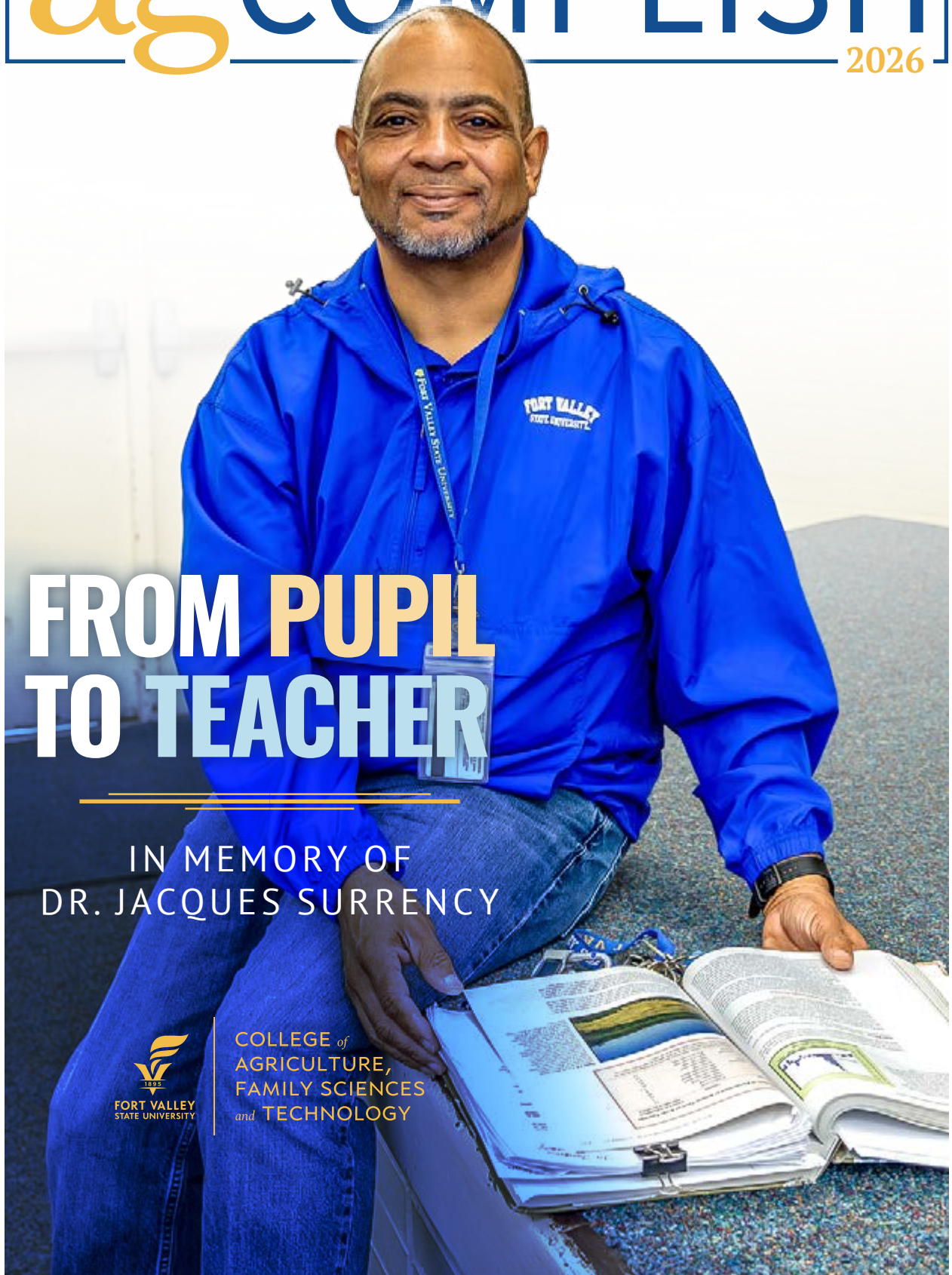




FROM PUPIL TO TEACHER

IN MEMORY OF
DR. JACQUES SURRENCY



COLLEGE of
AGRICULTURE,
FAMILY SCIENCES
and TECHNOLOGY



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ASPIRING ENGINEER EARNS HONOR AS VALEDICTORIAN OF FALL 2025 GRADUATING CLASS



By Russell Boone Jr.

One of the many students who received degrees at Fort Valley State University's (FVSU) Fall 2025 Commencement ceremony was Adetoro M. Adenuga.

Adenuga, a native of Lithonia, Georgia, graduated from FVSU with a Bachelor of Science in electronic engineering technology (EET). He was also the valedictorian for the fall 2025 graduating class.

"I decided to come to Fort Valley because they had what other schools didn't, the major I sought out. Honestly, I saw it as an opportunity to diversify and expand my knowledge because if I had majored in just electrical engineering, I wouldn't get the technical hands-on experience you receive in EET," Adenuga said.

Furthermore, Adenuga said that EET is more applicable and opens the door to more job possibilities in areas such as mechanical, computer and electrical engineering.

The FVSU student said he received several scholarships to attend the university, and he is grateful for the opportunity they provided.

"It's like FVSU saw the potential in me before I saw it in myself. So, the fact that I was able to pursue a degree and accomplish it speaks volumes," he said.

