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Southeast Produce Council to honor the late Martin Eubanks

By

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November 30, 2020

Martin L. Eubanks worked passionately and tirelessly for more than 30 years at the South Carolina Department of Agriculture, where he helped to promote all the bounty that the Palmetto State has to offer, to consumers within his state as well as to those in the region and beyond.



Mr. Eubanks brought that same passion and diligence to his work with the Southeast Produce Council, going back to the very beginning of the council's formation in 1999. Many aspects of the council's basic structure still in place today were put into place under Mr. Eubank's guidance.

Mr. Eubanks died Jan. 18, 2020, but in one final tribute, the council will honor Mr. Eubanks with the Terry Vorhees Lifetime Achievement Award, its highest honor. The award will be presented during Southern Exposure, which is scheduled to take place April 6-8 at the Walt Disney World Swan & Dolphin Resort in Orlando, FL.

"When it comes to people who have been very influential to the council, and who really got us off to a great start -- who really put some structure in our organization that has been in place since Day 1 -- Martin was instrumental in doing that," said David Sherrod, the council's president and chief executive officer.

"Martin put together our set of by-laws, and with his help and knowledge, he and Terry really worked together on trying to put that structure into place. And when it was all said and done, Martin was our first secretary-treasurer of the council."

Sherrod pointed to Mr. Eubanks' experience at the South Carolina Department of Agriculture as a key factor in "structuring us as a non-profit and also as a working board, putting us where we are today."

He added, "Martin believed in the vision that Terry and Tom had," referring to Terry Vorhees and Tom Page, two of the council's key founders. "Martin was also about agriculture in the South, and how important it is not just to the Southeast but really to the country and the whole world. He helped

us understand how that relates to what our role should be. We were just lucky to have Martin to take on that role, and he helped us so much in securing that good foundation."

Sherrod continued, "I think God puts people in your path, and Martin was surely put in our path. I think that if we could ask Martin today, he would say the same thing about the council -- that it was put in his path. He was such a big help to us, and we miss him, that's for sure."

On another level, Sherrod declared, "Personally, Martin really is that perfect Southern gentleman. In his tone, the way he talked, he really exemplified what being a Southerner was all about. His heart was always in the right place. When you look at who we are, a lot of that has to do with the people who put us there. They cared about people, and Martin is really a person who has always been that way. Martin Eubanks made a difference for the Southeast Produce Council."

Many members of Mr. Eubanks' family are expected to be in the audience when the Lifetime Achievement Award is presented. "It's going to be a special occasion to have them there to receive the award on his behalf," said Sherrod. "It's our highest accolade for the people who really mean a lot to this council."

Mr. Eubanks was born on Sept. 5, 1960, in Thomasville, GA. He graduated from Thomasville High School in 1978, and earned a bachelor of science degree from the University of Georgia's College of Agriculture in Athens, GA, in 1982.

A few years after graduating from college, he joined the South Carolina Department of Agriculture, where he remained for close to 33 years, serving in various roles. He was the department's assistant commissioner of agriculture when he retired around the summer of 2018.

Hugh Weathers has been South Carolina's commissioner of agriculture since September 2004, and worked closely with Mr. Eubanks on a variety of projects.

Asked what he thought Mr. Eubanks' greatest achievements at the department were, Weathers replied, "We had several. When I came on board, we looked at the strategic plan. How do we position this industry to go forward? Part of that was the birth, if you will, of our branding program," known as Certified SC-Grown.

"And with that, Martin took the responsibility of shepherding that program, with other people as well, and building it into something that the industry takes a lot of pride in to this day. He had quite a hand in helping develop that," said the commissioner.

"Maybe his biggest achievement was just his ability to be our liaison from the department to so many groups. If they were production agriculture -- of course he cut his teeth on fruits and vegetables -- but as he ascended in other management responsibilities, with the commodity farmers, or as he spoke on our behalf on budget requests. Martin's ability to just engage with so many external audiences was something that I will always be grateful for."

Regarding what kind of leader Mr. Eubanks was, the commissioner offered, "I think Martin's biggest attribute was his empathy for a whole host of perspectives, not only those that he supervised but those in the industry with whom he engaged -- those to whom he answered, myself included. So when he came to an issue, he had a very strong ability to understand the other person's perspective on a particular issue, initiate, program, whatever we were deciding or discussing. He could always look at it from beyond just his own perspective. And that's a very strong trait. We all could use a little

more of that."

