

# GARDNER-WEBB

Volume 59, 2024

THE MAGAZINE



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- ECONOMIC IMPACT OF GWU
- DOUBLE DAWG DAY BREAKS RECORDS
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## GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

The mission of Gardner-Webb University is to prepare graduates for leadership and service in their professional careers and in their personal lives.

Rigorous and innovative degree programs, combined with distinctive experiential learning opportunities, shape students into thinkers, doers, and world-changers.

Forged within a supportive and diverse Christian community, our students emerge ready to impact their chosen professions, equipped with the skills to advance the frontiers of knowledge, and inspired to make a positive and lasting difference in the lives of others.

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At Gardner-Webb University, we are most vibrant as a community when we love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and when we love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31).

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\*Unless otherwise noted, most stories credited to Jackie Bridges



## A Thriving CommUNITY

Hello, Runnin' Bulldog family and friends!

I am delighted to share with you the latest issue of *Gardner-Webb: The Magazine*, which again this year is packed with information and features about the people and programs that make Gardner-Webb University so very special. I hope you will take time to read about a sampling of the amazing accomplishments and advancements that have made 2024 a year to remember. I further hope that having been inspired by the good works of our students, faculty, staff and alumni, you will commit to increasing your engagement with GWU in some meaningful way or ways in the year ahead.

A theme that ties together the stories populating our current issue is *Community*. Throughout the institution's history, Gardner-Webb has drawn its core strength from community. Indeed, today's University owes its creation to the local community that first envisioned and then nurtured its growth. In the ensuing 119 years, Gardner-Webb has championed its Christian community and done so in an intentionally outward-facing way. Gardner-Webb has sought to build and enhance a sense of community connectivity, not only across our beautiful 225-acre campus but throughout Cleveland County and into the

broader Foothills region.

You will see in the following pages that, through a little creative license taken by morphing the word *Community* into *CommUNITY*, our intention is to underscore the many ways in which Gardner-Webb works to bring people together. Our society desperately needs more unity. In a world that seems to grow more polarized each day, who better than Gardner-Webb to remind us each day of our common humanity? No single magazine issue can adequately capture it, but every single day at Gardner-Webb there is a growing spirit of *CommUNITY* and a tangible commitment to serving others. I can think of no more timely mission, and I am profoundly proud that we have embraced it.

GWU's mission plays out in some very practical ways. You will read in this issue about the direct economic impact that our University is making in Cleveland County, as measured by such traditional metrics as job creation, consumer spending and tax revenues. You will read about the continuing success of a Bulldog Community Discount Program, which now boasts 18 local business partners and enhances commercial activity with students, faculty and staff.

Our still-new Brinkley Amphitheater is another outward manifestation of

GWU's commitment to bringing people together ... in this case by leveraging the power of music. In 2024 we launched our first "Summer in The Springs" Concert Series at the Amphitheater, while also using the space for student-led worship, movie screenings and student recruitment activities. For the first time, the Brinkley Amphitheater served as a perfect location for musicians performing at our annual Webstock festival ... get ready for year four of that University plus town of Boiling Springs community collaboration coming in April 2025!

Our athletic venues bring thousands of fans together annually to cheer on the approximately 600 student-athletes who compete for Gardner-Webb at the NCAA Division I level. Whether it is a home field, a home court, or a home pool, our Runnin' Bulldog teams benefit from the loud enthusiasm of those who come to cheer them on. Our commitment to investing in GWU sports has paid off in big ways. GWU Football will enter the Fall 2024 campaign as reigning back-to-back conference champions. Men's Tennis won back-to-back regular season conference championships. Softball won 33 games in 2024, its highest victory total since 2007. One of our swimmers, Justin Bender, competed in Indianapolis at the Olympic Trials and recorded his best time ever in the breaststroke. Our community of Dawgs is doing incredible things.

Speaking of incredible things, the landscape and architecture of Gardner-Webb's campus are evolving in spectacular ways. In addition to the new amphitheater, we added a donor-funded fieldhouse for Men's and Women's Soccer. And in what was clearly the biggest construction project of the year, we completely renovated and remade The Caf. Now equipped with a new annex (check out the inspiring cross in the glass front wall), GWU's primary dining space is now ready to serve as a gathering space where food, fellowship, and laughter will create lifelong memories. As the oft-quoted former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once said, "We shape our

buildings; thereafter, they shape us.” Whichever new facility you visit on our campus, you will immediately sense that they have been designed to cultivate community.

Forged each day in GWU’s classrooms is academic excellence. We have so many students and faculty who deserve to be spotlighted in this issue, and I hope you enjoy learning about the excellence embodied by students such as Makayla Jibben, Marissa DiMatteo, and Alex Haasser ... among others. Right there with our students every step of the way are their professors, their mentors, and their coaches. Highlighted in these pages are Yvonne Smith (recipient of the Excellence in Teaching Award) and Jim Corn (our longtime Women’s Tennis coach).

Every university depends on the lifelong engagement of its alumni. With approximately 38,000 living alumni spread out across the country and indeed around the globe, Gardner-Webb benefits in vital ways by staying connected with those who once lived, learned, worshiped and played at our campus home. We have reserved a special section of *The Magazine* to showcasing what our alumni are now doing to advance the mission “For God and Humanity.” We invite all alumni to stay in touch and to share your post-GWU life experiences with us so that we can share them in a future issue.

2024. An outstanding year for Gardner-Webb University ... for your University. Thank you for reconnecting with us by consuming the contents of this wonderful annual publication. Thank you for visiting with us on campus when you can. And thank you, most especially, for supporting the mission of Christian higher education through your advocacy of Gardner-Webb. May God bless you, and may God continue to bless this school that we call home.



**Dr. William M. Downs**  
President



# Once a Bulldog. Always a Bulldog.

**We build relationships for life.**

[Gardner-webb.edu/alumni](http://Gardner-webb.edu/alumni)







# Embracing CommUNITY

Acts of Service Impact Gardner-Webb Campus  
and Extend to International Neighbors

BY JACKIE BRIDGES

**A**t Gardner-Webb University, service is woven into the fabric of the campus community. From classrooms and club meetings to athletic fields and courts, the University's motto, "Pro Deo et Humanitate"—for God and Humanity—is more than words first engraved on the 1928 GWU seal. It's a call to action that impacts the surrounding community, the nation and the globe.

"Serving God and Humanity is a high priority and of utmost importance for us," Vice President and University Chaplain for Christian Life and Service Dr. Josh Parrott observed. "I'm thankful for and inspired by students who continually look for opportunities to follow the pattern of service left to us by King Jesus."

Like a magnet, the servant attitude attracts students, faculty and staff to the University. The newest Tucker Scholar, Lily Streeton, of High Point, N.C., sensed it when she came for her scholarship interview. "I can see how everyone cares about each other, and they put God first as well," Streeton asserted. "I'm looking forward to meeting new people, having new experiences, seeing other communities that I can get involved in, and finding some additional family."

Streeton has plenty of options—and the descriptions that follow are a mere snapshot of all the ways Gardner-Webb promotes community.

This year, students, staff and faculty participated in mission trips to Florida, Eswatini (formerly known as Swaziland), Kentucky, New Mexico, and Guatemala, where they performed various jobs in hospitality, construction, medical clinics and ministry.

Hope Saunders, Gardner-Webb assistant director of Student Engagement, noted that in 2023-24 there were 37 clubs on campus. They hosted 48 service events, engaged 541 unique club members, and sponsored a total of 861 events for members.

Service is built into the UNIV 111 curriculum, a course that introduces first-year students to college life and promotes personal and academic development. On average, these students complete over 800 hours of community service each year.

For three years now, Gardner-Webb and the Town of Boiling Springs celebrate the Town-Gown partnership with an all-day street festival, Webstock. The event continues to grow, drawing local vendors and bringing the campus, community and region together for free music performances.

Many groups and athletic teams lend a helping hand to the Boiling Springs, N.C., Community Garden. Organized in 2022 by individuals and churches, garden members grow and share fruits and vegetables with people in need or local food ministries.

Garden representative Don Pittman shared how GWU football players worked in the garden to put down landscape fabric, install 25 raised garden beds and fill the plots with soil. At least five other GWU groups, teams or clubs volunteered to work that first year.

Since then, various groups ranging in number from five to 25 planted seeds, pulled weeds, constructed additional raised garden plots, assisted with construction of a wheelchair ramp, placed pavers for handicapped access to the garden, and helped to install an irrigation system. Gardner-Webb students created T-shirt and location sign designs for the garden. The University has also provided monetary support. Pittman asserted, “We consider GWU to be a Boiling Springs Community Garden partner.”

Gardner-Webb students and student-athletes also encourage school children. On most Fridays during the academic year,

student-athletes visit one or both local elementary schools to encourage these children to celebrate learning opportunities. Other teams and groups go regularly to read, do homework or play with the children at the Boys and Girls Club in Shelby, N.C., or the satellite club at Springmore Elementary in Boiling Springs.

