

**2022 Distinguished Service Ruby Lecture**

**Branson, Missouri**

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**“For Such a Time as This”**

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**The University of Tennessee-Omega Chapter**

Good afternoon. What an honor it is to be standing before you—Me—giving the Ruby Lecture. I did not believe Jeff Myers when I read his text congratulating me. I immediately called him and asked, “For what?” He said, “for the Ruby Award!” I did not even know that I had been nominated. I am honored to be presented this prestigious award by you, my ESP colleagues, and I am humbled to join the distinguished list of past recipients.

I want to gratefully acknowledge Shelly Barnes, our chapter Awards Chair, who was responsible for my nomination. Shelly, thank you for joining me today virtually. Shelly’s instructions for me were “Your speech better not be boring!” and “You need to speak up!” I hope I can meet her expectations.

We have a good-sized delegation from Tennessee this year joining both in person and virtually. Would my Tennessee colleagues please stand to be recognized? Thank you so much for being here!

As most Ruby winners before me have shared, this award does not belong to me alone, but it is shared with those individuals who mentored, led, guided and encouraged me throughout my career.

My family has been an integral part of my success. My husband, Ross, my son Sean, and my brother, Pepper, have all been behind me. They are not here with me in person but they are joining me in spirit.

Ross has been my encourager, partner and champion throughout my career. One of the many ways Ross supported me when I was a young 4-H agent was to create all of my demonstration posters. He is very artistic and has great penmanship. This was during a time *long* before PowerPoint.

Sean is the joy of my life. Having had a miscarriage and unsuccessful fertility treatments, we thought we would never have children. Ross said, “Well if God

wants us to have a baby, then we will have a baby.” We had never discussed adoption. That was in August 1993. June 2, 1994 we celebrated Gotcha Day. I was with a group of junior leaders in Oakdale, about two hours from Baton Rouge and Ross was in Mandeville auditing a bank, when we got the call from my sister-in-law, Marlene, that her friend, Debbie, wanted us to have her daughter’s two-week-old little boy. We both drove back home to Baton Rouge wondering how this could be happening. The next morning, we had this tiny bundle of joy. It took almost a year for the completion of the adoption process. But thanks to Pepper and Marlene, they are both attorneys, Sean was ours. He was our miracle.

Back then, there was no maternity leave for adoptions. So, Sean put a few miles on his little body the first few months of his life, traveling with me to conduct school energy audits, staying with my mom, my mother-in-law or aunt while I worked. As he grew older, I always managed to be home for events important to him. However, when he was in pre-school I was a few minutes late getting back to town for his gymnastics program. When I got there, his teacher told me he had been quite anxious, worried that I would not make it. I was *never* late again.

I could not be where I am without great administrators who provided strategic opportunities for me and solid support. Two previous Ruby recipients made significant contributions to my professional career. Dr. Shirley Hastings gave me the opportunity to work for UT Extension and served as a role model for effective leadership. Dr. Tim Cross also served as a mentor and supporter in my UT Extension career.

Dena Wise, Jane Gault, Chris Sneed, Marci Hethmon, and Barb Metzger have been my dear friends and Consumer Economics colleagues since I moved to Tennessee. Thank you for adopting me into your Tennessee family!

Some of the most rewarding work and special memories in my career occurred while serving on the National ESP Board and the JCEP Board. Thank you, Peggy Damann, Elaine Bailey, and Jane for your friendship and leadership while serving with me during my Presidential term. The three Mark’s—Stillwell, Blevins and Platten. Mike Knutz and Karen Reddersen. Too many of you to name who stepped up and have led with excellence. I also want to recognize Jeff Myers and Bob Ohlensehlen, two men who coached and mentored me during my national ESP service. Since they are not here today to defend themselves, I won’t tell any tales of our adventures.

