

## TRAILBLAZER

FVSU ALUMNA BECOMES FIRST  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN  
TO SERVE AS DISTRICT  
DIRECTOR OF THE  
FARM SERVICE  
AGENCY IN  
GEORGIA.



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# LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

Media  
maven  
gets her  
start with  
agriculture



BY LATASHA FORD

An agricultural economics degree can open doors to diverse careers. For Annette Coward-Gomes, the journey from Fort Valley State University to Maryland has been a meaningful adventure.

The former Chicago resident recalls taking an economics class in high school. As an assignment, she visited the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT), where agricultural and financial contracts are traded. After one day, she realized that becoming a commodities trader was not the career path for her. However, remaining within this field impressed her so much she considered finding another way to work for the company.

Interested in pursuing finance as a major, Coward-Gomes decided to attend FVSU along with her best friend of 44 years. Her friend's mother, a journalist who lived in Atlanta at the time, offered to be her guardian. "This was part of my journey to FVSU. It was truly a divine intervention and a gift that would keep on giving for years to come," Coward-Gomes said.

During move-in day, an agricultural student helping her asked about her major and strongly recommended that she change to agriculture. "The rest is history," she said. "At that time in 1985, there were not a lot of women in agriculture. I entered this field and never looked back."

After graduating from FVSU in 1990, Coward-Gomes earned a master's degree in agribusiness management at Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University (AAMU) in 1997. Prior to graduating from AAMU, she landed her first job as an agricultural economist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Small Farm Program. During an interview on the university's radio station (WJAB), another opportunity arose that would change the trajectory of her life.

"An English professor was listening to the interview and said I needed to do something in communications, preferably using my voice," she said.

A short time later, one of the pioneers who started WJAB approached her about doing a farm report to discuss commodity farm prices on a weekly basis. The segment was called "Market News and Farm Report." She also developed a newsletter based on current information that would affect the agricultural community. Impressed with her communication skills, her

boss encouraged her to pursue agricultural journalism at the University of Missouri.

"He said, 'If you don't, I'm going to fire you,'" Coward-Gomes laughed.

Following his advice, she pursued broadcasting at the University of Missouri and began working for the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). She graduated in 2002 with a bachelor's degree in agricultural journalism.

"I remember during one of my writing classes, a professor asked the agricultural journalism students to please stand up. He said, 'You will



**Coward-Gomes is a former writer for the U.S. Army.**

always have a job.' I think that mentality stayed with me and somehow it was ingrained in my brain that I would always have a job," Coward-Gomes said.

The FVSU alumna returned to middle Georgia in 2002 to work for 13WMAZ in Macon. During her 13 years there, on and off, she served in various capacities such as reporter and morning anchor.

She also hosted a law show called “Law Call” for eight years.

A native of Barbados, West Indies, Coward-Gomes dreamed of a career in television. “I always wanted to do something different,” she said.

Her background in agriculture and journalism created a path for her most rewarding career as a writer for the U.S. Army in Virginia. Coward-Gomes and her husband, Phillip, live in Maryland with their cockapoo, Bailey. She began writing about wounded soldiers in 2015. “It is the most rewarding job I have ever had,” she said. “There is so much impact. You can see it.” She now serves in a new role as a communications specialist for the U.S. Department of Defense.

In addition to writing, the experienced journalist does voiceovers through her business, Wutavoicecommunications. Her latest role was performing the voice of journalist Ida B. Wells at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C. This experience

is part of the “We Return Fighting: The African American Experience in World War I” exhibition. She said this has been the best role yet.

“I auditioned for it in fall 2019 and was notified in December that I landed the role,” said Coward-Gomes, who was teased about her voice growing up. “I remember the late great FVSU professor J.C. Hill pushed me to use my voice and I made good on my promise.”


Her advice to students is to not let anyone dim their light and to learn how to reinvent themselves. “The world is your oyster and there are so many things you can do. Expand your horizons; do something different,” Coward-Gomes said. She plans to release a children’s book in April.

Thankful for her journey, she said majoring in agricultural economics at FVSU set the foundation for her success in agriculture and communications. “It gave me that base to talk to anybody and I have not shut up since then,” she said. “That is what agriculture did for me.”

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A man with short dark hair and a goatee, wearing a light blue suit, white shirt, and a yellow and blue striped tie, is shown in profile from the chest up. He is looking towards the right. The background is a dark brick wall with the words 'FORT VALLEY STATE COLLEGE' in large, light-colored, serif capital letters. The text 'IT'S ELECTRIC' is overlaid on the right side of the image in large, bold, white capital letters with a blue outline.

