

wearing a new hat

Former Burke County Homecoming Queen makes the grade in the beef industry

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A former Burke County homecoming queen has traded in her crown for a hard hat. She's as comfortable now handling beef carcasses in a packing plant as she once was adjusting her tiara with one hand and balancing a bouquet of roses with the other.

Samorya Evans, a 2007 graduate of Burke County High School, headed west after graduating with honors from Fort Valley State University last fall. Now she works for the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service in Dakota City, Neb., assigning quality grades to beef that will be processed, packaged and shipped to restaurants and grocery stores across the nation. As an agricultural commodity grader, she determines whether the beef she inspects will be labeled as prime, choice, select or other designations such as Certified Angus Beef.

It's a job she loves but not one she would have ever imagined back in high school, where she danced on the drill team in the Pride of Burke County Marching Band and was chosen as prom queen by her classmates. She filled her days back then running track, playing basketball and singing in the chorus.

But she was always open to new ideas.

So when she headed off to Fort Valley after high school, the suggestion of taking an animal science class was foreign but not far-fetched. She was encouraged by another Burke County native and Fort Valley alum, Neal Leonard Jr., who worked at the time as an ag liai-

son officer at the school, helping students find majors and classes that would capture their attention and their talents.

"I took a couple of classes and I loved it," she said, noting she was convinced shortly after to major in animal science. "We raised chickens and even learned artificial insemination. We vaccinated sheep. I really, really loved it and had never thought I would enjoy something like that."

Her interest in the processing side was piqued by helping out at the college's dairy goat center, where milk is used to make flavorful cheeses, sweet ice creams and moisture rich soaps. And the science behind it all is what ultimately opened her up to pursuing a career in the industry.

"The world really revolves around agriculture," she said. "We all eat food every day. There's a lot of science behind it and that's what I like about it."

A summer spent interning in meat packing facilities in Texas and Colorado guided her toward her current job, and another summer spent at Tuskegee helping with cancer research grew her love for lab work.

"I'd like to get back to research at some point," she said, adding that she'll likely go back to school to pursue her PhD at some point. "Anytime I can be in a lab, I'm happy."

For now though, she's content among the hanging sides of beef in the cooler where she spends her workday studying the marbling in rib eyes and leaving her mark on the quality of America's food supply.



Samorya works for the USDA grading the quality of beef in a meat packing facility in Nebraska.

MORE THAN FARMING

Students at Burke County High School are learning about the different aspects of the agricultural industry through the school's booming agricultural education program. Roughly 250 students have enrolled this year in classes such as agricultural science, horticulture, landscaping and ag mechanics. More than 100 are involved in the school's FFA chapter and complete in contests across the state in events like ag marketing, livestock shows, horticulture and even tractor driving.



Samorya Evans, center, was crowned Homecoming Queen and later chosen as Prom Queen her senior year at Burke County High School.

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