While completing his studies, the rising engineer stayed busy. He completed research projects and was provided the opportunity to present and share his work at the National Conference of Undergraduate Research (NCUR) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In addition, he attended the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 1890 AI CyberGames Conference in Washington, D.C. He placed third in the competition along with his teammates.

Adenuga said that when he received the email saying he would be the class valedictorian, he was ecstatic, almost in disbelief. He informed his parents of the honor he achieved, and he said they could not hold in their joy.

"They really made the moment bigger compared to how I initially reacted when I found out that I would be the class valedictorian," he said.

“

It's like FVSU saw the potential in me before I saw it in myself. So, the fact that I was able to pursue a degree and accomplish it speaks volumes.

”

The FVSU Wildcat said he would recommend FVSU to any student because of the numerous opportunities provided.

"If you want to put yourself out there and network not only in the state of Georgia but nationally, FVSU is the place to be. But you must be willing to take those steps yourself," Adenuga said.

He plans to pursue a master's in applied science while building his credentials in the workforce through licenses and certifications. He also seeks a career in engineering, where he helps develop and innovate technology systems that he believes will shape the future of mankind.

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FORT VALLEY ALUMNA SETS SIGHTS ON VETERINARY RESEARCH



By Latasha Everson

Destiny Absher is forging a path toward a future dedicated to the care and well-being of animals.

From the age of 5, her love for animals stood out as her true passion, surpassing other childhood dreams like becoming an astronaut or a singer. Her meaningful bond with small furry friends began with her grandmother's dog, Roscoe.

"He was my little protector," Absher said, smiling.

She recalled a family friend, who was a veterinarian, describing her occupation as helping animals, which sparked young Absher's curiosity as well.

Adding to her early exposure to animals, her mother, Diane, sponsored an elephant named Ellie at the Greenville Zoo. "That was my elephant," Absher declared. "I tend to call all animals that I interact with my babies. Animals always come to me."

This affection stayed with the Greenville, South Carolina, native as she and her mother moved to Fairburn, Georgia, during her middle school years. The animal science pathway at Creekside

High School only magnified her adoration for animals.

"I ended up falling in love with a rabbit named Cookie," Absher said.

This classroom experience taught her the importance of spaying female rabbits due to health benefits like reducing the risk of uterine cancer. Her ambition is to one day open a veterinary clinic and provide pro bono days for schools and people who cannot afford to spay and neuter their fur babies.

As she began connecting the dots of animal care to agriculture, she also learned more about higher education opportunities since both of her high school advisers were Fort Valley State University (FVSU) alumni. They suggested she attend their alma mater or Tuskegee University to pursue her dream of becoming a veterinarian.

"Fort Valley was far enough that I could be myself but also come home," Absher said.

For her, FVSU provided a foundation in animal science to obtain the knowledge and experience she needed before pursuing veterinary school. In 2025, she earned a Bachelor of Science in agriculture, majoring in animal science. As

a student, she earned several scholarships, including one from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) 1890 National Scholars Program.

"I would not have been in college if I had not had my scholarships," she said, noting her mother has disabilities.

A full-ride USDA scholarship under her belt, Absher interned for the National Centers for Animal Health's Farm Management Service in Ames, Iowa, in 2023. The Agriculture Research Service sponsored this learning opportunity, which involved her feeding, cleaning and performing health checks on cattle, sheep and horses. She also engaged in a research project on fetal bovine serum to test for specific diseases in sheep.

In 2024, Absher returned to the facility to continue her previous work and take on additional responsibilities, including caring for bottle-fed deer. She worked with several fawns, administering vaccinations and providing regular feedings. After gaining experience over two summers, Absher began focusing on

developing her clinical skills to further her veterinary training. She administered injections to treat animals and helped organize the pharmacy and feed warehouse.

"I gained clinical, organizational and social skills," Absher said.

In addition to her internship, she was actively involved on FVSU's campus as a member of the Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS) chapter, where she took part in panel discussions and attended conferences.

The future veterinarian also participated in the pep squad, suicide prevention efforts and recruiting students from her high school. She paid it forward by guiding students based on her own experience and the foundation that FVSU provided for her. During her time as a Wildcat, she visited Creekside High School to share the many educational opportunities at FVSU. She said at least seven students told her they chose to attend the historic land-grant university and major in agriculture because of her. This excited Absher, knowing she played a major role in their decision.

Although college can be challenging, her advice to students is: "You can make it through. If I can do it, why can't you?"

Now a graduate of FVSU, Absher plans to pursue veterinary research with the USDA and hopes to gain international experience before attending veterinary school.

"I want to be the go-to expert in preventing diseases in animals and reducing transmission between animals and humans," she said.

As she works toward her goals, Absher draws her greatest motivation from her mother and her late uncle, who worked for the Internal Revenue Service.

"He spoke it into existence. I am going to make him, my mother and my family prouder," Absher said. "It is sheer determination. I worked hard to get to where I am. Nothing was getting in my way."

To learn more about FVSU's animal science program, visit <https://bit.ly/animalsciencefvsu>.



Destiny Absher, a 2025 Fort Valley State University graduate, interacts with fawns.