On his particular leadership style, Commissioner Weathers said, "I watched him as he ascended up through the ranks. When I first got here, he was handling the peaches and other fruits and vegetables. Then he took on more responsibility as a manager. I was pleased at how he was able to realize that he had to be more of a people manager and leader."

Weathers continued, "And certainly with his personality and integrity, with the convictions he had about a work ethic and serving farmers, he tried to instill some of those in our staff. It was his goal to empower them to take on more of a management approach and a leadership approach themselves. It takes a lot of confidence to do that -- to empower someone else to make decisions. But Martin certainly had enough confidence to do that. That was an impressive part of his makeup."

The commissioner touched on another aspect of Mr. Eubanks' character. "His faith really served him well through some challenging times," he stated. After retiring, Mr. Eubanks spent a great deal of time "on his church activities as well as working on behalf of others, strictly because he felt like he was giving back for so many things he had been given."

Weathers concluded, "We were friends beyond just being colleagues. That's something that always made a great impression on me."

Rick Estess of RPE Inc. first met Mr. Eubanks in 1999 when the council was in its formative stages.

"You look back at the people -- Terry and Tom and Ken [Landhardt]. You have to add Martin's name to that as far as laying that foundation for what we have today some 21 years later," said Estess, who received the Terry Vorhees Lifetime Achievement Award in 2019.

"He was always trying his best to set South Carolina ag products apart, whether it was watermelons or peaches or nectarines or whatever," said Estess. "He was always trying to set their growers apart from any other state."

Estess also said of Mr. Eubanks, "His faith in God has to be one of Martin's greatest qualities. There's no doubt that Martin is looking down on us. Going back to the early days of the council, Martin Eubanks was the one who led the prayer" at many SEPC events.

"He was just down to earth, a good person," said Estess. "He loved his mom and daddy, he was a big family man."

He concluded, "I miss talking to him. If you needed something, Martin would be there to help you. He didn't judge you by what you do or what you have. He judged you for what you were."

Andrew Garrett, sales manager at Del Monte Fresh Produce Co. for the past nine years, spoke about his first encounter with Mr. Eubanks.

"I met Martin at PMA in 1995," he recalled fondly. "I was walking the floor, looking for someone who had the same accent as me, and I happened upon the South Carolina Department of Agriculture booth. I talked to Martin for about an hour, and from then on we were friends until his passing. We shared a lot in common -- we both loved the South, we were both young fathers, and we loved the outdoors."

He added, "Martin was one of my very best friends. I miss him greatly for a lot of reasons. He was a dear friend and a very good man."

Garrett, who is based in Atlanta and who has been in the produce industry for more than 30 years, spoke of his friend's leadership.

"For someone who worked for a state commission, Martin had a great deal of exposure across the country. He had a reputation as a people person. He was a good speaker. A lot of people came to learn about his reputation with the farmers, and not just in the produce industry. A lot of people gravitated to him because of his great depth of knowledge."

Garrett added, "He refused to be typecast as just a produce guy, even though that was where his heart truly was. I can't tell you how many people in the Department of Agriculture and outside" really learned so much from him.

Mr. Eubanks hired people for the SCDA "who would learn and grow and then move on," said Garrett, "but all of those people would probably tell you that Martin really set them with a solid foundation based upon his principles of family and God and a good work ethic."

Garrett said that he and Mr. Eubanks spoke frequently about the balance in their lives of work and family. "For Martin, that meant involvement in the church and in their school and sports, and challenging them to grow. He was immensely proud of them. Martin took the job of raising his children very seriously."

Mr. Eubanks was a man of high character, and "he expected the same -- and oftentimes demanded it -- from his peers and from the people he was associated with in his business life," said Garrett. "He really expected people to be above board, forthright and honest, and to operate their businesses accordingly."

Mr. Eubanks "was an integral part of the SC-Grown program," noted Garrett. "He really made that program into a brand, and he was immensely proud of that."

He continued, "When Martin retired from the state, he had some goals still within his career path -- things he wanted to do. He wasn't able to achieve those things, but among those goals was to find people to mentor."