# IT'S ELECTRIC

FVSU ALUMNUS  
USES ELECTRICAL  
ENGINEERING DEGREE  
TO AID THE U.S. AIR  
FORCE

BY RUSSELL BOONE JR.

Shelby D'andre Avant is living a dream.

Avant, 28, graduated from Fort Valley State University's College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology in May 2019 with a degree in electronic engineering technology (EET). He works at Northrup Grumman Corporation in Warner Robins as an electronic maintenance technician.

"It has always been a dream of mine to start a career in electronics. At one time, I did not know how to get started or what an engineering career would consist of, but I'm glad I made the decision," Avant said. "I have worked here for 16 months, and I am on the path to become an electrical engineer."

Avant's work with electronics is used by the U.S. Air Force (USAF) in its electronic weapons program. He said working for the USAF gives him a great deal of accomplishment and pride.



His father (James Avant) served 22 years in the U.S. Army, and he has many relatives and friends who are veterans. "It makes me feel great to know that I could help them even as a civilian," Avant said.

The Roberta, Georgia, native grew up on a 7-acre farm. "My dad raised many farm animals including cows, horses, hogs, chicken, goats and even an emu and ostrich at one point," Avant said. His father also grew corn on 2.5 acres of the land.

By watching his father and grandfather (Calvin Weaver) farm the land as a youth, Avant received the inspiration to pursue an agricultural profession. "I wanted to honor them with my career choice," he said.

Before attending FVSU, Avant earned an associate degree in electronics technology from Central Georgia Technical College. He decided to attend FVSU after watching his wife, Tykeya Turner, graduate from the university in 2015 with a bachelor's degree in political science.

While a student at FVSU, Avant said he enjoyed the challenge of studying EET. He also felt at ease in seeking information from his instructors. "I never felt I could not seek assistance from the teachers, instructors or guidance counselors. I thank them all for that," Avant said.

As a full-time employee at Academy Sports and a full-time student, Avant's time to participate in extracurricular activities was extremely limited.

He did join the (EET) Club and participated in the organization's activities when possible.

Furthermore, Avant said FVSU prepared him for his job at Northrup Grumman. "I am pleased with the knowledge I was able to bring to my employer. During my interview, they were blown away with how I was able to answer questions on electronic principles off the top of my head. I believe this ultimately led to my employment," the FVSU alumnus said.

The Northrup-Grumman employee provides simple advice to future students seeking engineering degrees. "Study every day and get comfortable with rewriting your notes multiple times. This major is constantly changing, but the underlying principles of engineering will remain the same. The student will need to get really familiar with knowing and applying formulas," Avant said.

For students seeking successful careers in agriculture, Avant advises students to strive for perfection in their craft. "Look for opportunities to grow in your field of study while in school, and don't be afraid to seek advice from people who have done it before you," he said.

Avant's plans include enrolling at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and earning a master's degree in autonomous systems engineering. He also seeks to pursue a professional career in unmanned vehicles and artificial intelligence.

For more information about the EET program at FVSU, contact Dr. Awad Eldurssi at (478) 825-6885 ([eldurssia@fvsu.edu](mailto:eldurssia@fvsu.edu)) or visit [ag.fvsu.edu](http://ag.fvsu.edu).

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**Avant (right) and his wife Tykeya (left), both FVSU graduates, pose with their son Landon Nasir.**







# EMBRACING OPPORTUNITIES

BY LATASHA FORD

Keeping an open mind to new possibilities landed Fort Valley State University alumna Dr. Erika Styles in a position to continue her education, teach, work for corporate America and to give back.

The Bonaire, Georgia, native never saw herself pursuing a career in agriculture. A firm believer that everything happens by the grace of God, her journey to FVSU came about by chance. Her mother, a former teacher, met the late Levi Glover, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) 1890 liaison for FVSU, at the Georgia National Fair, where he introduced her to the USDA's 1890 National Scholars Program.

The 1999 Warner Robins High School graduate knew she could not turn down the opportunities offered through the program. Styles applied for the scholarship, and as she described it, her life forever changed.

Exposed to agriculture at a young age, her father and grandfather owned a farm in Wilkinson

Fort Valley State University alumna serves as strategy engagement manager for State Farm Insurance.

