a part of that."

Estess is currently working with SEPC Treasurer Raina Nelson and the STARS team on expanding the Southeast Top Agricultural Recruits Scholarship program. "We're working on some things to bring more value to that program," he said.

Asked what he is most proud of regarding the Southeast Produce Council, Estess replied, "I think structure." Referring to both his term as president and the term of his successor, Al Finch, Estess said, "We put together a structure that is still carried on today -- that you serve the different offices

before you become president [now chairman]."

He continued, "The other thing I really am proud of is that we set it up where if you were going to be directors, you had to be the chairman of a committee. The meaning behind that was that we wanted to see what you did as a leader before you got the opportunity to be on the Executive Board. And that is still carried on today."

Looking back to his time as council president, Estess said, "We accomplished a lot in two years. We were able to get on a very good financial footing. But it could not have been done without three people: Al Finch, Bobby Creel, Martin Eubanks.

The Produce News contacted those three individuals, who offered their insight about Rick Estess.

"I've know Rick for over 20 years," said Finch, president of Florida Classic Growers. "I can honestly say you won't find anyone more passionate and trustworthy than Rick Estess. Rick's more than a friend to me; he's a brother from another mother."

He added, "Rick is someone that you can count on to get the job done the right way. His loyalty to the council goes beyond saying. His 'take the bull by the horns approach' to get something accomplished is part of the reason for the council's success. If you look back to the early days of the council, it was some of Rick's ideas that became part of Southern Exposure," such as value-added seminars and field tours, "as well as the development of our STEP-UPP program."

He concluded, "I can't think of anyone better deserving for this prestigious award than my good friend Rick Estess."

Bobby Creel, director of business development at L&M Cos. Inc., said that Estess "has played a pivotal role in the success of the Southeast Produce Council," and that from its very early days, "Rick has contributed in many ways to build the council and to move it forward."

Creel said that Estess "has served selflessly on numerous SEPC committees, including Education, Membership, Southern Roots and STARS," always "earning a high level of respect."

He added, "Aside from his many contributions while serving in various leadership roles, Rick has had a positive impact and has built strong relationships with many longstanding members, and especially younger members of the council. His dedication to the STEP-UPP program team has greatly benefitted that program over the years. Rick has been a supporter and mentor with many STEP-UPP students since its inception."

On a personal note, Creel said, "I have known Rick for over 20 years and can attest that he is not shy about expressing his well thought-out opinions, nor is he shy about protecting the values and purpose of the SEPC. Rick is a big guy in physical stature, and although he is known for his big ideas and his big goals over the years, in my mind I know Rick for his big heart."

He concluded, "I have had the pleasure of spending time with Julia, Corbin and Rick in their home in Georgia, where they have treated me with genuine southern hospitality -- and like family."

Martin Eubanks, who is retired from the South Carolina Department of Agriculture, where he served over 30 years in many capacities, including assistant commissioner of agriculture, said, "No one is more worthy" of receiving the Terry Vorhees Lifetime Achievement Award than "my good friend Rick

Estess."

He said that Estess "has always had a forward vision and an attitude of why can't we try this." Eubanks said that "from our first exposition to growing our commitment to scholarships and commitment to community and adding value to industry, Rick has been involved. Rick has helped shape the organization we enjoy today and remains just as committed now as when he began his service over 20 years ago in our infancy."

He added, "What strikes me most is his willingness to give of his time and efforts without a self-serving interest. I am proud to consider him a dear friend and have never turned him down on any request he has asked of me to help the council. I believe much of the council's 'what's next' attitude is grounded in the attitude that Rick exudes each and every day."

Rick Estess met his wife Julia at a produce show in Mississippi. This past September, they celebrated 25 years of marriage. There are three children -- Elizabeth Lee Hernandez, Adam Estess and Corbin Estess -- and four granddaughters. Rick and Julia live in Watkinsville, GA.

Asked what his hobbies are, Estess mentioned golf and playing cards. But most important, he declared, "I love spending time with Julia. As we have gotten older, that has become more and more fun and cherished."

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