

To Every Extension Program There is a Season

Ruby Award Address

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This is certainly an unexpected honor, and I am truly humbled to receive this award. I consider it to be a team award that really should be shared with all those I have had the pleasure to work with throughout my career, including my Extension co-workers, the farmers, families, and youth I've had the privilege to serve, and the many agencies, industry partners and donors who make so much of our work possible. Of course, I must also personally recognize those who nominated me for this outstanding recognition – I'm not going to say they embellished my nomination materials, but they definitely presented my case in the best possible way. Thanks Dr. Ann Berry, Shelly Barnes, and Johnny Barnes, for your time and efforts to develop and submit my nomination. More importantly, thanks to each of you for all you do for Epsilon Sigma Phi, UT Extension, and our many stakeholders in Tennessee.

Thinking about this address and what I could possibly share that would be as meaningful as the exceptional Ruby Award winners who have come before me, I reflected on my career and experiences. Reviewing many of the Extension programs that I was a part of brought to mind the song "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There is a Season)" that was written by Peter Seeger in the 1950's and made famous by The Byrds in 1965. The lyrics are taken almost verbatim from the book of Ecclesiastes, and the focus of the message in the song is that there is a time and a place for all things.

While my career only spans the past 35 years, Extension's history is more than 100 years strong. We've seen many seasons come and go, and it's worth pausing for a few moments to consider how Extension has adapted and responded as the seasons have changed.

A Time to Plant, a Time to Reap

When Extension was created through the passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, our country was undergoing significant change. The industrial revolution was underway, and the challenge was to feed and clothe our population. Educational programs and demonstrations were conducted to increase crop yields and livestock production, as well as improve food preservation and safety. Youth were identified as a key target audience, and 4-H was established to expand our reach to more farms and families across the nation. Extension programs were at the right place, at the right time, to meet the needs of the season for planting and reaping.

A Time of War, a Time of Peace

Our first opportunity to respond to national crises accompanied World Wars I and II. Extension agents supported the need for more food, helped respond to the Spanish flu epidemic, promoted "Victory Gardens," and taught youth how to raise chickens and eggs. Following the wars, Extension assisted citizens through community leadership and community improvement projects. Education and hands-on demonstrations during these seasons of war and peace revealed the ability of Extension to respond to unexpected needs in a timely and relevant manner.

A Time to Build Up, a Time to Break Down

The great depression in the 1930's brought a season of building up and breaking down to Extension staff. Our agents faced challenges in building up financial capacity during a period of historically low commodity prices and rapidly diminishing family income. We were also charged with building up our soils by planting soil conserving crops, which was needed due to the dust

bowl that plagued much of our country during this time. Our nation's capacity to produce food, crops and livestock was broken down along with the economy. Families were taught by Extension how to better manage their money, deal with bankruptcy and foreclosure, and supplement their farm income.

A Time to Gain, a Time to Lose

The post-war era led to significant growth in 4-H youth development programs. New events, activities and projects were offered focusing on citizenship, leadership, and service. Competitive events, such as livestock shows, grew in popularity and importance. Across the country, it was a season of gaining 4-H members and volunteers. It was also a time to help youth learn how to lose and benefit from these experiences as they went on to assume leadership roles in their communities.

A Time You May Embrace, a Time to Refrain from Embracing

After years of programming focused on increasing the food security of the nation, new challenges emerged. Extension responded to the call to improve diets and reduce obesity through increased nutrition education and food safety programs. After years of struggling to meet our food needs, we found ourselves facing health challenges related to heart disease, diabetes, and other chronic diseases that were often linked to poor eating habits. Families were (and continue to be) taught how to make better food choices, prepare healthier meals, and manage limited financial resources. We helped consumers to embrace better health while refraining from over-eating foods that were shown, through research, to lead to poor health outcomes.

A Time to Cast Away Stones, a Time to Gather Stones Together

Today, Extension is casting away inefficient and outdated production practices and gathering site-specific data together to utilize technology to improve profitability, protect natural resources, and enhance health. We're also investing in new educational delivery methods and utilizing technology to reach new and diverse audiences, gathering our learning communities together for better results. One need only review the titles of the September, 2018 issue of the Journal of Extension to see that a new season is upon us, a season which includes new funding models, adoption of mobile learning platforms and social media as delivery systems, and better integration of volunteers in engaging both youth and adults in learning new knowledge.

What Season is Next?