Shortly after new Head Football Coach Cris Reisert arrived on campus, he arranged for the football team to “paint the town red.” The players went to read and play with children at Springmore and Boiling Springs elementary schools. Reisert said, “It was incredible to see the impact our players had on those they served and to see the impact that was made on our players.”

In the 2023 Fall Semester, members of the GWU softball team volunteered 227 hours at the Boys and Girls Club in Shelby and served another 300 hours doing various projects in the community. Head Coach Bailey Wigness said the team enjoys their time at the club.

“Kids look up to college athletes, and I am proud of how this team is using their platform,” Wigness affirmed. “The game of softball has given us all so much; it is important to me that we never take that for granted and give something back whenever we can. At some point softball will end for us all, but the impact we can make on others’ lives will last forever.”

Softball team member Taylor Perry explained what spending time at the club means to her. “I feel blessed to contribute to the growth and well-being of the kids within the community,” she shared. “The joy and gratitude reflected in the children’s voices





**"I always look forward to working with GWU students. This partnership that has been created is much appreciated and much needed. Working with caring young people is a blessing."**

**Jada Hardin**, volunteer coordinator for Feeding Kids Cleveland County



makes every moment spent at the club a truly rewarding and humbling privilege.”

While investing time with young children brings immediate recognition, serving in menial, less noticeable ways often brings no acknowledgement. The Student Government Association (SGA) and the revamped Fellowship of Christians United in Service (FOCUS) sponsor and volunteer for campus clean-up days. They pick up litter and fish trash out of the creek. Their only visible reward is muddy shoes, dusty faces and dirty clothes.

FOCUS Co-coordinator Anna Sample said offering service events on campus helped to revitalize this group that before had one main purpose: to lead youth retreats for local churches. When Sample took on her role, she knew her job would be to inject new life into the dwindling ministry.

Trevor Wester agreed to help coordinate, and they recruited others to serve on a leadership team and participate in various ways. They soon had a list of people who wanted to help, from picking up trash to leading worship. For each event, they sent out an email requesting help, and volunteers responded.

Sophomore Kate Harrison joined the FOCUS ministry team. She affirmed, “I serve, because it is an honor to have the opportunity to be the hands and feet of Jesus out of an overflow of His love towards us.”

SGA members also volunteer 320 hours per academic year to pack bags of groceries for children they don’t know. The bags are distributed by Feeding Kids Cleveland County to families who struggle to provide food whenever children are home on the weekends and during school breaks.

Jalen Fearington, a senator at large, said participating in the act of service is uplifting. If he’s had a bad day, packing food changes his whole attitude. “It’s a pleasure to be able to

just help kids,” he asserted. “We take things for granted, but this brightens my day to help them get food and be a part of the process, because helping other SGA members is also a bonding experience.”

Jada Hardin is the volunteer coordinator for Feeding Kids Cleveland County. There are several jobs to be done at the organization’s warehouse, such as pack snack bags and delivery boxes, put cardboard boxes together, deliver food boxes and books, process books, clean the building, stock shelves, collect food and various other tasks.

She’s had numerous opportunities to work with students from Gardner-Webb—from undergraduate to graduate students and student-athletes in all programs. “Our success in feeding kids all over Cleveland County is due to all the volunteers that have helped us through the years, and the GWU students have played a big part,” Hardin asserted. “I can truly say that working with the GWU students has always been a joy. They are hard workers, very polite and respectful to me as well as each other.”

Hardin added, “I always look forward to working with GWU students. This partnership that has been created is much appreciated and much needed. Working with caring young people is a blessing. We at Feeding Kids appreciate and would like to say to all the staff that have contacted us to set up volunteer opportunities for their students, “Thank you and please continue.”

On the pages that follow, you’ll be introduced to:

- Students and student-athletes, who engage and inspire the campus and community.
- Faculty and staff, who teach, mentor and model service and leadership.
- Alumni, who carry the University’s mission into their homes, workplaces and communities.



# Gardner-Webb's Total Economic Impact in Cleveland County is \$155.3 Million

Report by Tourism Economics Commissioned by Visit Cleveland County, N.C.

**G**ardner-Webb University's service to the community is visible through hands-on efforts every day; the impact is monumental and life-changing. Measuring Gardner-Webb's economic impact requires expert analysis of the data.

A study by Tourism Economics, which was commissioned by Visit Cleveland County, N.C., provides a tangible assessment of the University's contributions to the county's economy. The comprehensive report analyzed the most recent data and concluded that GWU generated a total economic impact of \$155.3 million in the local economy, was responsible for 1,315 full- and part-time jobs, and produced \$8 million in tax revenues at the state and local levels.

Identifying Gardner-Webb's impact strengthens relationships and promotes more growth in the area, observed Town Manager of Boiling Springs, N.C., Zachary Parker, a Cleveland County native and GWU alumnus. "Gardner-Webb University and the Town of Boiling Springs share a rich 100+ year history," Parker affirmed. "We have known the metaphorical value of this great institution for some time, but we are excited now to be able

to quantify the University's investment into our community. Gardner-Webb is a strong community partner, and together we form a symbiotic relationship that spurs greater potential for future community impact."

Greg Pepitone, associate director of Tourism Economics, explained how the company calculates total economic impact. The first step is to determine the direct spending generated by Gardner-Webb, which is \$115.5 million. This amount is a combination of the University's operational spending: \$84.3 million and off-site spending by students and visitors: \$31.2 million. Pepitone noted that off-site spending relates only to the money that out-of-town students and visitors spend during their stay in Cleveland County, including local restaurants, hotels, retailers, student off-site housing, and recreation/entertainment venues.

Tourism Economics calculates Gardner-Webb's total economic impact by using a customized input-output model for the Cleveland County economy developed in IMPLAN ([www.implan.com](http://www.implan.com)). Recognized as an industry standard, IMPLAN is a software that

generates an economic profile by measuring the relationships among industries and consumers to track the flow of industry revenue to wages, profits, capital, taxes, and suppliers.

The supply chain is traced as dollars flow through the economy, representing indirect impacts. An example would be Gardner-Webb purchasing supplies from a local business. The model also calculates the induced impacts of spending. Induced impacts represent benefits to the economy as employees of Gardner-Webb—and other local businesses that are directly or indirectly supported by the direct spending generated by GWU—spend in the local economy, generating additional sales, jobs, taxes, and income.

Chairman of the Cleveland County Board of Commissioners, Kevin Gordan, noted how the study shows the two-fold impact of Gardner-Webb. “The results of this study demonstrate Gardner-Webb not only creates value to the community by developing a highly-educated workforce, but the University also generates millions of dollars in economic impact for Cleveland County through out-of-town students and visitors,” Gordan said. “The Board of Commissioners would like to thank Gardner-Webb for being dedicated to improving the community and the quality of life of our residents.”

While local business owners certainly appreciate the dollars that Gardner-Webb students, employees and visitors spend in town, they truly value the relationships that have been formed over the years. Cathy Creswell, owner of the Talk of the Town Salon on Main Street, is grateful for the faculty and staff who are regulars in her shop. Among the students, she has more male customers, who usually stop by to get a haircut before they go home to see their family. The students will come and go, and it’s

always bittersweet when they graduate. “It’s just fun getting to know them while they’re here,” she said. “Some will even stop by when they’re back in town occasionally and say, ‘Hey.’ We do get close to them and appreciate the business.”

Anna Tsambounieris, child of Snack Shop owner, Louie Tsambounieris, said he brought the family here in 1997 when she was only 6 months old. She and her sibling have grown up in the business and now he trusts them to manage the place when he needs to be away. “Throughout the years, we’ve seen great support from the University, especially the sports,” Anna said. “We cater to football, baseball, swim teams. The students and the staff are also kind, and they’re a big part of why we’re still here.”

The Snack Shop participates in the Bulldog Discount program, offering 10% off with a Gardner-Webb ID. “They take advantage of the discount every day and we’re really grateful for them,” she added.

Local entrepreneur, Tim Reen, has one of the newest businesses in town, Firebeard Coffee Roasters, featuring coffee beans that he roasts himself. He parks his mobile coffee trailer on Main Street in front of Dover Chapel and serves up coffee and conversation. He recently attended a family member’s graduation at GWU, and while there he searched for his customers who were also graduating.

“Gardner-Webb means not only customers but also relationships,” Reen said. “It’s really great to get to meet students and watch a lot of life change. I also have a lot of customers who are walking around campus visiting and I get to build relationships with the faculty and staff. Some of them have taken a substantial interest in my company, in my life and what I’m trying to do. They are encouraging and a blessing.”