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THIS PUBLICATION IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF DR. JACQUES SURRENCY. WE CONDUCTED THIS INTERVIEW IN EARLY 2026. HIS REMARKABLE WORK CONTINUES TO HAVE A LASTING IMPACT.

FROM PUPIL TO TEACHER

By Russell Boone Jr.

For more than 20 years, Jacques Surrency, Ph.D., professor of plant and environmental soil science, has taught in the College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology at Fort Valley State University (FVSU).

The FVSU instructor’s relationship with the university involves family, familiarity and a commitment to education. He graduated from Fort Valley State College in 1993 with a Bachelor of Science in agronomy.

His father, Edward Donald Surrency (FVSC ’67, agronomy) and mother, Lorraine Cousin Surrency (FVSC ’71, education), exposed him to FVSU at a young age.

“I was the little kid they brought to homecoming every year,” he said. Surrency also had several relatives graduate from the institution.

Surrency calls Fort Valley home but grew up in Thomson, Georgia, after his parents moved there in 1976.

“I used to come down here and spend the summers with my grandmother and aunts,” he said.

After graduating from Thomson High School, it was no surprise that Surrency matriculated to middle Georgia to pursue his college education.



Like his father, he chose agronomy as a major, seeking a career as a soil conservationist.

“I figured that with agronomy, we’re always feeding the population, and as long as we’re growing food, I would have a job,” he said.

Surrency also aspired to be an agent for the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). He wanted to emulate his father, one of the first African Americans from FVSU to integrate the Soil Conservation Service (now NRCS).

“I wanted to graduate, get a job and live happily ever after, but my dad had other plans for me when it came to furthering my education,” Surrency said.

As an undergraduate, Surrency said his experience was unforgettable. He served as president of the FVSC Agronomy Club and was involved in all student activities pertaining to agriculture. Surrency also said his instructors provided him with a strong foundation that allowed him to be successful in his graduate studies.

One of those teachers was Dr. JoAnn McCrary, a biology instructor.

“While taking a lab class, she said, ‘I think you’ll really be good in graduate school.’ That and my



dad’s wishes to continue my education motivated me to apply to graduate school,” Surrency said.

Additionally, Surrency discussed his internship experiences. “It was a must back then. You had to have an internship in order to graduate,” he said.

His first internship was with former FVSU Extension agent Bobby Solomon, who was then working for the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS, now Farm Service Agency) office in Fort Valley.

“He was very adamant on professionalism, being on time and representing yourself well,” Surrency said.

During the summer and Christmas break, Surrency also worked for the USDA’s ASCS Office in Thomson.

After graduation, Surrency enrolled at Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University in Huntsville, Alabama. There, he earned both his master’s and doctorate in environmental plant science/environmental science. It was at Alabama A&M that Surrency gravitated to a career in education.

“Teaching was the last thing I wanted to do. My mom taught school for 32 years, and I used to be the boy at the table helping her grade papers. One day, I told her, ‘I don’t know if I want to do this. But you never know what the good Lord has

in store for you,” he said.

Surrency’s first college professor job was at Albany State University in Albany, Georgia. For three years, he taught environmental science to non-biology majors.

Other opportunities opened for Surrency, but a family emergency made him focus on positions near home.

“At the time, my mom was sick and in the hospital in Augusta, Georgia. I had offers from all over the country, but I wanted to stay close to visit her in the hospital,” Surrency said.

Fortunately, a position opened at FVSU. “I applied, interviewed and did a presentation I felt good about. I then received a phone call from Dr. Latimore, who told me I had the job. Man, was I happy!” Surrency began his FVSU teaching career on Feb. 1, 2006.

Since returning to his alma mater, Surrency says he enjoys working side-by-side with his former instructors.

“They were part of my success in getting here. Now, we work together on various projects or grants. I’m elated to be here,” he said.

Jacques Surrency, Ph.D., (center) stands with classmates Frank Archer (left) and Trevor Robeson (right) after graduating from Fort Valley State College (now university) in 1993.



As an FVSU instructor, Surrency said his undergraduate experiences make him an effective educator and allow him to give sound advice.

“Nothing is easy, and you must work hard for it. I tell my students that if you’re working full-time and are a full-time student, that’s not going to work. Find a part-time job whenever you can, but the most important thing is to get your education,” Surrency said.

In comparing resources available when he was in school, Surrency says students have more access to scholarship opportunities and modern technology. He said that, for available scholarships such as the 1890 National Scholars Program, students can attend college for free, reducing the need to take out a student loan.

On the technology front, the FVSU alum said big PowerPoint presentations or D2L, an online learning platform, did not exist when he was a student.

“With D2L, they can miss a lecture, go back and listen to the whole presentation later. Back when I was in school, when you missed class, you missed class. You had to get notes from one of your classmates,” Surrency said.

In describing the most satisfying part of his job, Surrency says it is seeing students graduate.

“I also get enjoyment knowing that I played a small role in that process. They get a job, come back during homecoming, see you and say, ‘Dr. Surrency, I appreciate what you did for me.’ That makes you really feel good about helping students,” he said.

When not in the classroom, Surrency enjoys traveling, fishing and tooling around middle Georgia in one of his two classic Chevrolet Corvettes.

“I like to ride and enjoy the breeze,” he said.

