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by Larry A. Quinn



DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD – 2002 NAFB President **COLLEEN CALLAHAN BURNS** was one of three Distinguished Service Award recipients honored by the University of Illinois at the 2017 Commencement activities in May. Bestowed upon alumni, faculty, staff and friends by the UI Alumni Association on behalf of the University, the award is presented to individuals or couples whose consistent, exceptional and meritorious service to the University of Illinois (U of I) has made a significant impact on the institution's overall welfare and the advancement of its mission. An agricultural broadcasting trailblazer, Colleen was the first female agribusiness director for WMBD Radio and TV (Peoria, IL), the first

female president of the National Association of Farm Broadcasting (2002), and the first woman inducted into the NAFB Hall of Fame (2011). Following her distinguished 30-year career with WMBD, Burns launched her own communications firm, [Colleen Callahan Communications](#), in 2003. Six years later, the Obama Administration appointed her state director for USDA Rural Development in Illinois. She began her duties in July 2009 and oversaw the agency's 13 offices. Her focus on staff development led to communication training for rural development staff in Illinois, before expanding to other states and the Washington, DC office. In September 2012, **Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack** named her the Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator for Drought, leading the national recovery efforts for the Drought of 2012.



Through the years, she has been an active supporter of the University of Illinois, helping to drive the Ag Communications Alumni Leadership Council and serving in leadership positions with the College of Agriculture Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) Alumni Association, the Fighting Illini Pork Club and the University of Illinois Alumni Association. Other accomplishments include the expansion of the annual Salute to Agriculture Day and the creation of the **Dr. Jim Evans** Endowed Chair position in the Colleges of ACES and Media. In 2014, Colleen and her family, which includes her husband, **Richard** ('73 ACES), and daughter, **Brittney** ('03 ACES) were presented with Honorary Membership into the University of Illinois Varsity "I" Association in recognition of outstanding service. In 2017, she founded Colleen Callahan Consultancy.



DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD PRESENTED BY UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

Kim Kidwell, Dean, University of Illinois College of Agriculture Consumer & Environmental Sciences (ACES) (left), **Colleen Callahan** (center), and **Tina Veal**, Alumni Relations, College of ACES (right).

ABOUT HER HONOR – Colleen said, “This recognition is special because I didn't anticipate it. It's not one I applied for. Rather, someone believed this honor would be appropriate and nominated me. To be part of the momentous weekend when 13,000

graduates celebrated their accomplishments at one of the most highly respected universities in the nation was a real bonus. Being part of the graduation festivities was like getting permission to go back in time, but while the graduates were looking forward, I was reflecting – knowing that after they turned their tassels, their real education would begin.” She continued, “I thought about them leaving the classrooms to the rooms of everyday life – knowing that's where the value and benefit of their U of I education would begin. And, I thought about the old African proverb, ‘We stand tall, because we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us.’” She explains, “I stand on the shoulders of my Dad who led the initiative to get lights for our Milford High School football field. On the shoulders of my Mom, whom I watched, as the president of the Milford Jr. Women’s Club, initiate the effort to get the lighted scoreboard for the field. And on their combined shoulders as they took an idea to reality in the creation of the Fighting Illini Pork Club, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for U of I athletic and animal science scholarships.” She added, “I stand on the shoulders of **Dr. Jim Evans**, my college advisor, who, after 22 years of retirement, comes to campus at least one day a week to counsel students and who helped me decide to do what I wanted, but was afraid to do – switch my major to broadcasting, when there were no women in agribusiness broadcasting at the time! I stand on the shoulders of my Uncle **Gene Callahan**, who, when his then 8-year-old grandson was asked by his teacher what his Grandpa did, Brad said, ‘He helps people.’ Knowing as I spoke, Uncle Gene was being honored, posthumously, with the Distinguished Service Award from Southern Illinois University.” She

noted, “I knew I wouldn't be recognized if it weren't for the broad shoulders of my family – **Dick, Brittney**, and soon to be son-in-law, **Zack**, who are always there with me, for me, helping me, supporting me, and sometimes challenging me. And I thought of my Dad who always said, ‘You come in to this world with nothing, and you leave with nothing. It's what you do in-between that matters.’ The University of Illinois has been my ‘in-between.’ Now, my shoulders are ready!”