County, Georgia. "It was not until I started researching some of the possibilities listed in the 1890 scholarship that agricultural economics really stood out to me, partly because of the business side," she said.

The scholarship allowed her to intern with the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) and participate in a summer research program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"Having that diversity of working for the government and at an institution of higher learning helped me understand the different ways to conduct research," Styles said.

Those experiences also inspired her to pursue graduate school. She graduated from FVSU in





**Dr. Erika Styles receiving the B.D. Mayberry Young Scientist Award at the Association of Research Directors' 17th Biennial Research Symposium in 2013.**



**Styles enjoys quality time with her husband, Mike, and their three children, Karmyn, Peyton and Ryder.**



**Styles with her family.**



2003 with a Bachelor of Science in agricultural economics and then attended the University of Florida, earning a Master of Science in 2005 and Doctor of Philosophy in food and resource economics in 2008. Following graduation, the Wildcat returned to her alma mater as an assistant professor in agricultural economics.

“I did not see a lot of representation in the program of people who looked like me,” Styles said. “It was always a passion of mine to return to where I started and hopefully inspire and cultivate a new generation.”

In 2014, she received a promotion as associate professor. During her tenure, she secured numerous grants for research and skill development to provide students with the advantages of studying abroad, internships and scholarships.

“I learned a lot during those years. I am proud of what I accomplished and the impact that I made,” Styles said. “To whom much is given, much is required. It is fulfilling when you can create opportunities and see others grow.”

In 2015, Styles transitioned to corporate America and became an experience researcher for State Farm Insurance in Atlanta, Georgia. She said the analytical, communications and interpersonal skills she gained while at FVSU came in handy for her new role at the company. She currently serves as a strategy engagement manager and leads high impact cross-functional strategy efforts. She engages with multiple departments to execute initiatives to create better experiences for customers and enhance satisfaction.

“It has been a great experience,” Styles said. “As an agricultural economist, you are trained to look at things holistically. Whenever I look at a problem, I focus on the core, which is understanding how people make decisions.”

Styles also teaches two online classes (macroeconomics and microeconomics) in FVSU’s Business Administration and Economics Department as an adjunct instructor. “It is nice to reconnect with students and help build that foundation,” she said. She emphasized it is important that she can bring her experience to the table for students by applying theory to practice.

Furthermore, the FVSU educator used her entrepreneurial skills to birth a successful nonprofit organization, Keris Kares (keriskares.org), with her family in honor of her niece who died in 2015 from brain cancer. They help families impacted by childhood cancer.

“When I think about the simple principles of decision-making and how to run a business, it shows how this degree has helped me with my professional career and toward something that has become a passion,” Styles said.

The Newnan, Georgia, resident challenges students to keep an open mind. “The older me realizes that my major and FVSU allowed me to expand my network and relationships, which is critical to lifelong success,” she said.

Styles said she appreciates the amazing instructors who became mentors and lifelong family. Mentioning the key role that Glover played in her path to FVSU, she also commended retired agricultural professor Dr. Mack Nelson.

Throughout her career, Styles said her faith and family have been her biggest motivations. She is married to Mike, and they have three children, Karmyn, Peyton and Ryder.

“They are my why,” she said.

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ALUMNA BECOMES FIRST AFRICAN  
AMERICAN WOMAN TO SERVE AS  
DISTRICT DIRECTOR OF THE FARM  
SERVICE AGENCY IN GEORGIA





*Photo by Preston Keres*

Nikki Thomas, a 2003 Fort Valley State University agricultural economics graduate, was recently appointed as district director for District 1 of the Farm Service Agency (FSA) in Georgia. She began her role on Jan. 4, 2021.

For 17 years, she has worked for the agency as a farm loan officer and farm loan manager. One of humble beginnings, the FVSU alumna began her tenure at the agency as an intern while she was earning her degree. The Brooks County native shares how she rose to this leadership role in agriculture, how she is helping others and how she will continue to agComplish her goals.

***Why did you choose to study agriculture?***

I grew up on a farm. My father is a fourth-generation farmer, so agriculture is in my blood. I remember working on the farm as a child and thinking I'm not going to farm when I grow up, I'm going to have an office job. Nevertheless, I did not know I would end up working for FSA, but I knew I wanted to attend an HBCU and was familiar with agriculture.

***What was your major while attending FVSU?***

Agricultural economics.