In addition to enjoying fishing and traveling when not in the classroom, Surrency enjoyed driving one of his two classic Chevrolet Corvettes. Here he poses with his Z06 Coupe.

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CARIBBEAN CONNECTIONS



St. Thomas native earns degree, creates longstanding career in family and consumer sciences



By ChaNaë Bradley

White sand beaches, palm trees and roughly 1,400 miles of sea separate the tropical landscape of St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands from the pine trees, peach fields and pecan orchards of Fort Valley, Georgia.

Carol Shoy, a Fort Valley State University (FVSU) alumna, was willing to leave the Caribbean comfort she’d known her whole life for the unknown countryside. The exchange was the opportunity to earn a degree in a discipline she had grown to love.

“I wanted to get away from the Virgin Islands,” Shoy said, referencing her thoughts as a teenager.

In high school, she developed an interest in home economics education, now called family and consumer sciences.

“I had two wonderful high school teachers who always motivated me to pursue home economics education,” Shoy said.

From her research, Shoy noticed many of the colleges that offered home economics as a major were located in the deep South. With Georgia on her mind, Shoy set her sights on pursuing her passion.

“I applied to Savannah State, Georgia State and Fort Valley,” she said. Fort Valley was the first school to respond.

Not knowing anyone in Georgia, Shoy, at 19, decided to quit her job working for the Department of Health and Family Planning

Fort Valley State University alumna Carol Shoy enjoys seeing her students find their passion.

and leave St. Thomas. She shared her desires of majoring in home economics with her mother.

“She thought I was crazy. In the Virgin Islands, most parents think every child should know how to cook, how to sew and how to take care of children. She did not see it as a career,” Shoy said.

But a few conversations with her high school teachers and an acceptance letter persuaded her to go for it.

When she arrived on campus, Shoy made many friends. Many of the students grew fond of her accent and skills in sewing and cooking. She would often travel to their hometowns on weekends, visiting their families in different parts of Georgia such as Atlanta, Columbus and Griffin. She also became acquainted with her professors, their teaching style and academic demands.

“They were detailed and required a lot. I’m proud to say they were my professors,” Shoy said, recalling Dorothy Conteh, Ph.D., Linda Johnson, Ph.D., and Sharon Hunt.

Shoy said she took pride in Fort Valley because in the Virgin Islands, FVSU’s College of Agriculture had a strong reputation for preparing graduates for careers in education and agriculture.

As a student, she was able to explore multiple concentrations under family and consumer sciences. This included family and child development, food and nutrition, and clothing and textiles.

Likewise, Shoy was introduced to Cooperative Extension and learned about the outreach mission of land-grant universities.

“One of the things that I loved about Fort Valley was that they made sure we interacted with Extension agents. It was part of the curriculum. It was a requirement. I was always across the street interacting with the Extension agents because that’s what I wanted to do,” Shoy said.

Although she initially desired a career in Cooperative Extension, Shoy’s career began in education. After graduating with her degree in home economics education in 1990, she moved back to St. Thomas.

Her high school teacher learned she had returned to the island after earning her degree and convinced her to apply to the Department of

“
When they come back home and say, ‘Because of you, I went and majored in culinary arts. Because of you, I’m now an educator. You were instrumental in my going into the fashion world.’ That’s my biggest accomplishment.
”

Education. Shoy applied and was selected for an interview.

Soon after, she received a phone call. She was selected to teach home economics at her high school. For 26 years, Shoy taught her passion at two high schools on the island.

Her boss at her first job was impressed by her knowledge. She recalled how Conteh taught her how to develop a lesson plan, which she implemented in her classroom. The training was memorable.

“Dr. Conteh made me do this lesson plan over 20 times, and she told me one day, ‘I don’t care if you have to do it over 21 times. If it’s not correct, you’re going to do it over,’” she said.

At the time, Shoy didn’t see it, but she said it was one of the greatest teaching moments she had experienced.

Now at the age of 60, the St. Thomas native noted her joy comes from seeing her students find their passion and pursue it.

“My biggest accomplishment is seeing students who go away, and they major in agriculture, or they major in an area that is associated with

family and consumer sciences,” Shoy said. “When they come back home and say, ‘Because of you, I went and majored in culinary arts. Because of you, I’m now an educator. You were instrumental in my going into the fashion world.’ That’s my biggest accomplishment – making sure that my students are influenced and I had something to do with the career choices, or the field that they went into.”

With more than two decades of teaching experience, Shoy coupled that experience with a graduate degree in educational administration from the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI). Although she left the classroom, she did not leave the family and consumer sciences profession.

She was able to work in food and nutrition as a specialist for the St. Thomas School Food Authority for two years. After her time with the School Food Authority, she decided to teach adult education and then applied to UVI Extension.

At UVI Extension, Shoy served in multiple roles, including program leader for UVI Family and Consumer Sciences and 4-H. In 2024, she became assistant director of the Family and Consumer Sciences Program. Furthermore, she is also

a doctoral candidate in the UVI Educational Leadership Program.

This educational journey has inspired her daughter as well.

“I wanted to motivate my daughter to get her Ph.D. She is also in the program with me here at the University of the Virgin Islands, so it’s going to be a mother-daughter graduation. That’s something we’re looking forward to,” Shoy said excitedly.

Reflecting on her accomplishments and journey, she attributes much of it to her undergraduate experience.