## About Tourism Economics

Tourism Economics is an Oxford Economics company with a singular objective: combine an understanding of the travel sector with proven economic tools to answer the most important questions facing clients. More than 500 companies, associations, and destinations work with Tourism Economics every year as a research partner.



# Engaging Hopes and Dreams Around the Table

Matt, '97, and Michelle, '96, Norman Building Community Relationships

BY MARV KNOX

**A** 2017 meeting in a Spanish city hall typifies Michelle and Matt Norman's ministry in northeastern Spain. By that time, they had been Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) field personnel in the semi-autonomous region of Catalonia about four years. Their progressing proficiency in both the Catalan and Spanish languages had enabled them to develop deepening relationships, especially with local churches and surrounding communities.

While visiting with Pastor Nelson Araujo and his congregation in Vilanova, just down the Mediterranean coast from their home in Barcelona, they brainstormed "a bunch of ideas" for meeting needs of at-risk and underserved people. "We said: 'We think these are good ideas, but we're not experts,'" Matt recalled. They knew this was something bigger than themselves, and that coordinating with the community leaders was essential for success.

City officials and Christian ministers together sketched out a hunger-relief program—the city would pay for the food and provide the space, and the church would provide the volunteers.

Out of that collaboration, Espai Sopem—Catalan for "dinner space," or "the place where we eat"—was born.

"They developed a system that provides really nutritious meals from the local schools," Michelle reported. "We trained volunteers on food safety and nutrition, as well as social services in the town. And then people would come, and volunteers would sit down and eat with them. Espai Sopem helps people avoid homelessness and also find social services. They often don't trust the government, but they trust relationships."

The ministry thrived, and along the way, it has become a part of the culture of the community, with hope for the future.

"When city people realized this was being offered by a church, they were surprised that a church was actually living its faith," Matt said. "But they wanted to help, and now more volunteers come from the city than from the church. But that supports relationship-building, and the ministry runs on two tracks—to volunteers and to recipients."

The seeds of a thriving ministry took root because the Normans chose to be active and engaged in listening to community needs. They developed rich relationships beyond the walls and borders of the church. They put their energies into

making others' dreams come true. They expressed compassion. And they persisted. Now, hungry people are fed. Hurting people receive aid, and people see Jesus in a brighter light.

Despite what outsiders might expect from following the news, the Catalonian mindset does not translate into isolation or indifference to others.

"It's a very city-based society," Michelle said. "People are very concentrated, and they move on public transit. And they walk through the city—to the grocery store, to the doctor's office, to their kids' school. So, they interact with people a lot."

"They know their neighbors, and there's a very strong sense of community among the people of Catalonia," she continued. "And with that comes a strong sense of solidarity. People connect and feel a sense of fighting for one another, joining one another in their struggles."

In that context, "the most important work we're doing here is bearing witness to Jesus Christ," Matt said.

Sometimes, that means talking to Catalonians about their perception of God and Christianity. Other times, bearing witness means helping people "see glimpses of the Spirit of Christ in the community," he added. "We see people who are not religious engage with refugees and open their homes, (and) they're not doing it because of any faith, but just because they see people as humans."



### The Normans are involved in numerous other community ministries including:

- **Mamáventura:** A ministry for immigrant women and their children. This ministry serves many women who are victims of spousal abuse.
- **Mosaic:** A weekly worship/outreach ministry of First Baptist Church in Sabadell.
- **Cerdanyola Food Bank:** Located on the northern edge of Barcelona, it helps to ensure immigrants and Spanish people on the edge of survival have enough to eat.
- **PapaAdventura:** A parenting support ministry for single fathers and fathers from vulnerable families.

"We tell them: 'You know, that's the way Jesus actually teaches us to act,'" Matt continued. "'That's what Jesus would do.' And they look at us and ask, 'How come no one's ever told us that?' We tell them: 'I don't know, but that's Jesus calling you to do that. You're doing the work of Jesus when you do that.'"

"It's such a beautiful culture," Michelle said. "I see solidarity and caring for one's neighbor. I see God already at work in the world."

"We try not to do anything that's not locally initiated," Matt said. "So that means we are always listening, asking questions and coming alongside and making sure that people who grew up here, who know the culture, who speak both languages, are the ones who are initiating the ministries and think the ministry we're doing is a good idea."

Partnerships and relationships that grow out of long conversations with pastors and community leaders, as well as meetings with lay leaders are what the Normans feel is vital to their work.

"We're not working with a perspective of coming in with ideas and saying what we're going to do," Matt explained. "We came here to learn the culture and to build relationships."

The Normans aspiration is to support the community and help them identify and achieve their goals, but they can't do it alone. "This is our work and our calling, but we're not complete experts," Michelle added. "We are encouragers and helpers. We want to help people here realize their dreams and hopes for the church. They have plenty to give."

After a decade of serving this region, the Normans feel more can be done. Long-term commitment and long-term relationships are important to continue to build trust and understand the needs and viewpoints of the people in the community.

"Long-term presence allows your ministry to be more effective and actually start to bear fruit in ways you never could have imagined and take turns in ways you never could have expected," Matt said.

"My hope for the future here is that we encounter even more people who are wanting to engage this community, and we're able to encourage them to do so," Michelle said. "My hope is that whatever is built and done here engages the hopes and dreams of our friends here. That they can express the fullness of the gospel message in a way that walks alongside the vulnerable, that breaks down the barriers the church naturally puts up between it and the community."

*Matt graduated from Gardner-Webb University in 1997 with a degree in communication studies and a minor in English. Michelle earned her degree in 1996 in social sciences with a religious studies minor. Matt also has a MA in Global Leadership (Fuller Theological Seminary), a Master Certificate from Manchester University in Baptist Histories and Theologies, and will defend his PhD in Theology dissertation in the fall with the International Baptist Theological Study Centre and Vrije University in Amsterdam.*

*\*This story has been edited for space and format; the full article was featured in the Fall 2023 Edition of fellowship! magazine. Read online at <https://cbf.net/fellowship-magazine>*

**“I get to be somebody who helps to make sure that kids still get to be kids.”**

**Makayla Jibben, '24**



## Blessed to Receive, More Blessed to Give

Grateful for Gardner-Webb University's Investment in her Education, Makayla Jibben, '24, Serves Her Community

BY JACKIE BRIDGES

**M**akayla Jibben, a 2024 graduate of Gardner-Webb University, is diligently pursuing her goal to become a pediatric oncologist. She must complete 12 more years of medical school and residencies to realize her dream. Over the summer, the journey began at Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine in Spartanburg, S.C. She is driven by her passion to serve others and her desire to give children with cancer the opportunity to enjoy their childhood.

A biology major at GWU with a biomedical sciences concentration and minor in psychology, her interest in helping children with cancer started when she was a child. Jibben grew up in central Illinois, about 45 minutes from Peoria, where an affiliate of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital is located. Everyone in her community supported this hospital known for providing free treatment to children with cancer. For her ninth and 10th birthdays, she asked people to bring items for St. Jude. In high school, she volunteered for two summers at the main St. Jude hospital in Memphis, Tenn.

“When I tell people I want to work in pediatric oncology, they are like, “That’s so sad,” Jibben observed. “St. Jude didn’t feel sad at all. You walk

in and the walls are covered in artwork and music is playing. There are kids running around laughing. That's what I got to see. I know it's going to be sad, but I get to be somebody who helps to make sure that those kids still get to be kids. They get to throw a ball around and dump an entire bottle of glue on a craft and make a mess—all the fun stuff that kids get to do.”

She was awarded an Ignite full-tuition scholarship to attend Gardner-Webb, which required her to maintain a 3.5 GPA. While academics was a priority, Jibben didn't spend all her time in front of her computer. A firm believer in giving back to the community, her eight-hour day included assisting a professor, tutoring a student, or leading a campus tour. When she was home on break in Anderson, S.C., she was either changing the sheets on a hospital bed or wheeling a patient to the X-ray department at the local hospital.

Her parents modeled and taught her the concepts of generosity and benevolence from an early age. “I lived on campus,” she explained. “I wanted a good education. I wanted to have my professors invested in me. I couldn't expect to have those things if I was not also invested in my community. I want to be a reason that the campus can be made better, and people want to come here. People can see that we're invested not just in ourselves. Simple things like Bulldog Backpacks (packing food for children) took 10 to 15 minutes out of your day, but that made all the difference to a kid on the weekend.”

This concept of service was also drilled into her during the nine years she took martial arts. Jibben noted, “Our motto was, ‘I'm training for the person next to me—I'm here to help them.’” Jibben channeled this motto into helping her Gardner-Webb community. She entered the Honors Program as a freshman and was a peer leader for the UNIV 111 Honors section for three years. She was a tutor for science classes, teaching assistant in chemistry classes, and a Student Recruitment Ambassador. An Undergraduate Summer Scholar, she studied the healing power of essential oils and was mentored by chemistry professors, Dr. Ben Brooks and Dr. Stefka Eddins.