***Describe your educational experience at FVSU?***

My professors were very helpful. If I needed help or guidance, I was able to sit in my professors' offices and ask questions. Dr. Mack C. Nelson was very instrumental in helping me have a

good experience at FVSU. He helped me navigate several decisions.

***What did you learn about yourself while matriculating as a student?***

I learned that I can do anything I put my mind to. I know that sounds cliché, but my freshman and junior year, I held the highest GPA in the College of Agriculture. I'm the oldest of four children, so it was important for me to set an example for my younger sisters who attended FVSU as well, right after me.

— “ —

*I learned that I can do anything I put my mind to. I know that sounds cliché, but my freshman and junior year, I held the highest GPA in the College of Agriculture. I'm the oldest of four children, so it was important for me to set an example for my younger sisters who attended FVSU as well, right after me.*

— ” —





***What experiences did you have as a student (internships, summer study programs, conferences) that made you appreciate agriculture and FVSU?***

My internship with FSA. I begin interning with FSA the summer of 2000 in Thomasville, Georgia. I interned every summer and during holidays. That opened the door for me at FSA. In 2003, when I graduated, they did not have a full-time position in Thomasville, so for three months I was without a job after graduation. Soon after, FSA has a farm loan officer position to open in Statesboro, Georgia. I applied, got the job and began my career with FSA on Dec. 1, 2003. I worked there for 17 years, matriculating my way up through the agency.

***What made you apply to the district director position with FSA?***

The role opened about two years ago. I was eligible to apply, but I didn't at the time. One day, I was riding in my car and I thought about it and concluded that sometimes you must be uncomfortable now to be comfortable later. Statesboro wasn't home, but it became a comfort zone and I needed to broaden my horizons. So, I prayed about it and concluded that applying was what I needed to do. I applied, received an interview and they offered me the position. I accepted with no hesitation.

***How have those experiences prepared you for your current role?***

Learning how to communicate with people from different walks of life, working with different personality types and serving in leaderships capacities have helped me to perform well in my role as farm loan officer of FSA. Working on both the farm program side and the farm loan manager side of FSA will allow me to have decision-making skills in both areas.

***What advice would you give to high school students interested in agriculture and college students enrolled in the College of Ag?***

Don't think agriculture is just field work. You can have a very successful career if you work hard. Also, we need minorities in the field to help underserved populations. Fort Valley State's College of Ag will do a great job at preparing you for multiple roles.

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**Nikki Thomas,  
director of District 1  
for the Farm Service  
Agency, meets with  
Hall County, Georgia  
Farm Service Agency  
County Committee.**





# PAYING IT Fort Valley State graduate enjoys teaching youth about agriculture FORWARD

BY RUSSELL BOONE JR.

For Joseph (Joe) Nesbit, being an agricultural educator is not a job, but a calling.

Nesbit graduated from Fort Valley State University in 2014 with a degree in agricultural education. He serves as an agriculture educator at his former high school.

“What I enjoy the most about my job is that it doesn’t feel like work. I have the best job in the world. It allows me to teach the youth about one of the most, if not the most, important factors in the sustainability of life,” Nesbit said.

For the past four years, the 29-year-old has taught at Greene County High School in his hometown of Greensboro, Georgia. He is also the Future Farmers of America (FFA) advisor for the high school chapter.

“I feel very good about coming home to teach and having the opportunity to give back to my community,” Nesbit said. The Greene County School System appreciated his efforts by naming him Teacher of the Year for the district and Greene County High School for the 2019-2020 term.

It is not surprising that Nesbit’s chosen profession involves agriculture. He grew up on 90 acres of family land in Greene County, Georgia. His mother (Louise) and father (McArthur), both children of farmers, were raised on farms. “Naturally, farming and agriculture are in my blood,” Nesbit said.

When Nesbit was in third grade, an uncle, Fred Wright, tilled him a garden. This piqued Nesbit’s interest in agriculture and he began growing tomatoes and peppers. “I’ve been gardening ever since then,” Nesbit said. He later expanded his farming experience to include chickens and beef cattle.

In addition to his upbringing on a farm, Nesbit credits his former high school FFA adviser, the late Dr. Marty Collins, for inspiring him to major in agriculture. “I chose agricultural education because it prepares and educates you in all the capacities of agriculture. Majoring in agriculture also gives you the flexibility to pursue different career fields such as education and job opportunities in the federal and private sectors,” he said.