“I’m really proud to be a Fort Valley State graduate. It’s one of the best decisions I’ve made throughout not only my career but my life,” Shoy said.

For more information about FVSU’s Family and Consumer Sciences Department, visit <https://bit.ly/4oSTI4B>.

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Shoy has worked in food and nutrition, adult education and Cooperative Extension.



AG FAMILY & FIELD DAY

The College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology celebrated Ag Family and Field Day, “Denim Dreams... Camo Scenes,” on April 16, 2026, on Fort Valley State University’s campus. Held each semester, this educational event brings together students and faculty from across campus to connect, enjoy hands-on activities and learn more about the college’s agricultural programs. View photos from the day’s highlights.



(Above) Leadership from Cooperative Extension and the College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology, along with alumni, greeted students ahead of a day of interactive activities.

(Left) Students test their strength in a friendly tug-of-war competition.



Faculty and staff joined the festivities, engaging with students about the wide range of academic programs in agriculture.



Students toss a football during the outdoor event.

(Below) The Life on the Farm exhibit provided an opportunity for students to learn more about farm animals and Cooperative Extension.



A group of students and an adult male teacher are working in a greenhouse. They are holding small potted plants. The teacher is wearing a blue jacket with a white 'N' on it. The students are wearing various clothing, including a black jacket with 'NO GLORY' on it. The greenhouse has a glass roof and many hanging plants.

MARCHING TO A DIFFERENT TUNE

Virgil Blalock's career as an agricultural educator did not begin with a fascination for animals or the soil, but a love for music and a band scholarship to Fort Valley State University (FVSU).

By Russell Boone Jr.

Since 2006, Blalock (2005, agricultural economics, 2006 agricultural education) has taught agriculture at Northside High School in Warner Robins, Georgia.

“My responsibilities include teaching agriculture-related courses, developing hands-on, project-based learning experiences and ensuring our students are college and career ready. I also oversee student Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) projects, advise the Future Farmers of America (FFA) program and prepare students for leadership development events and career competitions,” Blalock said.

Most of all, Blalock takes pride in creating an engaging and inclusive learning environment for students, especially those with limited exposure to agriculture.

“I also try to help them understand the importance of agriculture in their daily lives and future career paths,” he said.

A native of Fort Valley, Georgia, Blalock said FVSU has always been a part of his life and influenced his desire to further his education. Additionally, his mother, father, aunt and brother graduated from FVSU.

“My mother and aunt were both educators. Seeing the impacts they had on students during their careers inspired me to follow a similar path. When I was awarded a band scholarship to attend FVSU, that motivated me in my decision to enroll. It provided me with the opportunity to pursue a career in education while contributing to campus life through music,” Blalock said.

When Blalock enrolled in FVSU, the school did not offer a music major, but a turn of events ensured that his college education would not be fruitless.

“While on campus one day, I met the agricultural recruiter who introduced me to the College of Agriculture and its academic programs. After learning more about the field, I decided to major in agricultural economics,” Blalock said.

He credits former FVSU professor Mack Nelson, Ph.D., his academic adviser and mentor, for steering him to the field.

“He explained that earning a degree in agricultural economics would provide strong career stability and versatility. Dr. Nelson also emphasized that graduates in this field rarely struggle to find employment. His guidance helped me see how agriculture, business and economics could be combined into a meaningful and practical career path. This ultimately confirmed my decision to pursue my first degree in agricultural economics,” Blalock said.

With a full load of classes, Blalock also kept himself busy with a heavy schedule outside the classroom.

“As a member of the Blue Machine Marching Band, I was exposed to a wide range of professional organizations and leadership opportunities on campus,” Blalock said.

In addition to being a member of the marching band, Blalock pledged the Upsilon Sigma Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc. He also participated in the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) Program and was involved with the Cooperative Developmental Energy Program (CDEP).



Virgil Blalock (center) shows students Randall Hicks (left) and Elajah Miller (right) how to glue together boards during a craftsmanship and problem-solving exercise.

“I spent additional time as a disc jockey (DJ) and drummer for the Conquest Show Band. This allowed me to further develop my musical talents while building strong relationships off campus. These experiences helped shape my leadership skills, time management and ability to network with other colleagues,” Blalock said.

Furthermore, Blalock enjoyed his FVSU experience. “I loved my time at FVSU. It is and will always be home to me. My wife (Mara [Hill], FVSU 2005, biology) and I were both raised in Fort Valley and graduated from Peach County High School. So, attending FVSU felt like a natural extension of our community and upbringing,” he said.

The Northside High School instructor gives the university credit for preparing him for his career in agricultural education.

“FVSU has a nationally recognized school of agriculture with a strong reputation for producing graduates that are well prepared for careers in education, industry and public service. One of its greatest strengths is its small class sizes, which allow for meaningful hands-on instruction and one-on-one attention from professors. This environment helped me fully understand course content while developing practical skills that directly translate to the classroom,” Blalock said.

Additionally, he said his non-traditional career path in agricultural education also makes him an effective teacher.

