

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Harkin, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am honored to have been nominated by the President to be Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Civil Rights. I am humbled by the confidence placed in me by President Bush, Secretary Johanns, and Deputy Secretary Conner. And, I am excited about the prospect of taking on the civil rights challenges at USDA.

I would like to introduce my family who is here with me today. My mother, Gary McKay, is a retired nurse and a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. My oldest daughter, Marja Vongerichten, is a former Miss Teen USA representing the District of Columbia and an actress. Her husband, Jean-George Vongerichten, is a world-renown chef. They are from New York. My son, Rick Allen, lives and works in Virginia. He is a director of his soccer league and captain of his soccer team. And, my youngest daughter, Kaila Allen, is a sophomore and an "A" student at Hampton University in Virginia. Also joining me are several friends and colleagues here to show their support.

I became aware of the civil rights struggle at a very young age, growing up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with my grandfather, John Gary Jones. He was active in the State and local NAACP and many other civic organizations. As an African-American man of his era, even though he was college-educated, served honorably in World War I, and was very capable, he was only able to achieve a certain level in the workplace...a supervisor in the Post Office. But, he was my idol and role model. I was impressed by his intelligence, his energy, his worldly perspective, and his activism. He instilled in me the importance of an education. He made me believe that I could do and become anything that I wanted. He taught me the importance of helping others.

As a child, I spent my summers with my other grandfather, John Mackay, at his farm in Catonsville, Maryland. I remember when my grandparents sold their farm and bought a house in Baltimore, Maryland. It never occurred to me at the time that selling their farm might not have been their first choice.

Grandfather Jones died when I was 16, and there was no money for college. But, I had good grades in high school and was able to attend Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, on scholarship from the United Negro College Fund. I was recruited on campus by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. While there, I gained another mentor and role model... another civil rights leader, the late Honorable Samuel C. Jackson of Topeka, Kansas. He was Assistant Secretary of HUD and a former EEOC Commissioner. Sam Jackson encouraged me to go to law school.

After attending Georgetown Law School in Washington, D.C., I went to the Civil Rights Division in the Department of Justice, where I prosecuted cases under all civil rights statutes. Later, I served as an Administrative Judge, hearing employment discrimination claims. I continued on this career path to the present time, in both the public and private sectors, specializing in employment law and diversity. I believe that my background and experiences will serve me well if I am confirmed for this position.

I am aware that many improvements have been made at USDA in recent years. I have great respect for former Assistant Secretary Vernon Parker and all that he accomplished with the

support of former Secretary Veneman and Secretary Johanns. That said, my belief is that there is always more to do.

If confirmed, my goals will be:

? First, to listen and to learn from all stakeholders. I want to know what specific measures USDA has taken to correct past problems. I want to know whether, and to what extent, such measures have been successful. I want to know what more needs to be done.

? I want to identify and remove unnecessary barriers to participation in USDA programs; expand outreach efforts; and, continue to build trust.

? I want to make sure that the civil rights of USDA employees are protected.

? I want to build strong working relationships, both inside and outside the Department; and, to strengthen partnerships with organizations representing minority and female farmers and ranchers.

? In addition, I want to ensure that all programs run out of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights are effective and efficient.

? And, finally, if confirmed, I pledge to represent the Secretary and to execute his Civil Rights policy, which promises "a workplace that respects differences and embraces diversity," and programs and services "that are accessible and delivered to all of our customers fairly and with dignity. There can be no exceptions or excuses."

Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank the committee for considering my nomination, and I look forward to responding to any questions you may have of me.