When deciding where to attend college, the Greensboro, Georgia native said FVSU was a top choice.



**Nesbit holds award for work on award winning poster.**

## Nesbit instructs students during a field exercise.







—“—  
*What I enjoy the most about my job is that it doesn't feel like work. I have the best job in the world. It allows me to teach the youth about one of the most, if not the most, important factors in the sustainability of life*  
—”—

As a student, Nesbit relied on the advice of former FVSU agriculture professor Dr. Glenwood Hill and Jared Fluellen, FVSU farm manager. “I still contact these mentors on a regular basis throughout the week. The information and life lessons that I learned from them during my time at FVSU are priceless,” the agricultural educator said.

Taking full-time classes and working on the university farm did not deter Nesbit from participating in extracurricular activities. These include Collegiate FFA, the Agri-Demic Forum, and Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS).

Prior to his senior year, Nesbit interned at the University of Arkansas’ George Washington Carver Research Program. At Arkansas, he worked with Dr. Andrew Sharpley in the areas of crop, soil and environmental science. “During my time there, I had the opportunity to do a research project on poultry litter and how the runoff from poultry litter affects water quality,” Nesbit said.

Overall, Nesbit described his FVSU experience as enlightening. “One of the most important and enjoyable experiences was being part of a family atmosphere. It felt like home. Attending FVSU taught me a lot about life as an African-American as well as understanding and gaining a deeper appreciation for my culture,” Nesbit said.

The 2014 FVSU agricultural education alumnus said the university successfully groomed him

for a career in agricultural education after graduation. “I was also blessed to have a family of fellow FVSU agriculture educator alumni help teach me things necessary to be successful in my field,” Nesbit said.

His advice to FVSU students seeking success is simple. Nesbit said they should visit their professors’ office, even when class is not scheduled, and converse with them. “I would also advise them to get a work-study job on the farm to gain real-world experience in agriculture and its practices,” Nesbit encouraged.

For professional success, Nesbit says students should gain as much knowledge as possible, build relationships, and develop contacts in their respective field.

As an agricultural educator, Nesbit’s goal is to help students apply lessons learned to life so they can be the best leaders and successful individuals in their pursuits. “I also want them to understand the importance of agriculture and the career opportunities available for minorities and all interested individuals,” Nesbit added.

In May 2020, the FVSU graduate earned a Master of Science in agricultural education from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, North Carolina.

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# From the VALLEY *to the* SWAMP

FVSU ALUMNUS PURSUES  
DOCTORATE DEGREE  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF  
FLORIDA



BY RUSSELL BOONE JR.

**Brandon Quinn-Ivey, 28, graduated from Fort Valley State University's College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology in 2015 with a degree in agricultural engineering technology (AENT). The Ideal, Georgia native is currently pursuing a doctorate degree in agricultural and biological engineering at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida.**

**Prior to enrolling at UF, Quinn-Ivey worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Athens, Georgia as a state engineering technician. He then earned a master's degree in agricultural and environmental systems from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, North Carolina.**

**The graduate student recently answered some questions about his FVSU and University of Florida experiences.**

***Were you raised on a farm?***

No, but, growing up in a small rural town, I had many on-the-farm experiences. As a child, my step father (Bobby Fulks) managed a local dairy and I would often help with the herding, bailing of hay and the milking process.

***Who, or what, inspired you to pursue a career in an agricultural field?***

My father (Charles Ivey) is a retired agricultural educator who was also my Future Farmers of America (FFA) advisor in high school. Though being an educator was not an interest of mine, through him, I grew a love for

agriculture from participating in FFA events and competitions.

***What or who, influenced you to come to FVSU and why did you select your major?***

I have to contribute my influence to join the Wildcat family to my father. He and many of my family members are proud FVSU alumni,







so it was a rite of passage so to speak. The selection of my major came in part from my love for mathematics and also from other alumni. During the summer before I began my journey at FVSU, I participated in the College of Agriculture's Research Apprenticeship Program on campus. Through the program I met my future mentor and then Agriculture Engineering Technology professor, Dr. Archie Williams. That summer of research in the department secured me as agricultural engineering student.

***Did you participate in any clubs, sports or organizations at FVSU?***

During my undergraduate education I was an active member of the campus collegiate chapter of FFA and the Agri-Demic Forum. In the clubs, I served the roles of parliamentarian and vice president, respectively. In the Fall of 2014, I was privileged to become an initiate of the Alpha Pi chapter of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Incorporated where I served as vice president.