“I was not raised on a farm, did not grow up around agriculture or was I a member of the FFA (Future Farmers of America) while in high school. With music being my primary interest, I took all music electives. I believe this background allows me to better relate to my inner-city students because many of them also have little to no exposure to agriculture or FFA. I understand what it feels like to be unfamiliar with the field, because I was once that student. This perspective helps me break down misconceptions and introduce agriculture in a way that’s reliable, engaging and relevant to their lives,” the FVSU alumnus said.

As an agriculture teacher at an urban public school, Blalock says the most satisfying part of his job is watching students discover a purpose where they didn’t think one existed.

“Many students come in believing agriculture is ‘just farming’ or has little relevance to their



Keeping it in the family at Northside High School, Blalock (right) poses with son Grant (left), a Northside student, and wife Mara (center), an English teacher.

lives. When they are given the opportunity to grow plants, build something, raise an animal or solve a real-world problem, their mindset begins to shift. Students who may struggle in a traditional classroom often excel with a meaningful hands-on learning experience. Above all, the most rewarding moment is hearing a graduate say, ‘I wouldn’t be where I am without your class and help,’” Blalock said.

Should a student approach Blalock about pursuing a career in agriculture, he said he would tell them that agriculture is bigger than farming. Furthermore, he suggested they get hands-on experience as soon as possible, take school seriously and connect learning to real life. He would also advise them to work hard in science, math and writing classes because those skills transition to careers in veterinary science, agribusiness, plant science and environmental science.

When not spending time with his wife (who also teaches at Northside) and three children, Blalock enjoys an occasional jam session with his brother, who is also a DJ and drummer.

“Music will always be a big part of my life,” he said.

For more information about programs in the College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology, visit bit.ly/40cyMLj.

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LIVING LIFE TO THE FULLEST THROUGH LAND-GRANT MISSION



By Latasha Everson

Alumna Tasha Hargrove, Ph.D., a Sparta, Georgia, native, earned her Bachelor of Science in agricultural economics from Fort Valley State University (FVSU) in 1994. Her career path has taken her from serving in the U.S. Air Force Reserve to becoming a full research and Extension professor at Tuskegee University. Discover how FVSU helped build the foundation for her experiences and her lasting impact in serving

What led you to choose Fort Valley State University for your undergraduate education?

“I selected FVSU because of its premier, world-renowned agricultural program. In 1989, I was selected to participate in an eight-week summer apprenticeship program sponsored by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) at then-Fort Valley State College. That program ignited my passion for agriculture, business and rural economic development and inspired me to apply to FVSU.”

What were some of the most meaningful experiences from your time as a student?

“Some of my most meaningful experiences were serving in the U.S. Air Force Reserve and becoming a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. I delayed my basic training so that I could start my college career with my class during the fall quarter of 1990. While at FVSU, I was a full-time student on weekdays and served my country on weekends and some weekdays. I didn’t have a strong grade point average during my first two years of college, but that did not define my future. I realized in my junior year that I wanted to pursue a Ph.D. To accomplish this goal, I focused on raising my GPA, including taking classes over to improve my grades. I saw this as an opportunity to reinvent myself.”

How did your education at FVSU prepare you for graduate study and/or your professional career?

“My education at FVSU laid the foundation for my career. I applied to graduate school at Tuskegee University based on a recommendation from a faculty member, Dr. Regina. She believed in me and saw my potential. She encouraged me to pursue my dream of earning a Ph.D. and not to limit myself. She also encouraged me to step outside of my comfort zone. FVSU is home for me. It’s where my love and passion for the land began. It’s where I gained knowledge in economics, marketing and business.”

Describe your career journey since leaving FVSU and what you are doing professionally today.

“I attended FVSU from 1990 to 1994. I joined the U.S. Air Force Reserve in 1990, with the full knowledge that I would attend FVSU for one quarter and then leave for basic training in December 1990 (Desert Storm). I completed basic training and returned to FVSU in April 1991 as a member of the military. I served 22 years and retired in 2012. I received each of my degrees while serving in the military. I also earned an Associate of Science in health service management from the Community College of the Air Force after completing my Ph.D. program.

Based on the recommendation of my academic adviser, Dr. Mack Nelson, I completed an internship with the USDA’s Farmers Home Administration. I was offered a full-time position; however, I declined it to pursue my dream of obtaining a Master of Science at the historic Tuskegee University. Tuskegee fully embraced me and offered me a full scholarship that covered tuition and a graduate assistantship. I gained hands-on experience working with the 2501 Program, which was federally funded and provided one-on-one technical assistance to small farmers.

I earned my Ph.D. from Iowa State University in agricultural Extension education. For my dissertation research, I conducted a case study analysis of the implementation process for the Small Farmers Outreach and Technical Assistance (2501). For my post-doctoral research at Tuskegee University, I focused on tracing the history of the Black resettlement communities established under President Roosevelt. It was during this time that I was introduced to the Flint River Farms Resettlement Project in Montezuma, Georgia (<https://www.flintriverfarms.org>). I contacted Ricky Waters, county Extension agent, to assist me in tracing the history of Flint River Farms. I was also assigned a graduate student, Michele Pace, who is an FVSU alumna, to assist with the project (<https://www.sare.org/resources/land-and-power/>).

I have been at Tuskegee University since 2002. I am currently a full research Extension professor and the coordinator of the undergraduate Agribusiness Program. Outreach programs that I have been involved in include the Appalachian Leadership Institute and the Black Belt Marketing Center.”

