

# MEDLEY

- a potpourri of diverse talent

April 2021

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**To create a diverse workforce and promote a positive work environment where all employees are respected and valued for their contributions.**

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## Black History Month Celebration

*by Leona Horst*

February is the month the U.S. Department of Agriculture celebrates the many contributions made to American society by Black scientists, foresters, farmers, conservationists and other Black Americans employed by USDA. As you may be eating your peanut butter sandwich, peanut butter cookies or other peanut treats, remember to be thankful for one of the greatest agricultural scientists in history, Dr. George Washington Carver, an agricultural scientist, inventor, and educator at Tuskegee University.

Dr. Carver not only popularized the peanut for its nutritional value, but also gave modern agriculture a map for soil health and conservation. Dr. Carver promoted the practice of reintroducing nutrients and organic matter to the soil, a central practice that is continually being refined by scientists to benefit farmers, landscape and greenhouse managers. In 1935, Dr. Carver became an official collaborator with USDA and served in this position until 1943.

This year, to celebrate Black History Month, the theme was ‘The Black Family: Representation, Identity, and Diversity’. Four speakers were invited to share their experience in ARS. Also, all students at 1890 land-grant institutions and national scholars were invited to share their name, institution, and major in the chat box during the zoom session.

Kenny Blackson is an EEO specialist and administrator for College of Agriculture at Virginia State University. He is a graduate of Southern University where he received his degrees in agriculture economics as well as his law degree. Also, Dr. Blackson was part of the USDA national program which is a partnership we have with 1890 land-grant institutions that are historically black colleges and universities.

Dr. Ray McKinnie is the Dean and 1890 extension administrator in the College of agriculture and Virginia State University. For Dr. McKinnie, celebrating Black History month allows him to take time to appreciate all those who have been before him and paved the way for his success.

Nate Looney is the founder and chief executive of Westside urban gardens as well as the founder of Phoenix Farms. For Nate, black history month makes him think of the resilience of the black community and their contribution to the world of agriculture.

The fourth speaker is a college agriculture student, Bre Holbert. She also serves

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as the associated student body president of California State University in Chico. Ms. Holbert said it is beautiful to look back on our history and think where she would be without the folks that came before her. "It is really exciting

that we get the opportunity to speak on our experiences and how those came before us impacted where we are at today."

Each speaker shared what representation, identity and diversity in agriculture meant to them. Dr. McKinnie shared that the challenge to feed the world will need all persons excluding race, color, sex, religion, etc. to solve this challenge. He went on to describe how can we actively encourage people to grow food. We each need to cheer on those who choose agriculture to become the next generation involved in agriculture.

Bre Holbert addressed the question on encouraging young students to choose a career in agriculture research or other STEM related fields. While many come from slavery or migrant worker backgrounds, we need to help those students write a different story connected to agriculture.

Other speakers shared that every one of us needs to share the enormous career opportunities in STEM and in agricultural science fields. The number of graduates in these areas are less than the demand. We need to encourage students to take control of their educational experience and explore where it can take them.

Other topics addressed by the speakers were urban agriculture and its future, how to provide grants to fund these types of endeavors, how to address student loans for those going into agriculture, how to start with preschoolers and agriculture and how to think outside the box of traditional agriculture. We were encouraged to be an information multiplier to others of all ages about the careers available in agriculture.

In conclusion, how will agriculture change in the future? What will the future agricultural farms be like? A high rise in the middle of the city totally converted to aquaponics and hydroponics? A community garden with many different age groups? A specialty crop on a small plot? Lab grown meat? A flat roof converted into a farm?

We were left with this challenge by the speakers: We need to get continued support of research grants and funding at our institutions, spend time looking at what those new models of farming systems are going to be, and come up with strategies that make a small farm successful. It goes back to people farming because they love farming, but they also want to make money too. How do we come up with the design of farming strategies and models that will support the smaller scale agriculture in this country? If we don't, we are going to lose more land and more generations of minority participation in agriculture.