***What did you enjoy the most about your educational experience at FVSU?***

I would have to say the most joy comes from the family culture in the school of agriculture. During my time there, we could depend

on each other (both students and instructors) to assist with our goals, whether academic or personal.

***Did you participate in an internship? If so, how many years, where, what company or government agency and what were your duties?***

I was blessed and fortunate enough to have had an internship my entire time at FVSU. For three summers I held an internship with the USDA – Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) as an engineering trainee, in Moultrie, Dalton and Griffin, Georgia.

***Why did you select the Ph.D. program at the University of Florida?***

Before finishing my master's degree, I had already set the goal of pursuing my PhD. The University of Florida has one of the top engineering schools in the country and after several meetings with UF faculty and former graduates, I knew the program was for me. I am currently studying agricultural and biological engineering with a concentration in hydrology.

***How well did FVSU prepare you for your graduate studies?***

Fort Valley State prepared me tremendously in the achievement of my master's degree and the pursuit of my doctoral degree. My

education from FVSU has given me the opportunity to take my career wherever I want go.

***What advice would you give a student seeking to have a successful career in an agricultural field?***

Agriculture is such a broad field. I would tell students looking for a successful career in it to first find what they love and enjoy most about agriculture. Once you find your passion in anything, the hard work you put into will mean everything to you and translate to success.

***What are your future plans?***

Upon finishing my doctoral degree, I plan to start an engineering firm of my own servicing my community. My goal is to employ people who look like me in a work environment where they can be themselves and have a successful and enjoyable career.

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# WHERE *are they* NOW?

After graduation, many students from Fort Valley State University's College of Agriculture continue to graduate studies, the workforce or participate in fellowships. Recently, two graduates who completed their studies at FVSU less than five years ago, shared life after FVSU, and what they are doing to make contributions to the field.



## *Madalyn Bryant*

c/o 2016

Bachelor of Science: plant science (biotechnology)

c/o 2018

Master of Science: biotechnology

› Lab manager for the FVSU College of Arts & Sciences

› Published in international research journal

### BY LATASHA FORD

Fort Valley State University alumna Madalyn Bryant is giving back to her alma mater by using her research and teaching skills to serve as a lab manager in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Bryant graduated with a bachelor's degree in plant science-biotechnology from FVSU in 2016. She also earned her master's degree in biotechnology from the 1890 Land-Grant University in 2018. Since taking on the role as lab manager in October 2020, the biotechnology graduate's duties include organizing and preparing the lower-level biology labs and teaching some of the classes.

"I can share my brain and help students. That is what makes me happy to work at this university because I was once in their shoes," Bryant said.

For her master's thesis, she investigated the advantages of using pulsed ultraviolet (UV) light to inactivate *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) K12 on goat meat and beef surfaces. The International Journal of Food Science and Technology (IFST) recently published the results of her thesis in the July 2020 issue (<https://doi.org/10.1111/ijfs.14733>).

"This accomplishment shows me that I can go far. My research experience gave me the opportunity to learn more about how biotechnology is used to enhance all living organisms," Bryant said. "This enables me to have a better understanding of the different science techniques and systems while in my new position."

The Perry, Georgia, native said FVSU was always a choice for her because her mother graduated



from the Historically Black College and University (HBCU).

“My mom was someone who I always admired. She passed away in 2011 from congestive heart failure. When I saw what she went through, I desired to go to medical school to be a cardiologist because I wanted to help people like my mom,” she said.

However, a pre-internship in the plant science-biotechnology program at FVSU opened her eyes to the many opportunities in science and agriculture.

“I aspire to continue doing research in my current position,” Bryant said. “Technology is enhancing every day. With research, there is always going to be something new.”



## **Brian Cornish**

c/o 2017

Bachelor of Science: agricultural economics

- › Doctoral candidate at Auburn University
- › Nominated to the USDA's Farm Foundation Agricultural Scholars Program

### **BY RUSSELL BOONE, JR.**

Brian Cornish, a 2017 Fort Valley State University agricultural economics alumnus, is currently enrolled in the doctoral program at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama. The Warner Robins native and former Wildcat football standout is pursuing a terminal degree in applied economics.

“I chose Auburn because it is close to home and suits my needs very well. The Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology Department is full of professors and faculty members who are very knowledgeable and experienced in the field of agriculture. I have gained new experiences and have learned how to work as a scholar,” Cornish said.