I attended my first national ESP Conference in Salt Lake City in 2000. Not only was I in awe of this Extension association but also this prestigious award; Dr. LeRoy Luft was the Ruby Award winner that year. I never dreamed that I would

one day be bestowed with this same distinction. I was sent to the conference on behalf of the Alpha Alpha Chapter in Louisiana because the secretary could not attend. This began my ESP journey. I owe much to this association for my leadership development, the collaborations and friendships I have made with professionals across the country, and for my success in Extension. They are not here today, but sincere thanks to the encouragement of Deborah Thomason and Sandy Corridon to run for National office. What an honor to be recruited by those outstanding women!

My love for family and consumer sciences started at a young age—my interest in clothing design started in the first grade, designing and making clothes for my dolls. I was at home sick around Halloween. Since I did not feel up to doing much, my mom gave me an old bedspread to make a costume for one of my dolls. The bedspread was a muted orange and white damask. I added an applique of a witch's hat that I cut out of black fabric. My mom kept that first creation for years.

I made all of my clothes in high school, even my jeans. My first efforts at cooking did not go so well, though. My brother and I made cookies for our parents when we were about 5 and 7. They were hard as rocks, but Mama said they were delicious. Daddy did not make any comments.

I also did not do very well at my first cooking competition. I entered the Rice Cookery Contest in Jeff Davis Parish. I made porcupines with ground beef and rice; a recipe from the Extension Office. The finished product really did look like porcupines. However, I did not place; probably finished last in that category. How was I to know I was supposed to cook the rice first?

My cooking skills did improve through middle school and high school. My oatmeal cookies received first place several years at the Parish Fair. I still have to make these for my brother twice a year—for his birthday and Christmas. My clothing and needlework also placed first or second at the Fair every year. I really liked getting the premiums that came with the ribbons! Making, spending and saving money was fun!

From the time that I was a little girl, I wanted to be a nurse and even in high school I thought I wanted to be in the medical field. However, I would have had to complete any degree in the medical field somewhere other than LSU-Baton Rouge, a thought I did not relish. As fate would have it, someone else in my class received the American Legion scholarship, which was for a graduate pursuing a degree in the medical field. I, instead, received a different scholarship that allowed me to go to any college and study any program. So off I went to LSU-BR with my high school friend, Paula, to study fashion merchandising.

My dad said with my love of clothes, I should pick a field where I could spend someone else's money on nice things! My dad also wanted me to be a consumer advocate like Ralph Nadar, and encouraged me to go to law school and study consumer law. I did not want to be a lawyer; that is what my brother planned to do. But I did like the idea of advocating for consumers.

My mom wanted me to be a teacher. I also enjoyed teaching others. Working for Extension has allowed me to combine the two careers my parents wanted me to pursue, as well as two of my interests and passions. You might wonder about my dreams of becoming a nurse. While I never got a nursing degree, I have had the privilege to provide nursing care for my mom as well as my husband and son, all very rewarding.

During college, I knew that I wanted to work for Extension, even though one of my professors discouraged me. "You know you won't have a classroom; you will be teaching in gyms, auditoriums, etc." Those words did not sway me in any way. I really wanted to become an Area Clothing Specialist after judging the Clothing Construction Contest at 4-H Short Course while working on my Masters in Textile Science. Little did I know that by the time I would be ready for this role, LSU Extension would eliminate these positions.

The Ruby Award recognizes someone with a lifetime career in Extension. The majority of my career has been spent in Extension; it would be just shy of 40 years if I had not taken a few years to work in retail, small business and economic development. My first Extension position was in 1983 as a 4-H agent in Acadia Parish in Louisiana.

Acadia Parish was a remarkable place to work, especially for my first real job. The residents of Acadia Parish knew who Extension was, and we had very strong community support. Our staff included two county agents doing adult work, one home economist doing work with adults, four 4-H agents—two male and two female, one crawfish specialist and four administrative assistants. I had a very supportive, caring county director and awesome colleagues who worked as a team. I learned a lot about relationships with community members and the importance of youth development.