## March is Women's History Month

By Christopher M. Sacchetti

*"To ignore the vital role that women's dreams and accomplishments play in our own lives would be a great mistake. We draw strength and inspiration from those who came before us – and those remarkable women working among us today. They are part of our story, and a truly balanced and inclusive history recognizes how important women have always been in American society." (Virginia Woolf)*



In 1980, President Jimmy Carter issued a Presidential Proclamation declaring the week of March 8, 1980, as National Women's History Week. The U.S. Congress followed suit the next year, passing a resolution establishing a national celebration. In 1987, at the request of the National Women's History Project, also known as NWHP, Congress expanded the week to a month, and the United States Congress has issued a resolution every year since. A Presidential Proclamation is issued, every year, honoring the extraordinary achievements of women.

Women were not integrated into the military until 1948 when President Harry S. Truman signed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act. During World War II, Major General Jeanne Holm was a truck driver in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. Holm graduated from Officer Candidate School and, following the Second World War, received a commission in the United States Air Force. In 1971, Holm became the first Air Force woman to

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be promoted to Brigadier General. In 1973, Holm became the first woman in all the armed forces to achieve the rank of Major General. In challenging military leadership to utilize the talents of military women and increase the number of and opportunities for women in the military, Holm is widely recognized for helping to achieve equal rights for military women.

On June 16, 2005, Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester was awarded the Silver Star for valor in Iraq, the first woman since World War II to receive the honor. A member of the National Guard, Hester received the Silver Star for her actions during an ambush of the convoy she and her team were shadowing. Upon receiving the Silver Star, Sergeant Hester said, *"It really doesn't have anything to do with being female. It is about the duties I performed as a soldier."* In 2008, General Ann E. Dunwoody, after 33 years of service, became the first woman to serve as a four-star general in the United States military. Dunwoody said after the appointment, *"If anyone is worried about the next generation of warriors, fear not. The bench is filled with talented Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines, and while I may be the first woman to receive this honor, I know with certainty I won't be the last."*

The United States Senate confirmed Admiral Michelle Howard to the United States Navy's number two post in December 2013, making her the very first female four-star admiral in the Navy's 238-year history. Admiral Michelle Howard's promotion to Vice Chief of Naval Operations made her the first African-American woman to attain the four-star rank in Pentagon history. In addition to participation in the military, women have contributed greatly to the STEM fields. The United States needs to tap into the brainpower and innovation of all its people. Removing barriers to women participating, and being successful in, the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields will benefit the entire nation. In the words of First Lady Michelle Obama, *"If we're going to out-innovate and out-educate the rest of the world, we've got to open doors for everyone. We need all hands on deck, and that means clearing hurdles for women and girls as they navigate careers in science, technology, engineering, and math."*

Throughout history, women have driven humanity forward on the path to a more equal and just society, contributing to our character and progress as people. Growing out of a small-town school event in California in 1978, Women's History Month honors and celebrates the struggles and achievements of women throughout the history of the United States.



## Illinois Women in Science

*By Cylie Colbeth*

Illinois Women in Science was a panel discussion set up by the Chillicothe Public Library's NEA Big Read program. The discussion was based on a memoir *Lab Girl*, by Hope Jahren a paleobiology researcher who was the only woman to be awarded both the Young Investigator Medals given within Earth Science.

The panel featured ten women scientists and lab techs from National Center for Agricultural Utilization Research (NCAUR) in Peoria, IL. Dr. Martha Vaughan, Molecular Plant Biologist and Research Leader for the Mycotoxin Prevention and Applied Microbiology Research (MPM); Dr. Susan McCormick, Research Chemist (MPM); Dr. Briana Whitaker, Microbiologist and Ecologist (MPM); Dr. Jill Moser, Research Chemist in Functional Foods Research (FFR); Dr. Jessica Lohmar, Research Associate conducting Food Science and Food Chemistry research (MPM); Dr. Kristin Duffield, Research Entomologist Post Doc in the Crop Bio-protection Research (CBP); Helene Tiley, Lab Technician working with Dr. Susan McCormick (MPM); Kylie Hampton, Lab Technician working with Dr. Jose Luis Ramirez (CBP); Kim Ascherl, Executive Assistant to the Center Director at NCAUR; and Erica Goett, Lab Technician working with Dr. Robert Behle (CBP).

