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**SEPC completes successful mission at Southern Exposure 2023**

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By

Gordon M. Hochberg, editor emeritus

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ORLANDO, FL — The theme of the [Southeast Produce Council](#)'s 2023 Southern Exposure conference and trade show was "Produce, the final frontier," inspired by the popular "Star Trek" television shows and movies.

And after talking with SEPC executives, exhibitors, sponsors and attendees, their impression of the event, held here March 2-4, may be summed up in two words: mission accomplished.

"It was out of this world," David Sherrod, president and CEO of the Southeast Produce Council, declared Monday afternoon, March 6. "It's unbelievable from start to finish how this conference came together and the excitement that was around it. It was beyond anything that we could ever have imagined, and it exceeded all our expectations and our goals as well."



At the STARS

breakfast Friday morning were moderator Clark Roper of Chick-fil-a along with Katie Rees, market development director at the South Carolina Department of Agriculture; Tiffany Stornetta, strategy manager for produce procurement at

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HelloFresh; and Drew Callaghan, vice president of business development at RPE LLC.

The numbers were impressive, too. "We were well over 3,000 total attendees, with 283 exhibitors and over 650 retail-foodservice buyers," said Sherrod. "We're just blessed."

Asked what his personal two or three highlights were, he replied, "I felt like both educational sessions were on point. We've got so much information to dissect from The Power of Produce that we'll have some additional information to share in the coming months."

Regarding the second session on food waste and nutrition insecurity, "I felt like it really went to the point of exactly what Tim's theme was this year, of how we can start working today to not waste food," Sherrod said in a reference to Tim Grass, chairman of the SEPC board of directors. "That's something where we can help as an industry."

Sherrod also mentioned the keynote brunch, which featured Sonia Lo, an experienced AgTech industry executive who brings a wealth of experience scaling indoor agriculture operations, as the industry keynoter, and Kimberly Williams-Paisley, an actress, *New York Times* best-selling author, Alzheimer's advocate and co-founder of non-profit The Store, an organization in Nashville that aims to address food insecurity, as the celebrity keynoter.

"I felt like both keynote speakers brought unique perspectives to ways we can start living our lives today to have a sustainable future," Sherrod said. "Sonia is one of those people that makes you think a little bit harder to make sure we're doing the right thing. I thought she did an excellent job." Regarding Williams-Paisley and The Store, Sherrod stated, "The work that they're doing shows us that we all can do something, no matter what stage of life we're in. We all have a responsibility to help and be good stewards. That's what it all comes down to."

Sherrod also characterized the presentation of the 2023 Terry Vorhees Lifetime Achievement Award to the late Al Finch as "a fitting tribute that meant so much to so many people."

### **From day to day**

Following the VIP dinner on Wednesday evening, March 1, Southern Exposure 2023 kicked into high gear with the annual Tom Page Golf Classic. The first-place winners on the Palm course were Joe Acosta of Moonlight Sales Corp., Nicole Hulstein of Food Lion, Nathan Stornetta of Produce Careers Inc. and Stephen Cowan of Mucci Farms. The first-place winners on the Magnolia course were Charles Alter of Sunview Marketing, Aaron Miller of Booth Ranches LLC, Mitch Mitchell of International Paper and Jake Davis of Florida Specialties.





The first-place winners on the

Palm course Joe Acosta of Moonlight Sales Corp., Nicole Hulstein of Food Lion, Nathan Stornetta of Produce Careers Inc. and (not shown) Stephen Cowan of Mucci Farms.

In the evening, the Future Generations Celebration Dinner was held, which featured the students from the Southeast Top Agricultural Recruits Scholarship program, the new class in the Southeast Training Education Program for Upcoming Produce Professionals, and the members of the Next Generation Leadership Academy.

On Friday, March 2, the STARS breakfast was held, where students heard from three industry leaders — Katie Rees, market development director at the South Carolina Department of Agriculture; Tiffany Stornetta, strategy manager for produce procurement at HelloFresh; and Drew Callaghan, vice president of business development at RPE LLC — who spoke to the students about what it means to be in the produce industry.

The two educational sessions were held in the morning, followed by the Southern Roots luncheon for women in produce, the STARS Cocktails & Careers, the Healthy Family Project Reception and the Retail & Foodservice Reception. At the Opening Gala, many SEPC executives as well as many of the attendees were dressed in "Star Trek" uniforms in keeping with this year's theme.

On Saturday, March 3, the council presented two Lifetime Membership Awards, one to Mark Hilton, who was the first president (now called chairman) of the SEPC board of directors, and another to Teri Miller, was the first woman to serve in that same role.