Jumbotron highlights Colleen Callahan Burns during U of I graduation ceremony.

PASSER RETURNS TO RETIREMENT – Jerry Passer (Brownfield Network, Cedar Rapids, IA) came out of retirement in October 2002, signing a six-month agreement to cover livestock markets for Brownfield. Now, nearly 15 years later, the veteran farm broadcaster is hanging up his microphone at the end of June. “For almost 35 years of a broadcast career that spans 51 years in July, I have worked for two of the best broadcast companies in the business. Nearly 20 years at WMT Radio and TV (Cedar Rapids, IA) and 14½ years for Brownfield,” Jerry said. “Without a doubt, my time at Brownfield has been the best. The people I have worked with are the best in the business,” he added. Jerry perfected the role of Livestock Market Reporter for the largest



agricultural radio network in the country. It is Jerry's passion for mentoring that his co-workers will miss the most. He has said many times that his proudest career achievement is training 15 farm broadcast interns at WMT, many of whom are still in the industry. He is a graduate of Brown Institute of Broadcasting and a Vietnam Era war vet (U.S. Navy). Following his stint in the Navy, he began a broadcast career that has spanned five decades. Passer worked at radio stations in Blue Earth, Albert Lea and Austin, Minnesota, at Cedar Rapids and Oelwein, Iowa, and spent nearly 20 years as Farm Director for WMT). He traveled extensively, including trips to North Africa, Belgium and Mexico with **Agriculture Secretary John Block**. He has been recognized by all major farm organizations in Iowa, received the Communications Award from American Soybean Association in 1986 and is an Honorary Iowa Master Pork Producer. Jerry is a Charter member of Cornbelt NAMA, and he served as a Regional NAFB Vice President and chaired the NAFB Awards Committee. While chairing the NAFB Ethics Committee, he wrote the first ethics policy for the organization. In his retirement years, Jerry looks forward to spending more time in Texas with his daughter and grandchildren. Anchor/Reporter **Meghan Grebner** will assume responsibilities for livestock market reporting in a newly created role on the Brownfield Ag News team.

AG NEWS DAILY PODCAST – *Ag News Daily* podcast was created in late 2016 by **Mike Pearson** and **Delaney Howell**, but their story goes much further back in time. As the son of a well-known broadcaster himself, Mike had big shoes to fill after his father, **Mark Pearson**, passed away unexpectedly in 2012, and Mike was asked to step in as host of Iowa Public Television's show *Market to Market*. "Stepping in as host of *Market to Market* really opened my eyes to the huge diversity in agriculture across this country," recalls Mike. Delaney on the other hand remembers hearing Mike's father, Mark, on the radio program *The Big Show* during the summertime as a child and always knew she wanted to be a voice heard 'round the world.' "It was a huge coincidence that we now happen to work together all these years later," Delaney reflects. "I used



