

# **HONOR OUR PAST, CREATE OUR FUTURE**

## **Ruby Lecture**

**26 October 2021**

Before I get started on the lecture itself, I would like to extend my thank you and appreciation to my Virginia Cooperative Extension colleagues and the Alpha Gamma Chapter for nominating me. I must also thank the many people who have mentored me in my Extension journey. I am very honored and humbled by this award, and very honored to be among the names of past Ruby Award recipients, a number of whom I have had the privilege to work with and learn from along the way.

“Honor our past, create our future”

In 2011, the year I was fortunate enough to become the director of Virginia Cooperative Extension, the New York Public Library celebrated their Centennial and published a book, “Know the Past. Find the Future.” That phrase has stuck with me and for today I have modified it to: “Honor our past, create our future.” I believe it is important that we know and honor the legacy of cooperative extension. I don’t want to dwell much on our legacy, but it is important that we recognize it, and celebrate it.

Wise people saw the circumstances of the US in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and wanted to build a better and stronger nation. Their creation of an organization whose sole mission was to provide important science-based information to all people, with no obligation, to improve the quality of their lives was a novel idea. And of course, as individual lives improved so did that of their communities and ultimately that of our country. The approach was one of addressing the pressing issues faced, and as an agrarian society, there were issues of crop and livestock production, marketing of those products, health and wellbeing of the family, youth development, and community leadership. These items were all connected. The farm and the family were an integrated entity. An entity that helped build and sustain communities. Extension worked hard to close the socio-economic gap

many families faced. And, from the very beginning, Extension was able to adapt to changing circumstances. Not long after its creation, the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 was the most pressing issue across the country, and Extension jumped in to help. Home Demonstration agents effectively became nurses, and in some places opened makeshift hospitals and all agents found ways for neighbors and families to take care of themselves and each other. Not that much different than what we have had to do during this pandemic. On through the 20<sup>th</sup> century Extension supported the country in war efforts, and along with the agricultural experiment stations it helped build the strongest agriculture industry in the world, it taught people how to be healthy, and it spurred on the largest youth development organization in the US, and indeed the largest anywhere. Without question the United States would not be what it is had it not been for Extension.

In fact, our system is the envy of many countries. Extension has afforded me the opportunity in my career to visit countries around the globe. From those experiences, two things struck me that we should be proud of. One, we are integrated in a university, a source of knowledge, expertise and support. We are, fortunately, not an independent bureaucratic agency that is even more grossly underfunded and supported than we are. This relationship with our Land Grant University allows us to be proactive and on the cutting edge. The second is the presence and passion and commitment of volunteers. From my experience volunteerism is very much a North American concept and one we must not take for granted. One time I gave a presentation on Extension in Virginia at a symposium in Kenya and I talked about the thousands of volunteers we have and how important they are to our programs. I was asked two questions: 1) why do they do that? And 2) do you pay them? I said, no, no we don't pay them, and they do it because they care, they care about youth, they care about their neighbors, they care about the communities they live in. They give freely to make their community a better place.

As an aside, I want you all to go home and thank your volunteers, really thank them, even the ones who can be challenging. You know which ones I am talking about.

We cannot rest on our laurels, as great as they might be. The collaborative environment of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century made it possible for the organization of cooperative Extension to arise with a local, state and national partnership. We

cannot take those partnerships and our accomplishments for granted. We must cherish what we have and what we have accomplished, and we must look forward.

Whenever my brother or I did something we were particularly proud of, an accomplishment, an award or the like, our mother would always bring us back to earth and say, “Well that’s nice, but remember where you came from.” Of course I knew where I came from. I was confused because I thought it was obvious, I lived in the same house my entire childhood and all my known relatives lived within 30 miles of us. It was years before I fully understood what she was trying to say. Mom had a unique way of using the English language sometimes, and she even made up new words once in a while. What she was saying was, “I am proud of you, you know that, but what are you going to do next?” In other words, you did good, but you must continue to look forward, serve others and work to be a better person.

Let’s remember where we came from, but also ask what are we going to do next? Let’s create our future. Again, I deviated from the NY Public Library theme in that I don’t think the future is to be found as if it is some thing around the corner or in a box just waiting to be discovered. The future of Cooperative Extension is in our hands, it is up to you and me if we are to thrive or just wither away.

As we think about what we should be and do in the future, there are four points I would like to explore.

First, language matters. In Extension we joke about all the acronyms we use, all the jargon we have that means something to you and me, but does it mean anything to the average person on the street? I bet if you went up to one of the hotel staff, or went on one of the Savannah trolleys and randomly asked someone – what is ANR or FCS or CRD or 4-H, what do you think their answers would be? They might have heard of 4-H, but do they know what 4-H is today? I recently had an opportunity to get some input and have a conversation with the Dean’s Advisory Council for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech. These are people who may be alums of our college, ardent stakeholders, perhaps users of our services, and one would presumably think they had some understanding of one of the major functions of the college. I wanted from them what they thought our priorities should be in each of our Extension program

areas. I decided to imbed a little experiment, so instead of asking for example the priorities in agriculture I asked what are the priorities in ANR using our acronym. Some had an idea about ANR, especially those who have been our advocates or involved in local hiring processes. They looked at me sheepishly until someone was brave enough to admit they didn't know what FCS and CRD were. And then, when I told them it was Family and Consumer Sciences and Community and Rural Development, they were only a little less confused. Language matters. It is imperative that we reflect on the language we use and consider its purpose. If our goal is to improve the life of the people we serve, I contend that we should use the language that people use every day. What do people think about? What do you discuss with your neighbors, community members, family? People think and talk about the economy, discussions of the economy are on the news. People wonder if they will have enough money to send their kids to college, will my kids get a good job, can I pay medical bills, will I be able to retire? In Extension we contribute to the economy in many ways, and most of our states agriculture is a major economic driver. They also think about health, how do I keep my family healthy and safe, how do I help family members suffering from cancer or other chronic disease, what about vaccines? They think about their children and grandchildren – will they get a good education, will they grow up to be a productive, healthy contributing member of society? These are just some examples of where Extension is so vitally important. My eight grandsons are a reminder of why I do what I do everyday, and I worry if they will have the same standard of living I have enjoyed. Language matters. Maybe it is time to change our language.

