

# G a f a Over Tech

After a life of constantly moving and experiencing new cities – both in the U.S. and abroad – one professor has settled in Lubbock, Texas, and taken over as chair of Texas Tech University’s Department of Animal and Food Sciences.

Leslie Thompson, Ph.D., was appointed chair on January 20, 2011. She is the first female in the department’s history to have this position.

The food science professor was born in Pasadena, Texas, but did not stay there long. The daughter of a fighter pilot, Thompson moved frequently as a child.

“We lived in Florida, Ohio, North Carolina, California, even the Philippines,” she said. “That was a pretty neat experience, getting to live outside the U.S.”

She cites her grandparents’ involvement in agriculture as what lead her to join 4-H while in California, a decision she recalls with a smile. During this time, Thompson discovered a love of horses, a passion she continues to have to this day. After attending three separate high schools, Thompson enrolled at the University of Florida to pursue a degree in agriculture.

While it was her grandparents who first exposed her to the world of agriculture, Thompson stated that one of her first college professors altered her course of study.

“My Introduction to Animal Science professor, Dr. Janky, was the one who got me interested in poultry science,” she said. “He made it sound neat, interesting.



He talked about the opportunities in the area, and I decided that’s what I wanted to do.”

While she was pursuing a bachelor’s degree, Thompson worked for Janky in the university’s poultry lab, and would go on to obtain both her master’s and doctoral degrees at the University of Florida under his guidance.

In 1986, Thompson joined the faculty in the Department of Animal and Food Sciences at Texas Tech as a visiting professor, her first job after obtaining a doctorate.

“Tech had a strong emphasis on teaching,” Thompson said in response to what brought her to Lubbock, “and the people were very nice and welcoming. It felt like a good fit.”

Since joining the department, Thompson has taught a number of undergraduate and graduate classes, including food sanitation and food chemistry, which she says are her favorites to teach. While Thompson said she has enjoyed the varied topics of classes she has taught, she admitted some have been more challenging than others.

“When I first came to Tech, I was asked to teach a cereal grain and oilseed processing class, a topic I didn’t know much about,” she said. “So I had to do a lot of homework that semester before I could go and lecture.”

In the 25 years Thompson has been at Texas Tech, she said she has seen many changes occur, the largest being the growth of the department. During her time here, Thompson has had a firsthand look at the success the department experienced with the growth of students, both graduate and undergraduate, the construction of the new animal and food sciences facilities in 2004, as well as a growth in the number of faculty members.

“We had two food science professors and two meat science professors when I first started,” she said. “I felt like we had a hole in the department – food engineering. Since then, I think we have done a pretty good job filling this hole.”

According to the department’s website, there are almost 20 faculty members in the department

Aside from the growth of the department, in terms of people and physical structures, Thompson said she recognizes tremendous growth in the amount of research money and projects funneled through the department.

As chair of the department, Thompson said her duties include facilitation of both the needs of faculty and students and running the day-to-day business of the department such as overseeing employment and budgets. While she said she recognizes the importance of providing leadership, that is not the only duty she feels she possesses.

“I view this position as kind of a service position as well as a leadership position,” she said. “It’s an opportunity to give back to the department, to serve the students, faculty and staff.”

Looking forward, Thompson said she aims to follow in former Department of Animal and Food Science Chair Kevin Pond’s footsteps and continue to increase the department’s endowments, as well as faculty and student numbers, but not at the expense of students’ education. In her eyes, Texas Tech possesses the top animal and food science department of any non-land grant university in the U.S., and places in the top 10 to 15 animal and food sciences departments of all universities, including land grants. During her time as chair, she would like to see the department become number one.

“We have to support student programs,” Thompson said in regards to how the department can obtain the nation’s top spot, “and recruit outstanding students, both undergraduate and graduate. I view outstanding students as being good in math and science, as these form the foundation of the classes taught in our department.”

Additionally, Thompson said the goal of becoming the foremost department in the nation can be aided by keeping the outstanding faculty and staff they already

possess and by recruiting more faculty members with strong professional connections to the animal and food science industries.

Thompson especially stressed the importance of maintaining what she described as the department’s “terrific staff,” which supports the overall academic mission by recruitment of students and promotion of the department in a positive way. Without the staff, she said, the department would not be successful.

Just as Thompson said her professor played a role in her education, she has done the same for many students.

Shelly Fairly and Samantha Stephenson, both food science graduate students under Thompson, agree that without her advice and encouragement as undergraduate students, they would not currently be pursuing their master’s degrees.

“If it had not been for Dr. Thompson pushing me as an undergrad,” Fairly said, “I can very easily say I wouldn’t be here now.”

Stephenson, who has gotten to know Thompson both in and out of the classroom, explained that while students may perceive her classes as challenging, they should not hesitate to contact her if they have questions or concerns.

“As my adviser, she is patient, caring – even though she’s extremely busy, she still makes the time to see me and looks me in the eye when

she talks to me, so I know she’s listening and I have her attention,” Stephenson said. “Outside of the classroom, she is fun and spontaneous, not awkward to be around at all.”

If students need a topic to talk to Thompson about, Fairly suggests music.

“I know she likes ‘Poker Face’ by Lady Gaga,” she said. “I don’t know if she likes everything about her, but I know she likes that song.”

Fairly described Thompson as very likeable, that she and many students have a lot of respect for Thompson and hold her in very high regard. Fairly and Stephenson agree that Thompson’s experience, knowledge and leadership skills will make her a great leader for the department.

Thompson said she believes her experiences have prepared her to lead the department.

“It is funny how things evolve,” she said. “In retrospect, my training and experiences have set me up really well for this position, though it is not something I ever necessarily thought about. I have a background in both animal and food sciences, and I ended up in a department that combines the two.”

“This position is an opportunity to give back to the department and to serve the students, faculty, and staff.”

Brandon O’Quinn | League City, Texas