This brief recap of the many “seasons” that Extension has experienced demonstrates that major changes have occurred in response to pressing social issues faced by our country. Now we need to consider the questions “What seasons will we face in the future?” and “Will Extension be willing and able to adapt and respond as we have in the past?” The popular Home Box Office series, *Game of Thrones*, includes many references to the quote “Winter is coming.” This statement really represents a perspective of constant watchfulness. In the series, the House Stark and the Lord of the North repeatedly warn that winter is coming in order to build support to deal with all that winter brings.

In recent years, many have raised alarms and signaled that winter is coming for our Extension programs. These alarms are generally based on observations or forecasts of decreased budgets, perceived lack of relevance in programming, and lack of visibility or recognition for Extension programs, especially among urban stakeholders. Winter for Extension includes slashed funding, drastically reduced contacts and impacts, and loss of support across all program areas.

To prepare for winter, we have developed new staffing models, created new curriculum and programs, and turned to information technology as a way to engage with more people timely and efficiently. These actions have helped us as we defended ourselves against the onslaught of a winter season that might directly reduce Extension's role and value.

An alternative view of the winter that is coming may be seen from a broader national or global issues perspective. This view might acknowledge that winter is taking the shape of a growing world population that will require a dramatic increase in food production over the next three decades. Or winter for Extension might be the growing rural/urban divide in per capita income, health status, information access, and population growth. Perhaps the winter we face is characterized by increased civil discord that leads to greater global conflict.

We all probably have a different expectation of what the next season is that Extension will be called upon to address. It may be characterized by both alarmist circumstances and global issues, such that we must defend ourselves while simultaneously mounting offensives to defeat winter. To remain vibrant and dynamic, Extension (like any other organization) must continue to grow and evolve. Embracing past effective practices, like relying on local needs assessments and emphasizing personal contacts and customer service, will help to maintain the status quo. Addressing new grand challenges will require new investments in new programs and new delivery methods.

For years, Extension (and our Land Grant Universities, as well as our private sector partners) have focused on becoming more efficient by doing more with less. More recently, information technology has enabled leaders to do more with the same by engaging with our stakeholders through web-based information, technology-enhanced program delivery, and adoption of a wide range of social media. To truly help solve grand challenges that our next

season will bring, I believe we must move towards a model of doing more with more. We need more faculty and specialists working on multi-disciplinary projects to learn all we can about issues such as climate and health. More agents and volunteers are needed to reach more youth who become good citizens and stewards of our world. And more demonstrations, experiential learning opportunities, and applied studies are going to be required to feed and clothe a growing world population. Of course, all this requires more funding, which must come from both public and private sources.

So How do we Prepare for the Next Extension Season?

Critics will say that it's foolish to think about growing Extension through more resources. Tight state and federal budgets, increasingly competitive grant awards, resistance to increased user fees, and ethical questions about gift funding used to carry out new programs all suggest that growing Extension budgets will be extremely challenging and fraught with pitfalls.

If we are to grow and do more in the seasons before us, we must build on our strengths and demonstrate that we are indispensable to those we serve. In my view, our greatest strength is our people and their passion, commitment and dedication to help others. Equipping our people to engage effectively with a wide range of community members is essential. That includes personal contacts in the field, as well as distance-based engagement through technology. We need to know and have positive, professional relationships with elected officials, partners, and agencies, and our Extension leaders must facilitate and support these relationships at the local, regional, state and national levels. Most importantly, we must be sure that we continue to contribute to addressing critical social issues with the strength of the Land Grant System and the research-based knowledge that it produces.

These are not new or revolutionary ideas, and many of our Extension staff will say they're already doing as much as they can, as fast as they can. I don't think we can ask everyone to work longer days, nights, and weekends, many are already facing significant challenges with regard to balancing work and family responsibilities. My experience, though, suggests that maintaining personal contacts while leveraging new and innovative ways of reaching an increasingly diverse group of stakeholders will lead to more recognition, more support, and eventually more funding. I think about the quote "The best way to predict the future is to create it." I am of the strong belief that we have the ability to take on the challenges of the next seasons, just as we have since we were established in 1914.

The last line of the song Turn! Turn! Turn! includes words of hope and optimism: "A time for peace, I swear it's not too late." Like the songwriter, I also have great confidence that the future is bright for our world and for Extension. Now is the time for us to turn our attention to the seasons ahead and continue the legacy of those outstanding Extension leaders who came before us. Winter is coming, but it's not too late! Let's continue to devote our efforts to feeding the world, improving our health and well-being developing our youth, and growing our communities.

I'm proud of the work being done each and every day by thousands of Extension staff across the country, Extension continues to be relevant and impactful today and I believe it will be tomorrow. I'm fortunate to have been a part of those efforts for the past 35 years. Thank you for all you do through Epsilon Sigma Phi for the Extension profession, and thanks for allowing me to share these remarks today.