That leads me to my second item. Silos. I don't know what came first, the silo or the language we use, it doesn't really matter, but I contend the two have over the years, especially since WWII, led to our programs becoming more siloed. What that means is we typically approach issues one dimensionally within the discipline or framework within which we work. Is a crop issue just an ANR issue? Is nutrition or diabetes or opioid addiction just an FCS issue? Is community leadership just a CRD issue? No, but that is how we have treated them. To some degree silos have served some program areas well in terms of visibility and support, and at times it has been at the expense of others. Silos do not reflect the future we need to create in order to thrive and more importantly, serve well the people of our communities. One of the lessons of an ecological education is that all things are connected, even if those connections are not obvious or direct. The

same is true of what we need to be doing in Extension. All parts of the community are connected, no matter how you define community. We need to recognize that the issues people face are not one-dimensional but are complex and require a diversity of people, disciplines, experiences, and thought to address. We must remove our organizational silos and barriers. And in the process maybe, just maybe it is time to rethink our organizational structures at all levels.

Third, how do we engage the spectrum of people we are to serve? Our history was one of technical experts providing information to people for them to use. Absolutely appropriate in a time when there were limited opportunities for education and communication. We provided newsletters and articles in newspapers, Extension bulletins or circulars. We conducted demonstrations and workshops. When radio became prevalent we started doing radio programs, and then television programs. Nearly all of these we continue to do today. How many of you have done any of those methods recently? But the U.S. has changed, in three major ways.

First, education. A significant part of our population has a high school diploma and a growing number with college or technical education degrees. Education is a key element of closing the opportunity gap and improving our socio-economic condition. A far cry from the norm in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of you may be first generation college graduates as I am. So, the education level has improved, and when I was young the Extension agent was among the few in a rural county that had a college education. This change in education leads us to think about how to more fully engage with our clientele. We now must consider the broad range of educational attainment in planning our programs.

The second part of engagement is communication. Communication has become convenient, cheap and technologically amazing. This became abundantly clear to Laura and I a number of years ago when we were in Puerto Rico for a meeting. We were standing out on the portico of the hotel, she was talking to our son who was in the Army and deployed to Iraq, and I was talking to our daughter who was in the Peace Corps in Tanzania. Our conversations were as clear as if they were just down the road. After we ended our calls, we looked at each other in amazement. At almost no cost we can talk to anyone, not only talk but see anyone, anywhere in the world at any time. A far cry from when I was a kid and a call from my uncle's farm to the county Extension office was a long-distance call,

and to make that call it had to be important. And no one, no one even entertained the notion of calling a specialist at the university, even if they knew who he or she was.

Third, information. Information is everywhere, some of it good, a lot of it probably not. If it is on social media it must be true, right? Extension is no longer the sole or even primary provider of information. So, where does that leave us? It means, we indeed still need to be providers of information, research-based information to people who need it and can use it. It also means that we need to respect and learn from others as they have experiences, knowledge, and perspectives different from ours but no less valid or relevant. We must help people understand information coming from different sources and help to either endorse or debunk as appropriate. We must be brokers and curators. We must be listeners and learners. We must engage in all ways possible with all people. It is no longer sufficient or appropriate to have a one-way transfer of knowledge.

My final point, let's reflect on our mission as we create our future. Simply put, our mission is to improve the quality of life of the people of this nation. We care about our communities. When we start adding qualifiers to that then we are inadvertently justifying our silos. The silos allow us to continue to do what we have always done, whether it needs to be done or not. I admit I did that as a specialist. It is comfortable, it is appreciated at least by some, but is it really what we should be doing?

If we care about our communities, and we are called to serve our communities, then the question I have is: "What is the most pressing need or issue in your community?" What is it? Just think about that? In 1914, Extension was created to address the most pressing needs of our country. It was an agrarian society struggling with food production, health, leadership, and the like. We tackled those issues, and did well. So what is it today? Are they the same, are they different?

I challenge all of us to reflect on what the most pressing issue is in your community. Then, think about what it is you can do to address it. Could be we have specialists and programs ready to go, maybe we need to rethink some of our programs, or we may just be the catalyst or convener who can start the ball

rolling on a collaboration. It is very likely we need to think differently and engage others in how to address those pressing issues

I believe that much of what I am encouraging is happening. There are numerous examples, but what must become our norm is that: We consciously get out of our silos, use language people are comfortable with and understand, engage all people in meaningful ways, and work to make a difference on those issues that really matter. I challenge each of us to go back to our roots to create our future of doing that which needs to be done for the communities we live in and the people we care about. That was the commitment each of us made when we joined Extension.

I would like to end with a quote from Aldo Leopold who is credited with being the father of wildlife management. In this quote he speaks of harmony with the land in terms of conservation and challenges much like with discuss soil health today.

I quote, “We shall never achieve harmony with land, anymore than we will achieve justice or liberty for people. In these higher aspirations, the important thing is not to achieve but to strive.” (Round River, Essay on Conservation.)

Let us strive together.

Thank you.

Edwin J. Jones