She was also a member of the Pre-Health Society and the Honors Student Association, and she was on the cheer team for two years. In the 2023 Spring semester,

she studied abroad in Malta and was introduced to European culture. She visited many places and made lasting memories. She also gained even more appreciation for her GWU professors. “Here, if I need help, I can go to my professors, and they will drop everything and help me,” she affirmed.

The close-knit community was the main reason she chose to attend Gardner-Webb and the reason she led campus tours for prospective students. “I got to brag on the school and all the professors,” she observed. “Yes, they were invested in my success as a student ... but they were also invested in me as a person. They knew who I was. They knew what my dreams were, what my hopes were. I never felt like I was a box to be checked off.”

In the coming years, Jibben hopes to provide her patients with the same level of dedication she received from Gardner-Webb's faculty and staff.





# Lessons from D-Day

Members of GWU's Concert Choir Share Their Experiences in Normandy and Performing in 80th-Anniversary Program

BY JACKIE BRIDGES



A picture may be worth a thousand words, but an image can't compare to the experience of being there. Before traveling to France to perform during the 80th anniversary of D-Day, the 16 members of the Gardner-Webb University Concert Choir could only imagine the price paid that day by American and other allied forces. After visiting Normandy and the American Cemetery, the cost of freedom became clearer.

Peter Moore, a junior majoring in traditional worship music, described how the scenes affected him. "Some of the most memorable moments were getting the chance to see the Normandy beaches, the memorials, and the artifacts preserved through time," he observed. "These helped me to understand the depth of struggle and sacrifice experienced there in a truly meaningful way. Taking the time to walk the property and viewing the nearly 10,000 crosses and stars of David had a deep impact on me. When I was reading about D-Day prior to the trip, I knew it was a costly

victory, but it was only when I saw all the graves for the individual soldiers, who were around my age, that I saw the full picture. We were able to sing for the visitors and a few veterans there. It was very emotional, moving, and special! I was so touched I could be a part of this."

The Gardner-Webb Department of Music started planning last year to travel to Paris, Normandy, and Caen, France. Generous supporters of the University helped to provide the funds to make the excursion possible for the group. Led by Dr. Aaron Rice, associate professor of music and chair of the Department of Music, and Dr. Joshua Cheney, assistant professor of music and director of Choral Activities, the trip included educational opportunities and culminated with a mass choir performance of Maurice Duruflé's Requiem in the Abbaye-aux-Hommes in Caen. Participants in the performance were from the United States, United Kingdom, and many countries across Europe. Gardner-Webb was the only college choir from North Carolina participating.





“It was a great trip!” Cheney shared. “We had an awesome time visiting Paris and Caen, taking in all that there is to see. Our performance at Abbaye aux Hommes was very special. It was quite moving to participate in the commemoration of such a major world event.”

Rice added a special observation about the performance venue, and its role during World War II. “After the Allies bombed the German emplacements in and around the city, many of the civilians fled to safety in the Abbeys and churches of the city,” Rice explained. “During the fiercest days of fighting in the region, more than 1,400 people were living in

the Abbaye. I was deeply moved during the performance as our students sang a concert of remembrance, honoring the sacrifice of both the servicemen and civilians during the Battle of Normandy in the very space where many of the city’s citizens sheltered for safety.”

Moore recounted the concert from a performer’s perspective. “Hearing the reverberations of our voices bounce off the walls was one of the most amazing auditory experiences I have ever had,” Moore offered. “It was truly fantastic to sing the Duruflé Requiem together with choirs from France, the UK, and the USA. We created a unique bond and connected

through song with people we didn’t know. Music has that power.”

Aside from the somber and reflective parts of the trip, the group also experienced the culture and explored other places of historical significance. Crystal Aldridge, a senior mathematics major, shared about some of her favorites. “One of the most memorable moments of the trip was the dinner cruise along the Seine River,” she reflected. “We all got dressed up and ate a fine meal. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. My friends and I visited the castle of William the Conqueror in Caen, which was built c. 1060. It was incredible to walk the stone walls that were built almost a thousand years ago and imagine what it would have been like at that time. I loved getting to immerse myself in a culture different than my own. It was a great learning opportunity. However, I can safely say I will NOT be eating beef tartar again.”

Aldridge concluded, “I am thankful to Dr. Cheney, Dr. Rice, and every donor that made this trip possible for a college student like myself. I am proud to be part of a choir that takes part in meaningful experiences like this.”





## Courting Success

Men's Tennis Continues to Build Championship Standards

BY RANDY CAPPS

**G**ardner-Webb University's men's tennis team set a school record for dual match wins in 2024 with 20, breaking the previous year's program best total of 16. The Runnin' Bulldogs also earned the Big South Conference regular season championship after finishing 2023 as co-champs. The team finished the season ranked No. 10 in the Carolina region by the Intercollegiate Tennis Association, a first for the program.

"We were disappointed to not win the tournament when I thought we were the best team," Mike Griffith, Gardner-Webb men's tennis coach, said. "But that's the way sports is. Credit to Asheville. But we're going to be ready next year."

Next year will be season 23 for Griffith, a Gastonia native that was a two-time all-conference selection at Winthrop University. Of course, the beauty of college



Head Men's Tennis Coach Mike Griffith

sports is that there's usually a next year that can build off the one before it. And so on.

Travel back to 1994, and I was a rising freshman at Gardner-Webb. I arrived on campus in time for orientation, but it was another appointment I was focused on keeping that day.

Earlier, I called the tennis office to talk to the new coach, Jeff Boren, about walking on the team. I was an average

high school player without a lot of playing experience, but I wanted to try it anyway.

I didn't know it at the time, but Coach Boren had a numbers issue—meaning he didn't have any—so my "tryout" that day at Cleveland Country Club was to find out if I knew which end of the racket to use.

I did, so I was in. Boren left to take a job closer to his hometown, and Andy Smith took the head coaching job. He decided to keep me around, and I played for a couple of seasons before my course load demanded more of my attention. We were never great during my years, but I had a lot of fun.

Griffith replaced Smith in 2002 and has been in charge of the Runnin' Bulldogs ever since.

It took a few years for Griffith to unlock what's been a winning formula—identifying and recruiting international talent.

"When I first took over, my goal was to build with southern kids," Griffith said. "I'm southern. I wanted to build with southern talent. But the problem with doing that is I needed to beat these teams. And I could never beat the teams with the players that would come here ... My first year, I lost a kid to UNC Wilmington and one to North Carolina State. And I just said, 'man, I can't do this.'"

One of the first players to fit this model is Gardner-Webb Athletics Hall of Famer Evgeny Slesarev. Slesarev piled up 70 match wins, four all-conference selections and was the first GWU male athlete to earn Player of the Year honors from the Big South in 2010.

"Evgeny was probably the first guy (we had) that could have played for anybody in the country," Griffith said. "Then Max (Scholl) came in and could not only play for anybody in the country, but also his professionalism was unbelievable."

Griffith credits those players, along with former GWU player, and Assistant Coach Seb Harris, for helping to build a culture

of hard work and professionalism that still resonates throughout the program today.

Eduardo Dias, a graduate student from Parana, Brazil, carries the mantle as the program's best player. The reigning Big South Men's Tennis Player of the Year will return to campus next season to earn his MBA and will lead a roster that should make another serious run at the school's first-ever Big South Tournament title—a crown that would also result in an NCAA Tournament bid.

Four more of the six singles players (Alex Lepine, Numa Lemieux-Monette, Kim Niethammer and Johan van Wijk) that took the court in the Big South Tournament final will be back, and Griffith is busy bolstering the ranks on the recruiting trail as well.

"I'm adding a kid from Australia who I think is going to push my four down," he said. "Then I got a lefty coming in from Montreal. That'll be the third Montreal kid that I have. And then I have a local kid from Rutherfordton who is going to come in and add some depth."

The latter is R-S Central standout Billy Mac Clement, who was a perfect 27-0 in regular season matches as a junior.

A southern kid with talent that didn't have to drive to Shelby for an audition? The program really has come a long way.

"Looking back, though, I think I'm a way better coach now," Griffith said. "Based on the kids, I learned just as much (from them as they did from me). Dealing with all types of people from all different types of places and personalities, it kind of lets me see the big picture that everybody doesn't see. So, I've kind of gotten better at stuff like that."

After two record-smashing seasons, the big picture might be even more special in 2025.

*\*Writer Randy Capps was a former student-athlete at GWU graduating with a BA in Communication Studies in 1998. Capps is now the publisher of JNOW.*

## Gardner-Webb University Welcomes New Head Football Coach Cris Reisert

### Reisert Promises to Build a Transformative Experience for Student-Athletes and Fans

**O**n the heels of back-to-back conference championships, the Runnin' Bulldogs football program has a new general at the helm. Gardner-Webb University welcomes new Head Football Coach Cris Reisert.