to love listening to Mark on the radio, he was always such an inspiration to me even all these years later.” After being selected for an internship with *Market to Market* during her college years, Mike and Delaney’s paths finally crossed. For the next two years, the pair kept in contact off and on. After Delaney finished college, she came back to Iowa Public Television to work once more. During late fall of 2016, Mike called Delaney one night with an idea, and while that idea was not what their business has become, it sparked in both a desire to find a new way to be voices for agriculture. “I decided to talk to Delaney about getting a service started because I believed it was important that we had a diversity of voices in the world of ag broadcasting as well as she was young, hardworking, and willing to take risks,” says Mike. After attending the 2016 NAFB Convention, the two sat down to discuss about what the ag industry needed. After many ideas were kicked around, and months of discussion and planning were done, Delaney concluded that the two needed to start a podcast. “I attended the 2017 Commodity Classic, my first time at the Classic, and talked to people about the ideas we had been kicking around for *Ag News Daily*. **Rob Sharkey**, fellow podcaster, was really the one who inspired the idea to just start our own podcast,” says Delaney. *Ag News Daily* was created as a daily agricultural news podcast to provide people in the industry with accessible, quick information wherever they were. Delaney added, “The podcast has been a work in progress but follows the basic outline of 10-15 minutes of news, followed by the commodity market closing prices, and ending with an interview with someone from the ag industry.” Mike explains, “My vision for the podcast was to make ag news even more accessible to farmers as the media landscape has continued to change.” Delaney added, “Whereas, my vision was to not only make ag news more accessible, but to connect more people with others involved in agriculture using some of the latest technology.” She continued, “And to be honest, I didn’t know how much work a daily podcast would be, but I’m glad we’ve started down this path and that I have a great partner to work with.” As the two continue to work towards their goal of becoming an international news podcast, both understand the value that traditional radio and television have played and will play into the future. “We believe radio and TV will continue to be a mainstay of ag broadcasting, but we’re excited to bring ag news to a new platform,” Mike concludes. To check out the podcast, go to *Ag News Daily* wherever you listen to podcasts or check them out online at www.agnewsdaily.com.

2017 NAFB FOUNDATION INTERN – One of this year’s NAFB interns is **Rhiannon Branch** from Iuka, IL, in Marion County. Her mentor is **Rita Frazer** (RFD Radio Network, Bloomington, IL) Rhiannon is a recent graduate of Kaskaskia College and will be transferring to Murray State University (MSU) this fall to pursue an agri-science technology degree with a communications emphasis. She joined 4-H early at the age of 8, and it is there that she began journalism, communications and public speaking projects. Later, she started showing cattle, became part of a nationally honored livestock judging team and dairy judging team, and she earned her own blue corduroy FFA jacket. “These organizations allowed me to combine my interests in agriculture and communications, which ultimately shaped my decision to devote my future to advocating for agriculture,” she said. “Through my participation in 4-H and FFA, I had been interviewed for the *RFD Radio Network* by **Rita Frazer** and had written two guest articles for *FarmWeek*. After watching my friend and former RFD Intern **Courtney Gerstenecker** enjoy her summer alongside

Rita in 2014, I placed this position in the back of my mind as an incredible opportunity to develop my skills.” She has just completed week two plus as the Illinois Farm Bureau News and Communications Intern.



Rhiannon Branch, NAFB Foundation Grant intern, left, with her mentor, Rita Frazer.

“So far, I am in heaven! Each day I leave knowing more than I did walking in that morning,” Rhiannon exclaimed. “I am looking forward to traveling the state to visit county fairs, networking with farmers and interviewees, and above all consuming as much knowledge as I can in one summer to become the best advocate that I can be.” The News and Communications Division provides learning pathways in broadcasting, journalism and social media advocacy which are all critical skills she feels she will need for a successful job resume following her graduation from MSU. “I was lucky to have found my calling at a young age, and I thank the staff at Illinois Farm Bureau for allowing me to exercise my talents and prove that I am exactly where I was meant to be,” she concluded. Rita Frazer said, “The RFD Radio Network is very thankful to have received one the 2017 NAFB Foundation DuPont Pioneer Internship Grants. This is our fifth year to receive the special grant, and we have been delighted with the quality of students we have hosted during those summer seasons.” She emphasized, “**Liz Koehler, Courtney Gerstenecker and Kelsey Litchfield** were all RFD Radio Network interns, and all went on to do great things within NAFB

and the agriculture industry. **Liz Koehler** (2014) and **Kelsey Litchfield** (2015) both received the CME Group and NAFB Foundation Scholarship. **Courtney Gerstenecker** was an outstanding student and remains a student member of NAFB. We are so excited to welcome Rhiannon and are looking forward to a wonderful summer in Illinois,” Rita concluded.