In that first job down in Cajun Country, I also learned some other important skills. I had to learn to make strong coffee as well as to drink it. You were considered anti-social if you did not have coffee three times a day with co-workers and whomever from the community wandered in the office during the day. I also learned to make a bed properly. Of course, I had learned to make my bed at a very

early age, but my family did not stress making square corners. Camp had cabin competition and those beds had to be made the proper way for inspection!

In addition to working in 4-H in Louisiana, I was a Rural Health Specialist, directing the Louisiana AgrAbility program. I got to help farmers and farm family members with disabilities to modify their homes and farming operations. One of my clients was a pig and alligator farmer with a visual impairment—I always kept rubber boots in my car; I never knew what the day would bring.

I continued to work with Extension full-time while pursuing my doctorate. After I completed my PhD program, I became an Assistant Professor in Family Resource Management while also serving as the EEO/CR/ADA Coordinator for the entire LSU AgCenter. I gained valuable experience at LSU, and I thank all of my LSU colleagues and administrators for the opportunities and support I received.

Dr. Shirley Hastings and Tennessee Extension offered me my dream job. I have served as an Assistant/Associate/Full Professor and Consumer Economics Specialist since 2006. Since April of this year, my responsibilities expanded to Assistant Department Head.

The stories I could tell of the wonderful experiences I have shared with my dear friend and mentor, Dr. Dena Wise, and friends and colleagues Jane Gault, Dr. Chris Sneed, Marci Hethmon and Barb Metzger. Dena, Jane and I always drove to conferences, taking time to enjoy the trip and even get some work done in the car. Dena and I usually traveled the back roads. One trip to Denver took us three days! Would you all please stand? This award is due in large part to the collaborations and relationships I have with each of you.

I have held a variety of positions throughout my career and have enjoyed each one. But my love for consumer economics, a field that has so much impact on individuals, families, and communities, has truly been rewarding and continues to be relevant especially in today's economy.

I cannot speak before a group without talking a little about economics. I want to share a glimpse in the times and conditions in 1983 as compared to today.

The U.S. dollar has lost 66% of its value since 1983.

A dollar today only buys 33.617% of what it could buy back then. The inflation rate in 1983 was **3.21%**. The current inflation rate compared to last year is now 8.52%.

A gallon of gas cost \$1.22; the national average as of this morning was \$3.72.

Median home price was \$75,300; today it is \$348,079.

There was a Farm Crisis in the Midwest in the early 80's. Today, we have severe drought, high inflation, supply chain shortages as well as climbing interest rates impacting the agriculture industry. Today's interest rate for a 30-year home mortgage is 6.72%. The Fed will probably raise interest rates two more times before the end of the year.

### **Reflection activity**

Think back to the day you began *your* Extension career. This may be 40 years ago or last year. Think about what was happening in Extension at the time. What was happening in our country? What was the economy like?

What leadership role did you have in your job? Did you feel adequately prepared?

Now, think about today. What is your current position? You may be retired. Do you have a leadership role in an association or for an organization in your community?

You were chosen for your first position. You have been chosen for your current role. I hope this lecture will give you some take-aways on leadership and how you can make a positive impact wherever you are.

Did you know there are over 75,000 books for sale on Amazon with leadership in the title? Thousands of blogs and articles are published each year on the topic as well. In the Journal of Extension alone there have been over one thousand articles published on leadership. And I am sure many of you have read some of these books as well have attended training on the topic.

A considerable amount of wisdom regarding leadership can also be found in literature. Homer, Plato, Shakespeare and Hemingway are examples. The Bible is a great resource on leadership and depicts many leadership styles. Moses, David, and Samson were all leaders possessing different styles and qualities.

### **Queen Esther**

Queen Esther was another great leader of the Jewish people, and I want to share her story from which insights about how different leadership styles can have huge effects. The *Book of Esther* is a book in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible and is part of the Hebrew Bible, one of the Ketuvim. One author compared the story of Queen Esther to the Clint Eastwood movie, *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, since there are examples of each of these types of leaders in the story. It really does read like a movie plot!