At the conclusion of the keynote brunch, attendees made their way to the expo, which took place from 11:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., followed by the Closing Reception.

### **What people thought**

*The Produce News* spoke to a number of people during the closing hours of the expo to ask their

Larissa Rice of Monterey Mushrooms said, "It's great. We're seeing a lot of people, a lot of customers. We're interacting with customers and potential customers, so it's been very good."

Asked what she liked most about Southern Exposure, she replied, "I really like the Southern Roots luncheon for women. I enjoyed that and the inspiration that it gives. So that's probably my favorite part of the SEPC — and seeing customers."

She was also seeing a lot of buyers, "including many foodservice buyers, which is nice to see after the pandemic," she stated.

Bonnie Lundblad of Sunny Valley International said, "I think the show is going great. There's lots of excitement, there's lots of traffic. Everybody is making it a point to stop at the booth and say hi and see what's going on, which is great. There's nothing that you want more than having people appreciate the fact that you're here and joining them."

She added, "I think being in Florida is definitely a plus for all the people that come from those cold, snowy states. I am not seeing one negative in the whole event. It's very positive. There's just tons of energy in this room."

Asked if she was seeing a lot of buyers, she replied, "I am. We're seeing a lot of retailers. They're all making it a point to stop by and say hello, and we get a chance to actually shake hands. We don't do that much anymore [since COVID]."

As to the SEPC in general, she stated, "I love coming to the Southeast Produce Council. I know in the very beginning, it started just as a couple of retailers that were from the very local area. Now they're drawing from many different parts of not only the Southeast but the Midwest and the Northeast. So you get a chance to see people from all over, which is great."

Charlie Eagle of Southern Specialties said, "You know, so many people have come here to enjoy the weather, and they're getting a lot of bang for their buck, because we're having a great show, the same great energy as we had last year. We brought an extended team with us. We have seven people at the booth. We were fortunate to have some of our customers visit us in advance of the show at our Pompano Beach headquarters. And now we came up to the show and an exciting opening brunch."

He added, "We're seeing a lot of young people. We're thrilled to see a new STEP-UPP class." Over all, "It's the same outstanding quality and outstanding attendees. And we're hoping when we go back at the end of the show, we're going to wind up with more opportunities for our company."

Benjie Richter of Richter & Co. said, "We are very pleased with the SEPC. This convention is the best convention for our company, and it's well served by the trade. We have very, very good results from this convention as far as meeting new people and seeing our present customers."

Asked how the expo was going, he stated, "It's been an excellent show this year, yes. We're very pleased with the attendance." He added, "I like the way it's focused and where they locate it. I like the fact that it's big but not too big. It's very manageable. It works very well for us."

Lucretia Parish of Giorgio Fresh was seeing "phenomenal traffic," adding, "We have seen a lot of our

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retailers and our foodservice companies. And it's been steady all day."

She added about the event in general, "The sessions are always educational. We have good speakers. And it just seems like every year the show gets better. And today I thought the brunch was very interesting."

Asked how she might rate this show, she replied, "This is my favorite. You see a wide range of your suppliers. And it's not so overwhelming that you feel like you're going to miss something. I also like that each booth is the same size. That's one of the successes of this show, that everyone's on an equal playing field."

In a final comment on his impressions of Southern Exposure, Sherrod said, "Everything just fell into place as it was happening. But that doesn't just happen. It's hard work by everybody. I can't express the gratitude I have for all these people who give their time and for the volunteers who help bring this together. It's been an awesome experience."

The next major event for the Southeast Produce Council is Southern Innovations, which will take place Sept. 14-16 in a new venue, the Charlotte Convention Center in Charlotte, NC.

*Top photo: The SEPC Executive Committee at the Opening Gala of Southern Exposure 2023 in their 'Star Trek'-inspired uniforms: David Sherrod, Raina Nelson, Tim Graas, Mike Roberts, Kristin Yerecic Scott and Sloan Lott.*

[Gordon Hochberg](#)

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## About Gordon M. Hochberg |

Gordon M. Hochberg was born in New York City, and grew up in Westchester County, NY. He earned a bachelor of arts degree in history from Lafayette College in 1973.

He started his career at The Produce News in the late 1970s, and has been with the publication ever since.

He served on the Board of Trustees of the New Jersey Agricultural Society from 2012 to 2018. He currently serves on the Southeast Produce Council's Board of Governors.

He enjoys music, theater and reading (American and ancient history are his favorites). And he's been a lifelong fan of the New York Yankees since attending his first game in the late 1950s. He and his wife, Kathi, have been married since 1974.

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