Were there any faculty members, mentors or programs that had a lasting impact on your personal or professional development?

“There were several faculty and staff who had a lasting impact on both my professional and personal development – Dr. Mack Nelson, Dr. Mark Latimore, Marc Thomas, Phillip Petway and Terrence Wolfork.”

What accomplishments or projects are you most proud of so far?

“I am extremely proud of all the projects that I have worked on, whether they were successful or not. Each has been a learning experience and shaped me into the professor, business owner



Tasha Hargrove, Ph.D., engages with attendees at the Association of 1890 Research Directors Research Symposium.

and colleague I am today. It has always been important to me to build a network of friends and colleagues and to develop relationships that extend beyond the project into lifelong friendships. I am also extremely proud of my work with the Flint River Farms Resettlement Project and of my nieces and nephews. One of my nieces is a student at FVSU and will graduate in 2026. She is a member of the FVSU women’s basketball team and Alpha Beta Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc.”

What motivates you in your work, especially in agriculture, research or service-related fields?

“My motivation comes from a desire to learn and to help others. I don’t want to waste the resources and opportunities I’ve been given. I aim to lead with understanding and gratitude and to pay it forward.”

What words of inspiration would you share with current FVSU students who aspire to follow a similar path?

“Follow your dreams and pursue your passion. We only have one life, and you should live it to the fullest. Never allow anyone to place you in a box or limit your potential.”

■ agCOMPLISH

FORT VALLEY STATE GRADUATE AIMS FOR GLOBAL IMPACT IN PUBLIC HEALTH

By Latasha Everson

Jeremiah Arowolo's journey from southern Nigeria to Fort Valley State University (FVSU) is fueled by a passion for public health and the well-being of others. Armed with international experience and a commitment to disease prevention, Arowolo is making a positive impact in communities locally and globally.

The 2025 FVSU graduate earned his undergraduate degree in agricultural economics and Extension from Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, one of Nigeria's leading universities. Graduating with honors, he earned the equivalent of summa cum laude (first class) distinction.

Arowolo is turning knowledge into action. His passion for food security and community outreach during his undergraduate studies sparked his interest in public health. His path ultimately led to the United States, where a friend who was already a student at FVSU connected him to the 1890 Land-grant University in middle Georgia.

At FVSU, he concentrated in environmental health and completed an 11-week internship with the South Carolina Department of Public Health under the National Environmental Public Health Internship Program. His experience included working on zoonotic diseases (transmitted from animals to humans).

"I worked on the rabies vector program, collected specimens from multiple cities and developed resource materials for community education," Arowolo explained.

Outreach opportunities involved the FVSU Wildcat conducting community engagement sessions to educate residents on rabies transmission, prevention and response. He also assisted with data analysis of hundreds of rabies incident reports.

"I met with department directors and regional heads to discuss strategies for improving public health. That was a major highlight for me," Arowolo said, smiling.

FVSU provided the foundation for him to build upon his skills in the public health sector. Earning his Master of Public Health in 2025, he praises his adviser, Dr. Oreta Samples, retired coordinator of the thriving program, for her encouragement.

Arowolo assisted Samples with research on zoonotic diseases and presented his work at conferences and community health fairs. He also advocated public health education and environmental safety as essential components of community well-being.

His advice to students: "Release your energy, your ability, your potential. Anything you are doing, make sure you do it well."



In addition to his academic achievements at FVSU, Arowolo earned multiple international health and safety certifications, including the prestigious National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health (NEBOSH) International General Certificate. He also achieved Certified Master Trainer status, enabling him to train organizations and industries worldwide in environmental, health and safety practices. He has trained more than 1,000 individuals in Nigeria and beyond.

For the World Diabetes Foundation, Arowolo developed strategies to improve diabetes care and distributed free glucose meters to cities and states across Nigeria. He also conducted community outreach and education on diabetes management.

“
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energy, your ability,
your potential.
Anything you are
doing, make sure
you do it well.”

"We encouraged nurses and health facilities to follow up with patients, especially pregnant women with gestational diabetes," Arowolo said.

The young scientist plans to continue working in public health, with a focus on environmental health and safety. His goal is to leverage his knowledge and experience to impact global health, creating safe communities and improving lives worldwide. His philosophy is rooted in diligence and purpose.

"See a man diligent in his work? He shall stand among kings. Public health is about the well-being of others," Arowolo said.

For more information about FVSU's Master of Public Health program, visit <https://bit.ly/fvsumasterpublichealth>.

■ agCOMPLISH

LEAVING A LEGACY OF STRENGTH



By Latasha Everson

When you walk through the doors of the O’Neal Veterinary Science Building on Fort Valley State University’s (FVSU) campus, you are greeted with the motto “Our Strength is Our Students.”

For 35 years, Dr. Oreta Samples has been a student, educator, veterinary technician and a Wildcat champion for FVSU’s veterinary technology and public health students. Samples first walked onto campus in 1991, where she found her second family and the strength to guide students toward their purpose.

Growing up in Warner Robins, Georgia, her childhood always involved pets. Samples initially enrolled in a nursing program in Macon, but it wasn’t the right fit. After taking a year off to reassess her goals, she entered a certificate program at Crandall Junior College in Macon. She worked as a medical assistant for 17 years, including time with Equifax as an insurance examiner.