Recently, Cornish’s work caught the attention of his department chair, Dr. Joshua Duke, who nominated him to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Farm Foundation Agricultural Scholars Program for 2021. “I am honored to participate and be a part of the Ag Scholars Program. I’m also excited to have the opportunity to meet and connect with various leaders and professionals within the agribusiness field,” said the Auburn doctoral candidate.

The program is sponsored by the USDA’s Economic Research Service (ERS) and Farm Foundation. Its year-long curriculum is designed to engage graduate level scholars in government and policy work focusing on agricultural production and agribusiness.

As an Ag Scholar, Cornish will participate in a variety of meetings and write a capstone project paper at the end of the year.

“By participating, I have the opportunity to work with different industry professionals and be mentored by agricultural economists of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service,” Cornish said.

“I think these interactions will be beneficial not only for my professional development, but also help me improve my abilities as an academic and researcher,” the FVSU alumnus said. He also looks forward to attending Farm Foundation Round Table meetings. “This will allow me to discuss ideas and learn new insights on various issues and challenges facing agriculture,” Cornish said.

After graduation, Cornish seeks to further his career as an economist for one of the USDA’s research stations or as an agricultural professional in the private sector.

# STUDENTS ON THE RISE

## FVSU graduates honored as U.S. Department of Agriculture 1890 National Scholars



Jaylan Horton and Asha Fears received recognition from the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue and Congressman Sanford Bishop through a virtual spring 2020 ceremony. Horton and Fears were among more than 20 graduating 1890 National Scholars.

The USDA 1890 National Scholars Program was established in 1992 as part of the partnership between the USDA and the 19 1890 Land-Grant Universities. The program provides full tuition, fees, books, room and board to students pursuing degrees in agriculture, food, natural resource sciences or related academic disciplines.

Appreciative of the recognition, Horton, who earned a bachelor's degree in biology, said without the USDA 1890 Scholarship, he would have taken out additional loans and found a job to help pay for school. "It lifted a huge burden off my shoulders and my family's shoulders. All I had to do was attend school and do my work," he said. Horton said his goal is to attend veterinary school. He plans to return to his alma mater in fall 2020 to pursue his master's degree in animal science.

Fears, who earned a bachelor's degree in veterinary technology, learned about the USDA 1890 Scholarship while attending Montgomery College in Maryland. After graduating with her associate degree in general studies in 2017, she decided to attend FVSU because it offers the only four-year veterinary technology program in Georgia.

The Washington, D.C., native said the scholarship was a blessing. "It not only helped me financially, but the internship opportunity was rewarding because they send you to a site that is related to your major," she said.

She and Horton encourage students to apply for the USDA 1890 Scholarship. "If you don't get it the first time, don't give up. Keep trying," Horton advised. He also recommends for students to find mentors. His support system included family, friends, Hollis, FVSU Outreach and Marketing Coordinator Fanisha Maze, Dr. Vernard Hodges of Critter Fixer Veterinary Hospital and his professors.

"If you are interested in agriculture or working for the government, the 1890 scholarship is the way to go," Fears urged.

## Striving to be the best



Fort Valley State University graduate Halle Tukes put her unrelenting energy into earning a bachelor's degree in animal science in three years.

The 21-year-old Brooks County, Georgia, native made it her mission as a junior in high school to achieve this goal by participating in the dual enrollment program through Wiregrass Georgia Technical College. While attending Brooks County High School, she was able to complete eight

college courses. The student-athlete, who played three sports year-round and added a fourth sport her senior year, said she made her schoolwork a priority.

After visiting the campus with her parents, she knew FVSU is where she belonged. However, her interest in becoming a dentist later changed to pharmacy. Working at the former Harveys Supermarket in Brooks County helped Tukes realize that she wanted to be a pharmacist. As a cashier in the pharmacy department, she observed the pharmacists, which resulted in her becoming a licensed pharmacy technician.

"I realized I would not mind doing this for the rest of my life," she said. She worked weekends and during winter and summer breaks. "They closed, and I moved to a local pharmacy in Brooks County."

Majoring in animal science at FVSU provided the foundation Tukes needs to pursue a pharmacy career. She realized that her career opportunities are vast. "Agriculture is a big contribution to this world. With animal science, you get all the sciences you need for most medical schools," she said. "There is so much more to agriculture than just being outside on a farm. Also, being able to observe the animals gives you a different point of view."