President Dr. William M. Downs highlighted Reisert's impressive record from 13 years of experience coaching in Divisions I and II. Reisert most recently spent five seasons as the head coach at Tiffin University, Ohio, where he compiled an overall record of 40-11 (.784) and a Great Midwest Atlantic Conference (GMAC) record of 32-4 (.889).

Downs declared, "Cris Reisert is everything we look for in a new coach. He's everything we look for in a new leader. He's everything we look for in a new colleague. He's the right man at the right time to take Gardner-Webb football to its rightful place at the next level."

Reisert looks to unleash a vision that will transform athletes and the football program itself at GWU. "This is a program in a University that has no limits," he observed. "We will prove that every single day through our work, through innovation, through faith in Jesus, and through an ability to connect and build relationships. We will win football games, and we will win a national title. I don't have a hard problem saying that. You might not believe it right now. I promise you; we will make a believer out of you. I promise you."

At Tiffin, Reisert led his team to three GMAC championships (2019, 2020, 2023) and was named GMAC Coach of the Year in each of those championship seasons. In 2023, his most successful team posted an 11-1 record, completing the regular season unbeaten before losing in the second round of the Division II national playoffs. With Reisert also handling offensive coordinator



duties, the 2023 Tiffin Dragons ranked in the top 25 nationally in scoring offense (43.7 PPG, 6th), total offense (482.9 YPG, 4th), scoring defense (16.2 PPG allowed, T-16th), and total defense (281.2 YPG allowed, 22nd).

Prior to Tiffin, Reisert spent two seasons as the offensive coordinator at his alma mater, Ohio Dominican University in Columbus. In seven seasons as the primary play caller, Reisert's teams averaged 38 points per game and 455 yards per game.

In 2021, Reisert was selected to the American Football Coaches Association (AFCA) 35 Under 35 Coaches Leadership Institute. Other stops in his coaching career include Elon University and Ball State University.

As a player, Reisert started four years at quarterback for Ohio Dominican, where he was named the 2007 National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) National Player of the Year and a two-time All-American. He was inducted into the school's Hall of Fame in 2019.

Reisert holds a bachelor's (2009) and master's degree (2011) in business administration from Ohio Dominican. He comes to GWU with spouse Emily, and children Hawkins and Lennox.

# Familiar Face to Lead GWU Men's Basketball

Jeremy Luther Emerged as the Top Choice for his Experience, Passion and Vision

**A**fter a national search, Gardner-Webb University President Dr. William M. Downs has named one of its own, GWU Associate Coach Jeremy Luther as the head coach of the men's basketball program. In his 11 seasons at GWU, Luther contributed a wealth of knowledge and played a vital part of the program's 188 wins. Luther also helped lead the program to its first NCAA Division I men's basketball tournament in 2018-19.

"I couldn't be happier to have Jeremy Luther take the helm as head men's basketball coach at Gardner-Webb," Downs shared. "Coach Luther emerged as the top choice from a national pool of truly outstanding applicants, and he earned the job by conveying his passion for our school, by authentically articulating his hunger for taking our program to the next level, and by mapping out his plan for developing student-athletes into great men. Jeremy Luther will be relentless, and he will do it the right way. That combination, I firmly believe, will lead to championship basketball and a very proud Runnin' Bulldog Nation. Let the new era begin!"

Luther's recruiting efforts have helped Gardner-Webb stock one of the best young teams in the Southeast. His expertise



has contributed to setting records and earning milestones, such as setting a new conference record of 10 seasons of 10-plus Big South wins and defeating six Power Five schools.

"Championship level culture is only possible when your organization has complete alignment of mission, vision, and values," Vice President and Director of Athletics Dr. Andrew T. Goodrich asserted.

The new coach is excited to take the helm of the men's basketball program. "I am very thankful and grateful to Dr. Downs and Dr. Goodrich for their belief in me and trust in me in leading this program going forward," Luther affirmed. "I also want to say thank you to Tim Craft for calling me 11 years ago

to come to Gardner-Webb to be his assistant coach. My family and I couldn't be more happy and more excited about the future of GWU men's basketball. I look forward to taking steps to move this program to the next level."


Luther is a Tallahassee, Fla., native with 23 seasons of experience on the college sidelines, including six seasons as a head coach at a pair of NCAA Division II programs. Luther spent 2007-09 rebuilding a Newberry College program that had not won more than 12 games in a season since 2003-04. In just his second season at the school, Luther led the Wolves to a record-setting campaign, posting a 21-win season.

Luther directed Armstrong Atlantic State University (now part of Georgia Southern University) to a pair of winning campaigns during his time in Savannah, Ga. Luther spent 2001-07 as an assistant coach at Mercer University, helping the Bears to an Atlantic Sun Conference regular season title in 2002-03.

Mercer finished that season with a 23-6 record, the most wins in school history at that time and the first winning season at the school since 1996.

He and his spouse, Ginny, have three children—Bryson, Kendall and August.

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PROFILE

# Equipped for Life

Wrestler Jha'Quan Anderson Inspires On and Off the Mat

BY ISABELLA BROWN

“I want to be an example,” asserted Jha'Quan Anderson, of Conyers, Ga., a young alumnus and former wrestler at Gardner-Webb University. Throughout his wrestling career, Anderson has been a mentor to his teammates and a leader.

In his final season at Gardner-Webb (2023-24), Anderson was the Southern Scuffle Champion and Outstanding Wrestler. He finished the season with a 31-10 record. A three-time NCAA qualifier, his overall collegiate record was 82-44. He was a two-time Southern Conference Finalist and named to the 2021 Southern Conference All-Freshman Team.

At the NCAA tournament on March 22, 2024, Anderson finished 16th in the nation—his highest ranking. Head Coach Daniel Elliott praised him for his personal accomplishments and his contributions to GWU wrestling. “Jha'Quan showed that he is one of the nation's best,” Elliott said. “I couldn't be more proud of him. I hope that we did as much for Jha'Quan as he did for us the past few years.”

Although he would have liked to go further in the tournament and gain the All-American title, Anderson was grateful for finishing his collegiate career with his best effort. “Wrestling has taught me perseverance, and man, that will stick with me through any job or hardship that life meets me with,” Anderson said. “Once I am faced with adversity, it will be so easy to walk over it, because of everything I've learned as a wrestler.”

Anderson aspires to share with others the life-changing impact wrestling has had on him, and he wants to equip



athletes to succeed both on and off the mat. He graduated in May 2024 with a Master of Science in strength and conditioning. “The master's program is really rigorous and prepares us for anything we have coming in our careers,” he affirmed. “I am well prepared because of my professors.”

He plans to stay in North Carolina, working at Architech Sports and Physical Therapy in Charlotte. There, he helps clients reach their athletic performance goals.

From the first time he stepped onto a wrestling mat, he knew he would be staying in the sport for the long run. “I started wrestling in middle school, when I was 13,” Anderson recounted.

“Football season had just ended, and the wrestling coach came up to me and said, ‘Hey, you should try wrestling!’ I told him, ‘I don't know. Wrestling is not for me’. And he responded, ‘Come to one practice. If you don't like it, you can leave.’ So, I thought, alright I'll do that.”

To Anderson, wrestling is more than just a sport, and the community aspect is something he appreciates to this day. “One of the reasons I stuck with wrestling is because it felt like a family,” he expressed. “It felt like a brotherhood.”

He draws inspiration from African American athletes like, LeBron James, Serena Williams, Tiger Woods, and Lamar Jackson, who have reshaped the world of sports by bringing people together regardless of their differences. They carved a path for the future generations of athletes who would make their mark on the world. “They are all people who broke down barriers and walls in sports and in spaces,” he explained. “Being able to break down those barriers is really important.”

When thinking about who has motivated him the most during his athletic journey, Anderson shares that it was American professional wrestler, Jordan Burroughs. “I've been watching him since I started wrestling,” he said. “He's one of the greatest wrestlers to have ever lived. I like to think I have a similar wrestling style. I like to watch him wrestle and emulate that.”

A wrestler with dreams that go beyond the mat, Anderson believes that perseverance is key. “Keep going,” he encouraged, “And you can break down these barriers and do things people think you might not necessarily be able to do. You can do hard things. You can get it done.”

*Writer Isabella Brown is an English Major who graduates in December 2024.*



## PROFILE

# Peace in the Storm

Through Highs and Lows, Micahla Funderburk, '24, Pursued her Goals

BY JACKIE BRIDGES

**M**icahla Funderburk gave Gardner-Webb University women's basketball fans a night to remember on Feb. 7, 2024. In a home game against Presbyterian College, she led with a season and career high 21 points going 7-7 on the night—all from beyond the arch. With a steady hand, she sank her final three-pointer with 1:32 left in the game. By making the basket, Funderburk also achieved a Big South record for the most three-point field goals attempted and scored in one game.