During those years, she adopted a cat. After the experience of trying to nurse her new fur baby

back to health, her local veterinarian recognized that she had a natural gift for helping animals and encouraged her to pursue becoming a veterinary technician. He handed her the business card of a familiar name, Dr. Ben Lowery, a longtime family veterinarian who had joined FVSU as a professor.

A visit to campus to meet with Lowery turned into the setup she needed for her future success. She went on to earn both the two-year and four-year veterinary technology degrees, graduating in 1994.

Following graduation, Samples briefly tried clinical practice but found the work too limited. She returned to Equifax months later and then received a call from FVSU about a veterinary technician opening. She started her career in 1995 and never looked back. As the only technician, she handled drug inventory, supervised caretakers and embraced the constant variety.

“It was like stepping into a new job every single day, and that really appealed to me,” Samples said. “Students came with their own

personalities, strengths and challenges. Every day was different.”

About 10 years into her career, she began thinking about further education. Influenced by the instructors she admired, she pursued FVSU’s online Master of Public Health (MPH) program to help bridge human health and agriculture. She earned her MPH in 2005. To teach, she

“
I like reaching the student who doesn’t believe in themselves.
”

knew she needed a doctorate, so she continued her education at Nova Southeastern University, completing her doctorate in health sciences in 2008.

In 2013, Samples became FVSU’s MPH program coordinator. She retired from that role in December 2025, though her heart has always remained in agriculture and with the Wildcat family.

One of her proudest accomplishments was training with researcher Dr. Thomas Terrill to establish a parasitology lab. She received specialized training and collaborated with him for years.

“He allowed me to grow in ways nobody else did, especially in publishing and learning how to conduct ethical animal research,” Samples said. “If it had not been for that experience, I don’t think I would have considered graduate school.”

Samples also credits Dr. Seyedmehdi Mobini for encouraging her to write journal articles. Her first publication on the care and maintenance of pet rabbits sparked a writing journey that continues today.

In retirement, writing has become a major focus. Samples has authored a lab manual, contributed

to a Wiley book and served as senior editor for a McCurnin publication. She is currently editing and co-authoring a veterinary disaster management text, drawing on her firsthand experience through FVSU’s SAFE Center.

“Retirement for me wasn’t about sitting in a rocking chair on the porch. It’s about getting into new projects and new things,” Samples said.

She continues to teach online for various colleges. She serves as a dissertation mentor for Capella University. At Chamberlain University, she teaches professional writing and leads the environmental health course for the College of Nursing and Public Health.

Among the many rewarding experiences at FVSU, Samples enjoyed being a cheerleader for students.

“I like reaching the student who doesn’t believe in themselves,” she said. She especially loved teaching international students. “To see what they accomplish when they get here is amazing. They come with their own ideas. My heart was working with the international students.”

Samples committed to preparing students for presentations, conferences and professional writing. She also believes strongly in giving back, whether through journal reviews, publishing or mentoring.

“If we don’t give back, we lose the resources that shaped us,” she said.

Also, Samples is deeply proud of receiving the National Environmental Health Association’s Dr. Bailus Walker Jr. Diversity and Inclusion Awareness Award in 2023. Her former student, MPH graduate Caroline Obi, nominated her.

Obi, now the district lead and healthy homes coordinator with the Georgia Department of Public Health’s North Central Health District in Macon, once praised Samples for demonstrating an unwavering commitment to all students, ensuring that they received equal support in their personal, academic and professional pursuits.

Obi is one of many students of Samples who have gone on to advanced degrees and careers across Georgia’s Department of Health and beyond.

“It allows me to sit back and say, ‘Job well done,’” Samples said, smiling. “Now they’re going to carry it forward and do for others what was done for them. At the end of the day, if that’s the legacy, then I can live with that.”

■ agCOMPLISH

UNDECIDED ABOUT YOUR MAJOR?

Selecting a major in college may be easy for some, but for those who are undecided, agriculture is a viable option. Fort Valley State University offers eight undergraduate majors and three graduate programs through its College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology. These programs prepare students for careers as dietitians, engineers and veterinarians, among others. Below is a list of programs offered that can jump-start an exciting career.

Bachelor's Degree Programs

- Agribusiness and Applied Economics
 - › Agribusiness and Marketing Management
 - › Supply Chain Logistics
- Agricultural Education
 - › Secondary Agriscience Education (Licensure)
 - › Agricultural Professional Services
- Agricultural Engineering Technology
- Animal Science
- Electronic Engineering Technology
- Family & Consumer Sciences
 - › Food and Nutrition
 - › Infant and Child Development
- Plant Science
 - › Environmental Soil Science
 - › Biotechnology
 - › Horticulture
- Veterinary Technology

Master's Degree Programs

- Animal Science
- Biotechnology
 - › Plant
 - › Animal
 - › Applied
- Public Health (MPH)
 - › Environmental Health
 - › Epidemiology

What can graduates do with a degree from the College of Agriculture?

Students are prepared for many careers.

Possible jobs include:

- › Economist
- › Teacher
- › Veterinary Technician
- › County Extension Agent
- › Researcher



For more information, visit:
fvsu.ag/academics

or contact:
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