Tukes commended the hands-on training she received taking organic chemistry. "It relates to the medication aspect of how taking more than two medications at one time could react negatively," she said.

Her advice to students considering attending FVSU is to take advantage of the friendly and family-oriented environment. "Teachers and advisers know you, and they care about you. They try to lead you in the right direction so you can be successful," she said, commending Dr. Niki Whitley, animal science Extension specialist.

Now that she has graduated, the FVSU alumna's aspiration is to attend pharmacy school, as well as conduct research on medications that are good for humans. As she continues



to pursue her dreams, she credits her parents as her motivation.

For more information about FVSU's animal science program, visit <https://ag.fvsu.edu/departments/ag-sciences/animal-science>.

## Fort Valley State University agricultural students receive national NCIS scholarship



A \$3,000 National Crop Insurance Services (NCIS) scholarship is helping Fort Valley State University agricultural economics juniors Faith Fantroy and Charity Greene not only cover college expenses but get a step closer to achieving their career goals.

NCIS distributes these scholarships annually to students at 1890 Land-Grant Universities to assist them in completing their education and preparing for a career in agriculture. The scholarship money may be used for tuition, fees, books and other related expenses. Each semester, the award recipients must maintain a minimum 3.0 cumulative grade point average, have a declared major in an agricultural discipline, and continue as a full-time student in good standing at their university.

Fantroy said receiving the \$3,000 scholarship offers her not only a means to cover college expenses, but it offers her a peace of mind and motivates her more to accomplish her goals.

"I want to work to make healthy foods more economical and available to the public," Fantroy said. "Ultimately, I want to be a business owner,

but first I want to work in a major corporation within the agricultural industry and to be a philanthropist."

Greene is also grateful to receive the NCIS scholarship. "It means a lot because not only is it helping me with college, but it is a blessing from God. This scholarship means all the hard work really paid off," she said. "This is only the beginning."

"Growing up, my interest gravitated more toward the process of marketing products and managing a team. As I learned the importance of how these same attributes can play a vital role in agriculture, my mindset began to change. Fort Valley State University's agricultural economics program opened the door to a broader career path," Greene said.

Dr. Ralph Noble, dean of FVSU's College of Agriculture, Family Sciences and Technology, congratulates Fantroy and Greene on this accomplishment. "This recognition is evident of these two scholars' hard work and dedication. I am proud of their achievements, as well as their future success at FVSU, and we anticipate even greater achievements in their agricultural careers," he said.

NCIS is a 503(c) not-for-profit crop insurance trade association whose membership includes private companies offering federal multiple peril crop insurance.

## Wildcat Warrior: Connecting families with resources



As the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues to affect millions of people across the world, Fort Valley State University alumna Nicole Howell is serving on the frontline as a community coordinator for the Macon County Family Connection in Montezuma, Georgia. This pandemic is a time for her to reach out and put her resources to work.

"A Family Connection community

coordinator is the glue in a community. We plan, coordinate and implement city and county programs that address serious challenges facing children and families," Howell said. There is one coordinator in all 159 counties in Georgia.

Although she is working remotely, she is still able to collaborate with elected officials such as Representative Patty Bentley and Governor Brian Kemp. Howell is also connecting with the nonprofit organization United Way, the Macon County School System and many other community organizations to assist with receiving safety alerts and updates, food drives, elderly needs and meals for local children.

In addition, as a board member of the Macon County Boys and Girls Club and the Macon County Chamber of Commerce, she partnered with the local recreation department and the Boys and Girls Club president in Albany, Georgia, to feed more than 150 families in her community.

Howell said she is proud of how far the collaborative has come since her first day on the job four years ago. Her initial task was to recreate the program.

"It was one of the best things that could have happened," she said. "We started with a group of about five members. It has grown to 45 members over the last four years. This is a group of police officers, sheriff's deputies, mental health and health care professionals, and county commissioners."

The 20-year social work professional said they are one of the largest statewide networks of community collaboratives in the nation. They also have FVSU group members including the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), Upward Bound and the Cooperative Developmental Energy Program (CDEP).

Passionate about serving others, Howell said her job brings her fulfillment, especially during these uncertain times.

"I have always wanted to help in my community," she said.

Although COVID-19 has changed her daily life, Howell said prayer keeps her going. "Fear and faith do not go together. Even during trying times, we must stay encouraged, as well as encourage each other, and know that we will get through this," she said.



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