NEW TO NAFB MEMBERSHIP – Although **Tim Slusarczyk** (Ag Radio Network, Inc., Barneveld, NY) is new to NAFB membership, he has been involved in farm radio for his whole life thanks to his grandfather **Edwin Slusarczyk**. From an early age, Tim spent time at Ag Radio Network, Inc., and even before he was officially on the payroll you could find him stuffing cassettes into envelopes for their affiliates and quietly observing Ed's talent in the recording booth during broadcasts. Also, Tim experienced NAFB firsthand as a young man, accompanying Ed to Washington Watch and seeing how seriously elected officials take agriculture and the essential role farmers play in feeding America and caring for our land and animals. After earning his BS in information science, Tim returned to the family business, helping make the transition to digital recording and Internet delivery of their farm reports. Later, he became the network's second broadcaster, working with **Tom Cassidy** to record, produce, and deliver daily farm news programs to the network's affiliates.



Members of the family business: Tim Slusarczyk, right, Holly Slusarczyk Cassidy, left, and Tom Cassidy, center. Tom is currently serving as NAFB's President Elect.

BABY BOOMER BROADCASTER – Mick Kjar (Farm Talk Radio Network, KQLX, Fargo, ND) claims he is of the Baby Boomer generation, growing up in the 50s and 60s with cows and corn in southeast North Dakota. “I spent my teenage years cultivating corn and getting chased by angry momma cows.” Mick recalls, “The early 60s was the heyday of top-40 rock and roll radio and coincidentally the tractor radio. So, as I spent hours upon hours in the corn field or making hay, I fell in love with radio. All I ever wanted was to be the guy on the radio.” Through the 70s, Mick was in rock and roll personality radio. “Those were great years for radio. Then with the 80s came satellites, consultants and cue cards. Radio was not as wild and creative as it once was. I realized that being a meteorologist on TV was where the fun in broadcasting seemed to be.” Mick spent the next five years working for the local NBC affiliate in Fargo and the *American Ag Network* while attending meteorology classes at North Dakota State University and University of North Dakota and completing correspondence courses to earn his meteorologist certification. He began doing farm news for TV and morning weather and news while serving as the Assistant Farm Director for the *American Ag Network*. He spent 10 years in both roles and 27 years as the morning meteorologist and Farm Director for the local NBC station and also CBS TV stations. During that time, he did morning weather for local radio stations, too. In 2007, **Terry Loomis** of KQLX approached Mick to do an afternoon farm show after the markets closed. “Sounded like fun to me! So, we launched *Farm Talk* at the beginning of 2008, and now 9 years later, it is carried on several stations across North and South Dakota.” Mick continued, “In 2015, I started to feel the aches of age and decided that getting up at 2:30 in the morning and working 16 hours a day was no longer a good idea. So, I abandoned my TV career and focused on radio again.” *Farm Talk* is a two-hour show that airs from 1:00 - 3:00 p.m. with the first hour local and the second hour a network show. It consists of a series of five- to ten-minute interviews on farm topics ranging from agronomy and animal health to advocating for agriculture, farm policy and politics. “Although we stay away from arguing politics on the show, I occasionally interview politicians about their perspectives on agriculture. Every job has its challenges and this job’s challenge is finding seven to eight people every day to fill two hours of radio.” Mick concludes, “I get to do that every day, day after day, all year long. I am not your typical radio talk show host. I feel that what I say is not as important as what my guests say. My audience of farmers seem to like that formula. All I ever wanted was to be the guy on the radio. Luckily, I still am.”



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WE WANT YOUR NEWS – Send us your stories and photos for future newsletter issues. Contact me at larryaquinn@outlook.com or call me at **703-819-6532**. *Airing on the Side of Agriculture* is included in the blog section of NAFB.com. For an archive copy of any past issues, go to **Membership** and click on **Airing on the Side of Agriculture**.