The book can also be viewed as a study of a variety of leadership styles and ends with what can be interpreted as a prescription for effective leadership (Esther 10:3). Some of you may have read this book or have seen movies about Esther; for those of you who have not, I will give a brief synopsis. I suggest you read the entire book if you want more details.

It is also a book of romance, intrigue and courage. The four main characters are the king of Persia--Ahasuerus, Esther—a young, ordinary Jewish orphan, Mordecai—Esther's cousin, guardian and mentor, and Haman—prime minister of the kingdom. The drama involves three players exercising leadership, whether in an authorized leadership position or taking the role of leadership upon themselves, and a fourth player caught in the middle and faced with a choice, “*What kind of leader am I going to be?*” The leaders surrounding Esther are Mordecai (the good), King Ahasuerus (the bad), and Haman (the ugly). Each one models a drastically different style of leadership. The young girl turned queen is given an opportunity to embrace one of their approaches. The stakes are high as her decision will impact the lives of the entire nation of Israel.

The story of Queen Esther takes place in Persia approximately 2500 years ago. The Persian empire was vast—one of the largest kingdoms in history, stretching from modern day Ethiopia across the Middle East all the way to India. The story unfolds with Ahasuerus, known as an arrogant pleasure-seeker, hosting a lavish party for his court and dignitaries. In a drunken state, he orders Queen Vashti to parade her beauty in front of the crowd. She refuses and he removes her as queen.

Ahasuerus then holds a beauty contest of young girls so he can pick a new queen. One of these girls was Esther. The king fancies her and makes her his new queen. She does not tell anyone that she is Jewish. Not long after she is made queen, Mordecai discovers a plot by members of the court to kill Ahasuerus. The conspirators are caught and hanged, and Mordecai's service to the king is recorded. However, Mordecai is given no immediate appreciation nor does he ask for any.

Ahasuerus appoints an evil man named Haman as the prime minister. Haman thrives on recognition and demands respect from everyone. Mordecai refuses to bow down before Haman (bowing down in those times meant to literally lie down prostrate in front of someone). In Mordecai's view, this was treating Haman as a god; Mordecai only worshipped the God of the Jews. Well this made Haman very

mad. When Haman found out Mordecai was Jewish, he devised a plan to have Mordecai and all of the Jews in the empire killed. Haman gets permission from Ahasuerus to carry out his plan.

When Mordecai finds out about this plot, he tells Esther about it and asks her to intercede with the king. She is afraid to break the law and talk with the king unsummoned. She could be killed by this action. Mordecai tells her she must do this for their people. *“If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this.”* (Esther 4:14, MSG).

She seriously considers his request and asked him to have all Jews in Susa fast and pray for three days with her. On the third day she goes to the king. He stretches out his scepter, an indication that all is well. Esther invites him to a feast along with Haman. She asks him to attend a second feast the next day. All the while Haman gets madder at madder at Mordecai and plots to have him hanged.

That night, the king can't sleep and asked that the court records be read to him to help him get to sleep. He finds out about how Mordechai thwarted the plot to kill him and that Mordechai has received no thanks for this act of service. Just then, Haman appears, planning to ask the King to hang Mordechai. However, before he can make this request, King Ahasuerus asks Haman what should be done for a man who the king wants to honor.

Haman thinks that King Ahasuerus is referring to him, to Haman. So Haman says that the man the king would honor should be dressed in the king's royal robes and led around on the king's royal horse. To his horror and surprise, the king instructs Haman to do this for Mordechai.

After this, Ahasuerus and Haman attend Esther's second banquet, where she reveals that she is Jewish and that Haman is planning to annihilate her people, including her. Overcome by rage, Ahasuerus leaves the room; meanwhile Haman stays behind and begs Esther for his life, falling on her in desperation. The king comes back in at this moment and thinks Haman is attacking the queen; this makes him angrier than before and he orders Haman hanged on the gallows that Haman had prepared for Mordechai. The previous decree against the Jews cannot be annulled, but the king allows the Jews to defend themselves during attacks. The Jews are able to overcome their attackers. Esther creates a holiday to commemorate the victory. Ahasuerus remains very powerful and continues reigning. Mordechai assumes a prominent position in his court.