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The event began with an introduction from all panelists and a shout out to Dorothy Fennell, the only female member of the Penicillin Team at the Northern Regional Research Center whose role was crucial in isolating the strain of penicillium needed to mass-produce penicillin and Dr. Allene Rosalind Jeanes who was a Chemist who made mass-production of a blood plasma substitute, Dextran possible. She was one of the first women in ARS Hall of Fame.

The panelists shared authentic stories about being women in science. As an undergrad, Kim Ascherl attended a poster session where she asked the male presenter a question and got no answer. She asked the question again, louder and got no answer. She asked her question again and he looked straight over her head. Feeling confused and still really wanting to know the answer, she asked her male comrade to ask. Immediately after her comrade had asked her question the presenter said that was a great question and proceeded to answer. She felt overlooked and excluded because she was a girl. She had a similar exclusion experience when she was in graduate school and was administratively excused when there was a small chemical spill because she was pregnant. *Lab Girl's* author, Hope Jarhen was also told to go home because she was pregnant despite her wanting to and being able to work. The panelists wanted to make sure no young women felt as though they needed to choose between a career in science and motherhood. Erica Goett emphasized that having a good work-life balance allowed her thrive in her career and also be a mother of five. Dr. Jill Moser expressed the importance of setting up boundaries to not work too late, and focus on life outside of work. They both expressed appreciation for the amount of flexibility within Agricultural Research Service (ARS), their labs at NCAUR and their teams.

The panelists were asked about how they were introduced to their scientific careers. This included shout outs to high school physics classes, science teachers, English teachers, books from childhood and more. Dr. Martha Vaughan had an English teacher point out that many of her essays included plants and that she frequently gave her plants personalities. Dr. McCormick recalls reading about George Washington Carver in the book series *Famous Men* as a child who found multiple uses for peanuts. She learned the term chemurgy which means finding chemical or industrial uses for raw products. She enjoys the puzzle of finding out a chemical make-up and then using that knowledge to solve other puzzles about how plants and things evolve. For example, as a person who is against smoking, she would brainstorm different uses for tobacco so farmers could still profit from their crops as less and less people smoked.

Another big inspiration for many panelists was family members. Dr. Briana Whitaker said her mom would take her on walks along the beach and would point out seashells and birds. Her mom encouraged her to ask questions. No question was too big and it was okay if they didn't know the answer right then and there. She said it taught her to be observant and curious and to ask why. Kim's dad who was an engineer also encouraged her to ask questions. Kim loves passing the same encouragement onto her kids and getting to explore with them by having science fun nights at home. One night included a fetal pig dissection!

Several women spoke about their call to help others. Dr. Jessica Lohmar had always been drawn to biology and science in general. She initially wanted to be a physician and was fascinated by infectious diseases and tiny seemingly invisible microbes' abilities to get into plants and humans and cause disease. During her undergrad she was introduced to fungal genetics and the first experiment where she saw tangible results really drew her in and knew she wanted to do that for the rest of her career. Dr. Kristin Duffield said she comes into work every day and feels like her work matters. She shares the responsibility that many in the USDA have of being tasked with feeding people in the most environmentally friendly way possible. Kylie Hampton loves the opportunities she has as a lab tech and really emphasized that some of the science they work on has potential to reach people in the community, state, nation and the world.

