

How is your job/career related to agriculture?

If you grew up in Champaign County, like I did, you touched the business of agriculture every single day. My family has been in farming in Champaign County for five generations. We have raised cattle and dairy cows, grown soybeans and corn. We know this is not a turn-key business. The lessons I learned helping on the farm, detasseling corn, working at DeKalb Pfizer Genetics by Flatville, and working at the grain elevator in Royal during harvest have certainly shaped my career. As the elected Treasurer of the state of Illinois, I use these lessons every day. I am a strong advocate for the Ag industry, and I use the tools of this office to help farmers and others in the industry. One tool, the Linked Deposit Program, provides low-interest loans to farmers. Years ago, the tool fell out of favor, which is a shame given its potential. We studied the program, proactively reached out to farmers, bankers, and the Farm Bureau, and made significant changes to improve the program.

How did you get started in your career/current profession?

While a junior at Rantoul High School, I was selected to attend Boys State. This summer leadership and citizenship program is sponsored by the American Legion. The program was about a week long, and then-Gov. Jim Thompson offered a word of inspiration. It just so happened that he was in the gym when I delivered a speech as part of a scholarship contest. 'Big Jim' congratulated me when I won and told me that I could write speeches for him any time. Looking back, I'm sure his offer was a simple gesture of encouragement. I also am sure that it planted in me the seed of public service. Agriculture was a focus during my time on the county board and as a state senator. It remains a focus today in my current role as Treasurer. We need to constantly emphasize that there is more to agriculture than just farming.

What excites you most about being connected to the agriculture industry?

It is an exciting time to be in agriculture. I truly believe we are on the precipice of explosive innovation. We need to look big-picture. Some of what is required simply is bringing a fresh perspective to a traditional idea and modernize it, which is what we did with Ag Invest, our linked deposit program for farming.

However, too many people overlook the tremendous space that the University of Illinois plays in advancing agri-business. Too many times I hear of a great advancement coming out of Silicon Valley or out of Boston and invariably the news reports neglect that the genesis of that next, great, advancement started right here at the U of I. That needs to change, and we have a tool to help such innovators stay here in Illinois.

The [Illinois Growth and Innovation Fund](#) modernizes an existing tool to fund brilliant ideas that need seed money. Although the Legislature authorized such investments years ago, it was not a priority for all of my predecessors. We changed that because we believe this program can help create innovation and jobs right here in Illinois and eliminate the perceived need to relocate to the east or west coast. During the next three years, the fund will invest more than \$220 million in the idea marketplace with an emphasis on bio-technology. Based on our success with the first round of funding, we expect nothing less in this second round.

The key here is that government is not picking winners and losers. We are investing in funds that, in turn, invest in potential. The funds are chosen after relying on exhaustive conversations with investment managers and a board of industry experts. Entrepreneurs also can pitch their ideas.

There is a new horizon in the Ag industry and the Illinois Growth and Innovation Fund wants to be part of it.

What is your favorite memory of rural life and growing up in a small town?

I have many memories of growing up in a small town and around the farm, but the sweetest is of sweet corn.

Among the things my Grandfather did to make a living was to grow corn and soybeans. Like many farmers, he would set aside a few rows for sweet corn. We would gather the ears right off the stalk, shuck them outside and then bring them inside to boil. We would let the ears cool just enough and then roll one on a stick of butter. Sprinkle on some salt and just accept that some of the butter will roll onto your chin. Growing up seemed much easier then.

What is your favorite meal?

Ribeye, medium rare. Baked potato with butter and sour cream. More butter for the sweet corn. A side salad to make it seem healthy.

What do you enjoy doing outside of work, free time activities, hobbies, and interests?

I spend as much time as I can with my young daughter, Ella. I love to read with her and I love it when she reads to me. Sometimes we read together, she one chapter and I the next. Other times, she might start a book, become sleepy, and I will finish reading it to her. As with most young girls, she also enjoys board games and is just getting interested in sports such as softball. It is incredible to see her process information and it makes me wonder what my parents thought of me at that age.

Tell us about your family and background.

I often say that I came from a perfect mix of rural life. My Dad grew up on a farm that at different times raised cattle and dairy cows. My Mom spent some of her childhood living above a slaughterhouse that her family owned as part of a meat locker business. They remain humble and taught my brothers and me the benefits of hard work, honesty, and standing straight. We did not have much growing up, but we were not missing a lot, either. We learned the difference between a need and a want, even if we disagreed with the decision. In that sense, there were a lot of families who followed the same path.

If you could have supper with one or two famous living individuals, who would they be?

I always scratch my head at this question. I suppose it is intended to offer some insight into a person, but it always gives me pause because my list frequently changes.

Right now, because I am focused a lot on investing, I would have to say Warren Buffett, and because it is baseball season, and the Cubs are off to such a great start, I would also like to talk with Joe Maddon.

What change or challenge do you see on the horizon that will impact agriculture the most in the near future?

Science and how consumers react to it.

Agriculture is on the precipice of great change. The change will include identifying the next breakthrough, financing it, and convincing consumers that it is healthy. A robust debate about farming practices rages on because communication channels have expanded greatly. The internet has turned thoughtful debate on its head and created a microphone where each voice erroneously is given the same weight and authority. Our ability to evaluate competing ideas and separate fact from hope will be essential to manage outcomes that will touch the family farm as heavily as the corporate marketer.