Funderburk's success on the court comes from her genuine joy of playing the game. Basketball paid for her college education, making it possible for her to

pursue her passion of becoming a police officer. Along the way, she experienced the once-in-a-lifetime bonus of being part of a basketball program that won Big South regular season and tournament championships and a ticket to the first round of the NCAA Tournament in 2023.

It's inconceivable that Funderburk could have missed out on all of it. Before her senior year of high school, the talented player received offers from several colleges, including Gardner-Webb. While weighing her options, she tore her ACL for the third time. Suddenly, the offers were gone.

"Someone who has torn the ACL for the third time is considered injury prone," Funderburk related. "You don't know if

you're going to come back to being college level or how you will be throughout the four years."

Gardner-Webb was the only school that still offered her an opportunity to play Division I basketball. Then, she had to decide if she still wanted to play basketball knowing the risk of injury. "Basketball is something I love, and I just wanted to do it," Funderburk stated.

She had also met Gardner-Webb President Dr. William M. Downs, who was new to the campus at that time. "He was a really nice guy," she reflected. "I thought, 'Gardner-Webb is going to be my home. The coach is sticking with me.' I took the opportunity here, and I've loved it. I don't regret anything. I have learned so

much about myself. If it wasn't for coming here, I wouldn't have become the person I am today."

Outside of her basketball exploits, Funderburk was determined to be involved in campus life and support other teams, such as lacrosse, softball, soccer and swimming. She was a member of the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee, vice president of the Black Student Association and a member of the Criminal Justice Society.

A naturally outgoing person, she never meets a stranger. She strikes up a conversation with anyone, anywhere; especially, when she's standing in line at Chick-fil-A.

Because of the connections she made across campus, Funderburk decided to stay when her head basketball coach left before her senior year. "I still love the school, you know, Gardner-Webb was more than basketball to me," Funderburk related. "The school felt like home. It was the environment, it was the people, and I knew I wanted to graduate from here."

She and another teammate stayed at Gardner-Webb. Funderburk took a leadership role and had to learn the new coach's way of doing things. Her new teammates were a diverse group, from Spain, Africa and California. Getting to know them and a new coaching staff improved her listening and problem-solving skills, a necessity in law enforcement.

After graduating with her degree in criminal justice, Funderburk entered the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department's Police Academy and was hired by CMPD. The Gardner-Webb faculty prepared her for the job, because many of them have experience in law enforcement.

One of her instructors was Chief Tim Ledford, who retired as Chief of Police in Mint Hill, N.C. When she met Ledford at Gardner-Webb, they discovered a connection to the event that motivated Funderburk to become a police officer. "My junior year of high school, 7:15 in the morning, I remember it exactly in my head," Funderburk recalled. "I was

watching a fight. One of my friends was fighting this other kid and the other kid pulled out a gun and killed him."

When the shots rang out, everyone felt nervous and scared. "I remember how the police officers made me and my friends feel," Funderburk observed. "They gave us a sense of security and safeness."



She admired how the officers displayed peace and calm after the tragedy. That's when Funderburk knew she wanted to pursue a career in law enforcement. While describing the incident to Ledford, he remembered being at her high school on that day. They had been through the same tragic situation. Funderburk was assured that his expertise would be invaluable to her education.

"I want to bring that (peace) to people," Funderburk asserted. "I've always looked at myself as the type that brings joy to people's lives. As a police officer, I'm going to get called out to situations that are going to be the person's worst day. I want to be the type of person to change that feeling for them, to make it a better situation than what it is."

**"I took the opportunity here, and I've loved it. I don't regret anything. I have learned so much about myself. If it wasn't for coming here, I wouldn't have become the person I am today."**

**Micahla Funderburk, '24**



## PROFILE

## Linked by Friendship, Driven to Improve in Life

Alumni, Eli Strait and Mike Shade, Help People Through Golf

BY ISABELLA BROWN

Connected by their love of golf and dedication to improving their game, Gardner-Webb University alumni, Eli Strait and Mike Shade, created a successful podcast called, “Chasing Scratch.” These two could never have guessed their podcast would reach far beyond the game of golf. Two friends, one dream, and several swings of a golf club later, they have accomplished just that.

Strait and Shade recall their memorable journey from becoming best friends to podcast hosts. It was a beautiful day in Boiling Springs, N.C., when Shade first visited Gardner-Webb. “It was the perfect day,” Shade said. “I was just like, ‘This is the place.’ Me and my dad played at the

Riverbend golf course. Then, we walked through campus.” Shade remembered thinking, “this is where I wanna be.”

Shade, who is originally from Greensboro, N.C., only lived a small distance from campus unlike Strait who lived more than 450 miles away in Lexington, Ky. “I had never heard of Gardner-Webb,” Strait admitted. “I was a basketball player and wanted to play college basketball. Gardner-Webb said, ‘Hey, you know, we’re in North Carolina.’ I went down for a visit and just fell in love with the place. And that was really how I ended up there, through basketball,” Strait said.

It didn’t take long for Shade and Strait to become friends.

“We met on the first day,” Shade said. Finishing his thought, Strait continued, “In the same freshman orientation class.” Now, after two decades of friendship, the two often complete each other’s sentences.

While they hit it off right away, it wasn’t until their junior year that they became close friends. “We happened to have a Spanish class with Teresa Phillips, who was an awesome professor, and we just had a blast in her class,” Strait noted. “She fully embraced our unique personalities. That was really where we hit it off. Pretty much our whole senior year, it was just us hanging out.”

Shade added, “We spent many an afternoon at Riverbend after class. We were playing golf every chance we could.”



**"I felt like the sun was always shining the moment I saw Gardner-Webb. I always felt like it was God saying, 'Hey, this is right where you need to be.'"**

**Eli Strait**



After graduation, the bonds of their friendship still held strong, even when Strait moved back to Kentucky. "I'd call Eli, or he called me every single day after college," Shade said. "There was always something to talk about."

"For 20 plus years, we essentially have talked every day," Strait affirmed. Their many conversations eventually led to thoughts of doing a podcast, but they hadn't landed on a topic.

Then, the idea came to them after one of the three or four golf trips they plan every year. "One year, we went on our yearly golfing trip over the summer—the one we got so excited for—and I thought we were gonna play so well and we played so bad," Shade expressed. "After the trip, we were like, this has got to stop happening. And we said, well, what if we just try to get better? We're still going to be great husbands and fathers, and we'll be great employees, but in that little time in between, what if that's all golf? Maybe that's our podcast idea!"

What started as a personal challenge in 2018 to improve their golf score, the "Chasing Scratch" podcast has gained

international fame and a devoted audience. "I would never have thought we would be in season seven of anything," Shade said. "We thought we would do it for one year. Eli bought us mics (and) we recorded for seven months before we put an episode out because we didn't know what the story was going to be. But then we got to the end of season one, and more people were listening to it than we thought. And we did improve a lot. So, we were like, well, let's do it again!"

The friendships Strait and Shade have had the opportunity to build through the podcast have been the most impactful aspect. "It's been awesome," Strait shared. "Whenever you have listeners write in and say, you know, that thing that you talked about, it helped me be a better dad, or helped me be a better spouse, or we had so many people during COVID write and say, 'Man I was so isolated, and your show got me through COVID.' Every time somebody writes something like that, it's like, wow, that's amazing."

Through it all, both friends look back with appreciation on their experience at Gardner-Webb: the place where their friendship began. They are excited to

continue the tradition of hosting their final show of the season in the area. "Every year, we end our season by coming back to Gardner-Webb, and we play at Riverbend," Shade explained. "Because of the opportunities we've had, we've been offered to go to other places for that last event of the year. And it's never even a question—because we always want to come back (to GWU), that's our favorite place to be."

The community, campus, and special friendships are something each one cherishes deeply. "I always used to tell my wife that every time I had to go home during school, whenever I would drive back—it didn't matter what the weather was—I felt like the sun was always shining the moment I saw Gardner-Webb," Strait said. "I always felt like it was God saying, 'Hey, this is right where you need to be.'"

"It's a special place," Shade affirmed.

*\*You can find Chasing Scratch: A Golf Podcast on your favorite podcasting platforms.*

*Writer Isabella Brown is an English major who graduates in December 2024.*



## PROFILE

# The Bonds of Community

Kim Rivera, '84, Celebrates 40-Year Connection to Classmates, Friends and Professors

BY ASHLEY RICH

**F**or alumna Kim Rivera, attending Gardner-Webb University proved a deeply impactful experience, giving her the opportunity to participate in collegiate sports and various activities, work as a Resident Assistant, serve on several mission teams, and form connections with people all over the world. Her professors and academic experiences prepared her for a fulfilling and successful professional and personal life.