In addition to helping people, the panelists expressed the importance of mentorship. Helene Tiley encouraged people to look into professional societies, such as the American Society of Plant Biologist (ASPB), where you can be paired with a mentor or mentee. The panelists also encouraged viewers to reach out in their own research communities to find a mentor. Briana absolutely loves mentoring students and helping them find their own strengths, and weaknesses, and discover what they can bring to the table. She wants to help fuel mentees drive to know more about the research, find the purpose of projects and ask more questions. She expressed a sense of responsibility for helping them grow, approach problems in new ways, test experiments, and work through failures. Kim encourages people to stick with it when things don't work. She said science in high school is designed to work, but science as an adult doesn't always work. Martha said without the failures, successes wouldn't be as sweet. One of her mentors shared that there is a lot of power in failures because failures are

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discoveries. Failure means you've discovered that it is something other than what you've initially anticipated. Kim closed out our discussion by sharing a quote from Dr. Robert Behle who told her most innovation and science doesn't come after "Eureka!" Most innovation follows the words, "Huh. . . That's weird."

These women have many more experiences to share. If you'd like to hear more about these amazing women, I encourage you to reach out. Ask Erick Goett about Madagascar Hissing Cockroaches and ask Susan McCormick about the "breakage" fee she had in her first college chemistry course. Everyone has unique experiences and the first step toward building a community that supports women in science by reaching out and hearing their stories.

Thank you to all the women who participated in the panel and bravely shared their stories and insight. The science community wouldn't be what it is today without you and your contributions. Thank you to the author, Hope Jaren for proving such meaningful discussion. We encourage anyone who is interested to purchase *Lab Girl* available on Goodreads, through Amazon and at Barnes & Noble. Hope Jaren also has many videos and event where you can engage in further conversation. Lastly, thank you to the Chillicothe Public Library for hosting the event. To learn more about the Big Read program as part of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest, please feel free to visit the library website: <https://www.chillicothepubliclibrary.org/adult-family-events/nea-big-read>.

## APRIL 22, 2021: EARTH DAY & USDA-ARS TAKE OUR DAUGHTERS AND SONS TO WORK DAY

*By Christopher M. Sacchetti*



### Thursday, April 22, 2021 Marks 51 Years of Celebrating Earth Day

Earth Day is an event celebrated annually, around the world, in order to demonstrate support for environmental protection. Earth Day was first celebrated in 1970 and now includes global events coordinated by the Earth Day Network. Earth Day 2021 is the fifty-first anniversary of Earth Day. Celebrations will include the Great Global CleanUp, Citizen Science, Advocacy, Art, and Education.

The very first Earth Day celebrations took place at two thousand colleges and universities, approximately ten thousand primary and secondary schools, and hundreds of communities throughout the United States of America. Twenty million Americans peacefully demonstrated in favor of environmental reform. Earth Day is now observed in 192 countries and coordinated by the nonprofit Earth Day network which is chaired by the first Earth Day 1970 organizer Denis Hayes.

### April 22, 2021 Is USDA-ARS Take Our Daughters And Sons To Work Day

USDA-ARS Take Our Daughters And Sons To Work Day is a national day on the fourth Thursday in April every year that gives children in the United States of America a look at the working world, exposure to future professional opportunities, and emphasizes the inherent value of obtaining an education. The national day was developed by the Take Our Daughters and Sons To Work Foundation, a 501 (C) (3) non-profit educational organization. Take Our Daughters and Sons To Work Day is the successor to Take Our Daughters to Work Day, which was expanded to include boys in 2003.

Photo Credit: Wikipedia and Our children are the next generation of USDA-ARS agricultural leaders. (Photo credit: Getty Images)



## We would love to hear from you!

Everyone has a unique story to share and we would love to hear yours. What projects are you and your team are working on? Have you been involved in student mentorship opportunities? Do you know anyone who has gone above and beyond with outreach programs? Do one of the upcoming observances resonate with you? If you would like to submit an article or are willing to be featured in an article in our next Medley please reach out to your location representative. Thank you!

## Upcoming Special Emphasis Program Observances

May	Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month
June	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride Month
July	USDA American Diversity Month (ADM)
August 26th	Women's Equality Day

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