Ahasuerus is a bad leader. He's not particularly malicious or evil—he's simply selfish, immature, and controlled by his passions. He is the type of leader who is concerned with glory and fame. He's easily manipulated by the very people he's surrounded himself with in hopes of manipulating them.

But if Ahasuerus is bad, Mordecai is good. He taught Esther the most important lesson of leadership: A leader has to be willing to risk one's life for the people. Mordecai's integrity runs so deep that he refuses to bow down to Haman. Any position or power he received was used to bless others and create a better future for them.

If Ahasuerus is bad and Mordecai is good, then Haman is downright ugly. Where Ahasuerus is weak and easily manipulated, Haman is strong and calculating. His ambition and lust for power drive him to attempted genocide. He used his positions of power to manipulate, deceive, bribe, and serve his own selfish desires. His pride is driven by insecurity—he must have the glory and will literally kill anyone who stands in the way.

In the midst of these three men stands Esther. Esther was humble and teachable, listening to Mordecai. Her humility and wisdom earned her favor everywhere she went. Promotion and position didn't change Esther's character—she kept listening and learning, remaining humble and honorable.

She **sought guidance** and detailed information from reliable sources to understand problems and create solutions. She **strategized**--devised a plan and took the initiative to carry it out. She was **decisive**. Once she realized that this was her responsibility, she rose to the occasion. The key moment in her leadership journey comes when she issues a call to all the Jews to pray and fast in preparation for her biggest challenge.

She honors authority and navigates politics shrewdly to persuade, rather than to deceive. She uses her influence to promote and protect others and delegates duties to those more qualified than her. Esther works alongside other leaders. She rescues the Jewish people, having indeed come to the kingdom for "such a time as this."

The book of Esther shows us many leadership qualities we can strive to achieve.

**Esther acted with courage and bravery.**

Good leaders are not afraid to do the hard things while poor leaders avoid hard decisions. We need to lead with a clear vision and purpose. Sometimes that might require bravery and courage to follow through.

**Esther used her position for good. She did not use her position to tear down or manipulate. She used her position for the greater good, to protect her people.**

Good leaders serve others while poor leaders pursue the applause of others. Leaders need to have humility, focusing on the people they are leading and not themselves. Sometimes they need to be a voice for those they serve.

Good leaders react patiently while poor leaders are reactionary and compulsive. Leaders should be open to advice, and they should seek wise counsel.

Like us, Esther was surrounded by competing approaches to leadership. This story shows us the importance of selecting leaders with integrity, honesty, and humility—in government, in business, in professional associations, and in Extension.

In her blog, “Queen Esther: Quiet Leader,” Daniella Shear defines a leader as “a person or people who can effect change.” She also comments that some people think that in order to be a leader you have to be loud and outspoken. But volume has nothing to do with leadership. Esther wasn't outspoken at all, but **she undoubtedly led**. While there are good leaders who are loud and outspoken, there is no one image of a leader. If a leader is someone who effects change, then many people have the ability to be leaders. Small changes are important too. Everyone cannot be administrators, kings or queens, and not everyone has the same amount of power. But what matters is what we do with what we have. Your voice does not always have to be loud to be heard—you can be quiet and still bring about positive change that is important and meaningful.

Simon Sinek, leadership expert and author of the classic, “Start with Why” states that “Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge.”

Queen Esther was chosen by her God “for such a time as this” to save the Jewish people. You have been chosen by your organization, department or University to lead in whatever capacity you are serving. No matter your style of leadership, remember the lessons from *the Book of Esther* and that your leadership style and the quality of your leadership will have lasting impact and you can make a difference where you have been placed. Esther stepped up to the challenge and took care of her people. Are you ready to do the same?

*For you all were chosen for such a time as this.*