“The most important lesson I learned is the value of people and friendships—GWU has such a strong sense of community,” Rivera shared. “I met

students at Gardner-Webb that helped me study the Bible and grow in my faith. I loved participating in many activities at Gardner-Webb. Find things you’re passionate about and get involved! Learn something new. Challenge yourself. Make a difference. Join a community or club that worships, prays, encourages and helps you grow.”

A graduate of the Class of 1984, Rivera, serves on the Alumni Advisory Board. “It’s been a joy to reconnect with the University and alumni,” she affirmed. “The campus is beautiful. I’m amazed at the growth of the University and very proud of all it has to offer students.”

Being back on campus gave her the idea to have a 40th class reunion. Rivera wondered if anybody ever held college reunions like they do for high school. She took her question to Leah Clevenger, GWU director of Alumni Relations.

Clevenger said it could be done and her office would help. “So, I started thinking, ‘Why don’t we have a milestone reunion and reconnect with friends and professors?’” Rivera reflected. “I said to Leah, ‘Let’s do it.’ It’s nice to celebrate special moments and people that have made a significant impact in your life and that’s what this reunion meant to me. It was also a time to collectively remember and honor those classmates who have

**“The most important lesson I learned is the value of people and friendships—GWU has such a strong sense of community;”**

**Kim Rivera, '84**

passed on and are no longer with us.”

When the planning committee started meeting, they decided to also invite the classes of 1983 and 1985. “We thought it was a great idea, because we were such a tightknit group,” Rivera said. “In the '80s, almost all students lived in resident halls on campus, and this fostered a lot of connections and friendships. Since the classes of 1983, '84 and '85 shared so many friendships, it was great to have the reunion together. You're studying together. You're eating together. You're playing sports together. You're doing everything together. It was an extraordinary group of people.”

They gathered in April 2024 with nearly 90 in attendance. “For all of us, Gardner-Webb is very special, and we felt like family,” Rivera observed. “We shared stories, laughter and tears.”

Hailing from Mt. Holly, N.C., Rivera majored in business management. She discovered Gardner-Webb through Linda Greene, a friend from her church, First Baptist in Stanley, N.C.

“When we stepped onto campus, met staff and students, I knew this was the college where I wanted to spend the next four years,” Rivera said.

Starting in her high school years at East Gaston, Rivera played tennis for the men's team. As she began her time at GWU, she hoped to continue to play tennis, even if she had to once again play for the men's team. After speaking with Dan Moore, athletic director at the time, the first women's tennis team at the school was formed, coached by Pat Wilkinson.

“My first semester, fall of 1980, we started practice and had the first fall season of matches,” Rivera recalled.

Her academic experiences in the business department during her time at GWU proved to be quite an asset for her later work. The pathway prepared her for the variety of professional positions she has held over the years.

“The business department was large with exceptional professors and classes,” she related. “I learned time management and solid communication skills. Professors taught me to set goals and work with others to help reach them.”

Roughly 20 years after graduating from GWU and while working as a children's pastor at South Point Baptist Church in Belmont, N.C., Rivera learned that the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) moved their headquarters

from Minneapolis to Charlotte, N.C. Remembering Graham's impact at Gardner-Webb's Spangler Hall dedication in 1971 and thinking that the organization would be a good fit for her, she applied for a job. In January 2005, she entered a position in the television department working with video, audio and photo archives.

Currently, Rivera works in the new Billy Graham Archive and Research Center located on the same property as the BGEA headquarters and Billy Graham Library. “The Archive Center has 2.5 million photos digitized and 67,000 video recordings and films being digitized,” Rivera described. “There are thousands of papers, documents, artifacts, gifts, awards, letters, and posters on file.”

“I've been blessed to work on video productions and meet Christian leaders from all over the world,” she said. “It is truly astonishing to realize what Billy Graham accomplished during his lifetime. Thankfully, I met and talked with him. He was the humble and kind man I knew he would be.”

*Writer Ashley Rich, '26, is a Gardner-Webb English major from Etowah, N.C. Jackie Bridges contributed to this story.*





## PROFILE

# The Power of Positivity

Seb Harris, '23 and '24, Impacts Others Through Everyday Encounters

BY JACKIE BRIDGES

**O**n the court, Sebastian “Seb” Harris is a fierce competitor, consistent and determined. Meet him around the campus of Gardner-Webb University, and he serves up an enthusiastic smile, followed by a kind word.

Harris strives to project a positive attitude every day. Rather than be known for his accomplishments as a GWU tennis player and assistant coach, he wants people to think of him as upbeat and encouraging. “If you make someone feel good, then that’s what they’re going to remember,” Harris shared. “That’s what’s going to stick with someone. Even if I met them briefly, I’d like to think that I make someone’s day better after seeing me.”

Harris said the key to leaving a good impression is gratitude. “I think I used to be a bit of a complainer, always trying to find things that could be better,” he observed. “And then I got into a lot of self-help books. I just thought, what am I complaining for? I’m very lucky to be in such a good situation. It’s even basic things—I get to eat food every day, I have a nice bed to lie in, I have good friends, and I have a really good family... it’s about perspective.”

Harris came to Gardner-Webb in 2019 from London, England, achieving his goal of playing Division I tennis in America. He had been playing tennis since he was 5 years old, however, to find success at this level meant putting

in more work, training, court time, and discipline. During practices and matches, Harris learned the value of positivity, perspective and perseverance. He played on the GWU tennis team through 2023, serving as captain from 2021-23, and earned his bachelor’s in marketing. During his final year at Gardner-Webb, Harris became the assistant tennis coach while pursuing a Master of Business Administration degree, which he received in May 2024.

Whether he lost a match to an opponent or had a day when everything went wrong, Harris considered the missteps, but didn’t dwell on them. “Sometimes maybe you don’t have the resources that you need, maybe you



Wimbledon Champ Carlos Alcaraz (L) and Seb Harris

didn't have enough sleep or the right kinds of food," he described. "So, there are a lot of things that can play into it. If there were failures, what can I learn from those failures? If there were successes, what can I learn from those? And from both of those standpoints, how do I move on? How do I turn those failures into successes down the road or make those accomplishments even better?"

Head Tennis Coach Mike Griffith was instrumental in helping Harris change his perspective. "My first year we didn't get on; I was a bit soft, and he gave me a lot of tough love," Harris reflected. "He molded me. When things aren't going right, you just gotta get on with it really. Fight hard for things you want."

By his senior year, Harris experienced the benefits of his relentless dedication. "I just went all in, and I had the best season I've personally ever had," he stated. "I think that kind of showed if you actually want to do something and you put everything into it, you will see results. And if you do everything you can do and it doesn't work out when you've done your best, you can't be upset about the result."

Griffith witnessed the growth in Harris as a player and a leader. "He is something special, someone I admire," Griffith affirmed. "Seb is someone who has

helped me be a better coach and a better person." Harris reacted to Griffith's praise with humility, noting that the coach was his role model, teaching him not to take everything seriously and to choose your perspective. "Life isn't always fair, but it's how you look at it that really matters," Harris acknowledged.

Off the court, Harris doesn't shy away from challenges. He taught himself French, because that is the only language his girlfriend's parents speak. His best friend from England, Oscar Glennister, inspired him to train for an IRONMAN, which is a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bicycle ride, and a 26.2-mile run completed in that order, a total of 140.6 miles. The swim was the hardest part for Harris. When he started, he could barely swim two consecutive laps of GWU's Bost Pool (50 meters). Eight months later, on June 2, 2024, Harris conquered the IRONMAN with Glennister's help. "It went well; it was a long, fun day," Harris described.

Harris continued to explore and embrace opportunities after the IRONMAN. Working with the charity, Mécénat Chirurgie Cardiaque, he was able to participate in a leg of a time trial stage of the Tour de France with other charity representatives before the official cyclists took to the route. Harris also had

a ground level and bird's eye view of the race itself with Team Cofidis. "I went in a team car with the sporting director of Team Cofidis, and in a (team) helicopter to watch (from above). Yep, it was an unbelievable experience," Harris noted.

If that wasn't enough excitement for the summer, Harris also got to hit around with two-time defending Wimbledon champion Carlos Alcaraz and other top athletes sponsored by Balbolat prior to the start of the Wimbledon Championships. "This was definitely a memory of a lifetime," noted Harris. "I'm really grateful and tried to enjoy the moment."

Throughout the years, Harris has continued to gain deeper gratitude for his family, friends and teammates for their constant encouragement and support. "I hope they know that I appreciate them, Harris said. "Definitely, a lot of anything I've achieved is a product of people around me. I wouldn't be playing tennis if it wasn't for them. I wouldn't have gone to America. Maybe, I wouldn't have stayed at Gardner-Webb after my first year if it wasn't for them. If you have good people around, (you can) be grateful for those little things that you experience every day."