Garrett concluded about his friend, "He was a very godly man. He cared deeply about people. That was one of the best things about him. He loved the agriculture industry. He loved the people that he worked with and the people that he worked for. And he took all those things very seriously."

Mr. Eubanks' son, who is known as John Martin, said he was "very humbled" when he heard that his father would be honored with the council's highest honor.

"He never bragged on himself, which just shows the kind of man he was," said John Martin. "So I'm really honored to brag on my father a little. It's exciting news."

Asked what he thought his father's best quality was, John Martin replied, "His sense of humor. That's something I try to emulate --making people laugh, making people happy. That was one of his best characteristics. You always felt warm around him. When he would speak, people would want to listen. He just had that kind of personality about him."

John Martin said that everything his father did inspired him. "His work ethic and his outlook on life always inspired me. He was always a humble guy. He always said there was no reason to brag on yourself, you should let your hard work speak for itself," said John Martin. "There's a lot of truth in that. Beyond that, just the way he treated people. He treated people the way they wanted to be treated."

While everyone today associates Mr. Eubanks with South Carolina agriculture, there was a time in his life when he considered going in a completely different direction.

"He was actually thinking in high school about wanting to do something in the military," specifically in the Navy," revealed John Martin, adding that his father was even accepted to the United States Naval Academy.

"As it turned out, it's not what God had in store for him," said John Martin. "He studied ag, like he was supposed to do all along. Agriculture has always been more than a job, it's been a passion for him."

Mr. Eubanks' wife, Karen, called the award "a very welcomed surprise. David and the whole Southeast Produce Council meant so much to Martin. To remember Martin comes at the perfect time to start a new year."

And her reaction when she heard that her husband would be honored?

"Oh my goodness! Martin's passion for all these people who are involved, and how special that would be to him -- I can almost picture him grinning from ear to ear."

She spoke of her husband's strengths: "First and foremost, Martin was my rock. He's the person who no matter what goes on or what kind of storm is around, he's holding it together. And he's encouraging people through it."

She continued, "God, family and friends were important to him, in that order. He was a faithful, genuine man. He was very light-hearted and humorous. He loved life, and had a personality larger than life. He also enjoyed instigating things, and just found humor in it."

Also, "He was an excellent leader not only at work but in his family. He loved to see other people grow and succeed. He loved to be able to supply the tools to people to be able to do that. Of course, you know he made friends everywhere he went. One of the most important things I would want people to know about Martin was that relationships were very important to him. Not only did he have a relationship in the agricultural industry with so many different people, most importantly he had a relationship with Jesus Christ."

Martin and Karen were very active in helping the needy through their church. They traveled for the past six years to the Bell County, KY, area of Appalachia, "which is one of the most impoverished areas in the United States," she noted. "It was a very special part of his life."

Karen also revealed a few things that most people probably didn't know about her husband.

"He was probably the messiest man I have ever known in my entire life," she quipped. "We were on completely opposite ends of the spectrum. I'm very tidy, very neat, everything has to be in order. For Martin, it doesn't matter if everything is in disarray; he's probably fine. But I really do miss those dirty boots coming into the house after a hunt and leaving trails all over the floor."

She added, "I'll tell you something else he enjoyed: pedicures! I always enjoyed having my nails done, of course -- manicures and pedicures. And I kept after him, saying, 'If you go with me, you're going to be hooked. They'll also give you a glass of wine if you go.' So he finally went with me. And they pampered him, and he had the best time. He was hooked. He would go with me just about every chance he would get. Sometimes he would go without me."

Among his hobbies, Karen mentioned hunting, woodworking and traveling. But what he truly enjoyed was "spending time with all three of his children and his grandchildren. Those were passions in his life," she said. "And sitting in front of several TVs going at the same time watching football games. And eating. Oh goodness, he loved a great plate of food in front of him, especially a real good steak."

Finally, she talked about what the SEPC award would have meant to her husband. "He would have been excited but very humbled. Martin knew that so many people put in so much time and energy into all that this [organization] has become. He loved this organization. He would just be thrilled."

Karen will be at Southern Exposure this April, along with all three children and their spouses, and the oldest grandchild, to accept the award on Martin's behalf.

Photo: Martin, a graduate of the University of Georgia, sported a Georgia Bulldogs cap; he is flanked by the mascots of two South Carolina schools, Clemson University and the University of South Carolina.

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