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Produce industry gathers in person and virtually at SEPC's Southern Exposure

By

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ORLANDO, FL — The Southeast Produce Council welcomed back the fresh produce industry to Southern Exposure the first week in April, as many attendees enjoyed their first in-person event in more than a year, while other attendees participated through the SEPC's Virtual Garden platform.

Southern Exposure is usually held the last weekend in February or the first weekend in March, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was moved to the first week in April, right after Eastern Sunday. This year's event, themed "The Rise of Produce," took place at the Walt Disney World Swan & Dolphin Resort, here.



The family of Martin

Eubanks receiving the Terry Vorhees Lifetime Achievement Award with Gordon M. Hochberg of *The Produce News*.

Following the VIP dinner Monday evening, April 5, golfers hit the links Tuesday morning, April 6, on two courses at the Reunion Resort & Golf Club in nearly Kissimmee, FL, with the annual Tom Page Golf Classic, named in honor of Tom Page, one of the founding members of the council.

The first-place winners on the Watson Course were John Williams of L.G. Herndon Farms; Michael Bader of Wescott Agri Products/Honeybear Brands; Ray England and Jeff Weaver of D.J. Forry. The first-place winners on the Palmer Course were Bill Pollard of Dollar General; Aaron Miller of Booth Ranches; Howard Litaker and Justin Litaker of SMP Marketing.

The STARS & STEPUPP dinner took place Tuesday evening at Disney's Hollywood Studios. Raina Nelson of Renaissance Food Group and Clark Roper of Piggly Wiggly coordinate the Southeast Top Agricultural Recruits Scholarship Program; Mike Roberts of Harp's Food Stores and Gary Baker of Merchants Distributors LLC coordinate the Southeast Training Education Program for Upcoming Produce Professionals.

The STARS Breakfast was held Wednesday morning, April 7, with some students participating in person, and other students participating virtually. Megan Zweig, vice president of DMA Solutions, and Wendy McManus, executive leadership coach at Connect 2 Potential, spoke to the students about the many benefits of a career in fresh produce.



SEPC's David Sherrod (right)

surprising Bobby Creel with a Lifetime Membership Award.

There were two educational sessions later Wednesday morning. The first was titled "It's Not Personal, It's Generational," and the second was titled "The Power of Produce 2021."

Next up was the Southern Roots luncheon for women in produce, where attendees heard from Sarah Frey, founder and CEO of Frey Farms.

Following the annual Produce for Kids reception and the Retail & Foodservice Reception, the opening gala took place in the evening. In keeping with health guidelines during the pandemic, the gala switched from the usual dinner dance to a dinner show, featuring comedian Michael Jr. An Eagles tribute band known as The Dark Desert Highway Band — whose lead singer has been SEPC President and CEO David Sherrod's boyhood friend for 45 years — provided wonderful entertainment.

The Keynote Luncheon got things going Thursday morning, April 8. Harold Paivarinta of Red Sun Farms, who is also chairman of the SEPC Board of Directors, was unable to attend Southern Exposure in person due to travel restrictions, but took part via video.

He gave a State-of-the-Council report, which recapped events of the past 12 months. He also introduced a video in which many members of the SEPC family extended their heartfelt thanks to the produce industry's essential workers, including supermarket employees, field workers, truck drivers and warehouse personnel, for all their amazing hard work and dedication during the yearlong pandemic.

The council had announced virtually back in October that Kristin Yerecic Scott, marketing director at Yerecic Label, was the recipient of the council's Next Generation Award for 2020, but Southern Exposure conference Chairman Tim Graas of Associated Wholesale Grocers introduced her during the Keynote Luncheon, where she was able to express her appreciation in person.



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the Palmer Course: Bill Pollard of Dollar General; Aaron Miller of Booth Ranches; Howard Litaker and Justin Litaker of SMP Marketing.

Continuing the council's longtime commitment to giving back to those in need, Sherrod presented checks to these non-profit organizations within the SEPC Cares Initiative: Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, Palmer Home for Children, Paul Anderson Youth Home and Society of St. Andrew.

The council, which is also known for its longstanding support of education, noted that 74 Member Scholarships of \$2,000 each had been awarded, and that the Nolan Family Foundation Scholarship of \$5,000 had been awarded to Michael Fuehrer, son of Milton Fuehrer of Michigan Fresh Marketing.

The Vorhees Vision Scholarship, for \$7,500 and named after Terry Vorhees, one of the council's founders and its first executive director, was awarded to Emily Lessard, daughter of Dave and Alisa Lessard of The Giant Co.

Sherrod then surprised Bobby Creel of L&M Cos. with the council's Lifetime Membership Award. Creel, who serves as chairman of the SEPC's Board of Governors, was truly surprised as he walked on stage to accept the award.

The 2021 Terry Vorhees Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to the family of Martin Eubanks, who died Jan. 18, 2020, and who was instrumental in helping the council during its formative years.

Graas then returned to the stage to introduce the keynote speaker, Duncan Wardle, head of innovation and creativity at Disney, who gave attendees a motivating and dynamic address.



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The first-place winners on

The afternoon was devoted to the expo, where attendees had the opportunity to see the newest and latest produce items from exhibitors all over the world. About 275 companies, almost the same as last year, had reserved space in the expo hall, and while the overwhelming majority of firms were able to staff their booths in person, travel restrictions meant that some exhibitors were simply unable to attend, leaving some booths empty.

So how did attendees feel about the over all experience at Southern Exposure 2021? *The Produce News* had an opportunity ask a number of people on the expo floor.

"I think produce is back!" exclaimed Kevin Donovan of Phillips Mushroom Farms. "This show is proof of that. I can't thank the SEPC staff enough for the work and effort in putting this show on this year. They've been there every year. That's excellent for retailers, that's excellent for foodservice people, and that's excellent for grower-shippers. You can understand that attendance is down this year due to corporate restrictions. I'm looking forward to this show next year, as I have since the first one."

Helen Aquino, who was staffing the Village Farms booth with Lyra Vance, said, "I'm very happy to see so many people in attendance. This is our first live show in over a year. There's no substitute for face-to-face in produce. We've seen some key customers, and we're happy about that. We've also participated virtually. We both attended the women's luncheon, which was very good. This is always a great show for us, with great networking."

Ronnie Cohen of Vision Import Group LLC said, "It's time we get out and get the ball rolling. We're in fresh produce. We need to get out and touch the product and see our customers. Everybody wants to feel alive again. We're sociable animals -- we need the camaraderie, the hand-shaking." As for the

trade show itself, he added, "It definitely exceeded our expectations. For me, it's half-full, not half empty."

Tom Curtis of Riveridge Produce Marketing Inc. said, "I'm glad to be out and communicating with customers again. This has always been a good show, and we certainly wanted to support it. Traffic has been better than I expected."

Charlie Eagle of Southern Specialties said this: "We are obviously excited to have an opportunity to see our friends, customers and prospective customers live and in person. And this particular show has afforded us an opportunity to spend more time with prospective customers. Every aspect of the event has been top notch and up to the usual SEPC standards. Even though we're spaced safely, the quality of the show is exemplary. I think everybody attending the event is enjoying themselves. And the show remains, in my opinion, the benchmark for regional shows in our industry."

Southern Exposure concluded with the closing reception in the Dolphin grotto and beach area.

And for those already looking forward to seeing their SEPC friends and colleagues again, the council's Southern Innovations conference is scheduled to take place Sept. 9-11 at the Savannah Convention Center in Savannah, GA.

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