*Source: Interview with Noel T. Manning II*

**“As a dentist, I will be able to serve my community while also creating long term relationships with my patients.”**

Alexandra “Alex” Haasser

## PROFILE

# Alexandra Haasser Receives Big South Conference’s Prestigious Christenberry Award

Honor Recognizes Student-Athletes with the Highest GPA During Undergraduate Collegiate Careers

The Big South recognized Gardner-Webb University swimmer Alexandra “Alex” Haasser as one of six student-athletes to receive the Conference’s prestigious Christenberry Award for Academic Excellence. The award is given to athletes who attain the highest GPA during their undergraduate collegiate careers.

Haasser, who graduated in May 2024, achieved a 4.0 in biology/biomedical science during her time on campus in Boiling Springs. She is continuing her education at the University of Florida College of Dentistry in Gainesville.

“I am pursuing dentistry, because I believe oral health is extremely important and often overlooked,” Haasser shared. “As a dentist, I will be able to serve my community while also creating long term relationships with my patients. The interactions I had with my own dentists showed me the importance of having a dentist that I trust and can relate to.”

She chose to swim at Gardner-Webb because of the academic program and smaller student-faculty ratio. “I felt that the small school atmosphere would give me the opportunity to excel in school,” Haasser reflected. “I believe the faculty has set an amazing foundation for my education for dental school. The faculty in the Department of Natural Sciences has done a great job in making courses rigorous while also providing excellent instruction. They wanted to make sure their students understood the coursework and were always available to meet if there were any problems. They cared about me as a person, which made me feel valued as a student.”

In addition to her academic excellence, the Seffner, Fla., native had a stellar career in the swimming pool for the Runnin’ Bulldogs. “Alex has been an absolute pleasure to work with the last four years,” said Michael Blum, head swimming coach. “She sets an example of how to balance an athletic and academic career. We could not be prouder of her. We are going to miss her sense of humor and her work ethic. She has made a lasting impact on our program for the better.”

*Big South member institutions nominate athletes for the award annually. The honor is named for George A. Christenberry, the former President of Augusta College (now Augusta University) and one of the founders of the Big South Conference. A member of the Big South Hall of Fame, Christenberry served as the league’s first President from 1983-86.*





# An Attitude of Gratitude

Tremayne Booker, '21 and '22 Alumnus, Serves His Community

In their free time at Gardner-Webb University, Tremayne Booker and his friends liked to hang out in Tucker Student Center or in the apartments playing video games, socializing and watching TV. During those moments when the hearty laughter turned into a quieter, serious conversation, they talked about their goals for life after GWU.

The discussions reflected the University's motto, "Pro Deo et Humanitate"—For God and Humanity. "A lot of the people I worked with and socialized with at Gardner-Webb, we always wanted to look for what is morally right," Booker reflected. "How can we sustain ourselves, but also, how can we sustain our community. Instead of just

going to work and then coming home and doing what we do, we want to go out and actually make an impact."

Booker, a member of the football team, earned his undergraduate degree in 2021 in political science with a minor in interdisciplinary studies. After COVID-19, student-athletes received another season of eligibility. Booker accepted the offer and stayed on campus to pursue a Master of Business Administration. As he neared completion of his master's in 2022, he started searching for a position in a community-minded company like he and his friends talked about.

He believes he found such a position as a financial analyst in the Raleigh headquarters of the North Carolina State

**"A lot of the people I worked with and socialized with at Gardner-Webb, we always wanted to look for what is morally right. How can we sustain ourselves, but also, how can we sustain our community."**

**Tremayne Booker, '21 and '22**

Employees Credit Union (NCSECU). “The people who come into our branches, we are serving them,” Booker affirmed. “Everybody is a member, and they dictate what the company does. Our goals and objectives directly correlate to what our members want.”

Additionally, the SECU Foundation “People Helping People” scholarship program has given over \$81 million to support students. The foundation also awards grants to address community issues, such as affordable housing, health care, and human services.

While pursuing his studies, Booker met and interacted with various people across campus. He worked as a Resident Advisor and Graduate Resident Director,

and served as a senator and senior class president in the Student Government Association (SGA) and as social media coordinator for the Black Student Association (BSA).

Booker asserted that everything he learned at Gardner-Webb—whether in the classroom, on the football field or in a club meeting—applies to his job every day. “I’m constantly recalling information and experiences from Gardner-Webb,” he observed. “When I’m talking to my peers at work now for management, I always relate it back to what I was involved in.”

For example, the interactions he had with his friends in the classroom or club meetings help him navigate workplace

communications. “How to interact with people, how to approach people—that dynamic I learned being involved with SGA and BSA,” he noted. “I can come to (colleagues) with the same passion that I used to approach Brian Arnold (assistant dean of Students and director of Student Engagement) or (President) Dr. Downs.”

Booker relates his management style to his experiences as a football player. “Wherever I feel like there’s a lack of communication, I want to bring everybody together and say, ‘We are a team,’” he explained.

When he wants to inspire and motivate his colleagues, Booker recalls the encouragement he received from his professors, especially Dr. Joseph Moore and Dr. Elizabeth Amato in the Department of Social Sciences. “With academics, I wanted to do my best,” he shared. “Dr. Amato really pushed me, and other professors challenged me to reach my true potential. Dr. Moore’s Civil Rights class was probably my most challenging class.”

While developing his skills and expanding his knowledge, Booker made friends across campus that keep in touch.

As he reflects on how much he values the time he spent at Gardner-Webb, Booker is grateful that he listened to his mom, dad and grandmother, who are GWU alumni. His senior year of high school he was reluctant to even consider going to their alma mater but decided the least he could do was visit the campus.

“I toured other places, but Gardner-Webb really was the one that felt like home,” Booker asserted. “I’m thankful that I was drawn to the school. Gardner-Webb has a strong community with people who can foster your personality and talents and inspire you to go after what you want to achieve. I’m forever thankful, forever indebted to the people at Gardner-Webb for making me who I am today in my professional and personal life.”





# Embracing Inspiration

Omar Porter, '10, Learned to Put Others First by Picking Vegetables in a Summer Garden

**G**ardner-Webb University alumnus, Omar Porter, '10, has enjoyed many successful endeavors in acting and music. He was an extra in Tyler Perry's "Madea Goes to Jail," and was on the soap opera, "As the World Turns." He was also featured in a commercial for Harris Teeter in the Charlotte, N.C., market. His music credits include playing percussion for Grammy-nominated gospel artist John P. Kee and Grammy Award-winner Jonathan McReynolds, and performing on a Christmas song with Grammy Award-winner Regina Belle.

Despite these accomplishments, Porter is firmly committed to his first calling: to serve the people in his life and those he meets. He learned this principle as a youngster growing up in the Light Oak Community in Shelby, N.C. In the summer, he and his sibling sweated and labored in the family's garden under the watchful eye of their wise grandparent. After an exhausting day of picking vegetables, they did something that shaped Porter's future.

"My grandfather would make us go out, and all the stuff that me, my brother and our mother picked, we would take and give it to the elders in our community," he recalled. "So, my grandfather put the value of helping people in me early."

As Porter continued to grow, his servant attitude became more evident to his friends and family. He remembers the moment in high school when his career path became clear. He was listening to a speaker at Cleveland Community College (CCC)—where he works now—describe her job as a social worker. "She talked about helping people, and I was like, 'I want to do that,'" Porter affirmed. "I always say it's like a God-given calling for me. He kind of placed that in me."

In 2019, he was hired as an academic advisor by CCC. He became a recruiter in 2021, and in March 2022, he was named the director of Community Engagement.



**"My grandfather put the value of helping people in me early."**

**Omar Porter, '10**



His two older children are both college graduates, and both are in jobs where they work with the community and help people. He encourages his youngest to follow her dreams, knowing that she will have the support of family and friends.

As he talks about his own journey, Porter acknowledges several people who helped him along the way. He started at Gardner-Webb in 1998. A native of Cleveland County, N.C., and graduate of Crest High School, he played football for two seasons at GWU. The coaches recruited him, and he came because he wanted to be near his two young daughters.

In 2000, his grandparents became sick, and he left Gardner-Webb to devote more time at home caring for them and his

children. That's when he started acting and performing with gospel musicians. Before she died, his grandmother made him promise that he would go back to college and finish his bachelor's degree.

Later, he worked in the Cleveland County School system as a behavior tech based at Shelby High School. In 2008, the late Mike Roebuck, a GWU athletics administrator, encouraged Porter to re-enter Gardner-Webb's program for adult learners. The classes met in the evenings on campus.

During the day, when possible, he studied his course material while the Shelby High students did their work. With the support of his employer, faculty and family, he received his Bachelor of Science in human services in 2010.

"When I graduated from Gardner-Webb, the (Shelby High) principal at the time was Dianna Bridges," Porter reflected. "She allowed the department that I worked with to bring the students to watch me graduate because that was such an inspiration for them."

After graduating, he began working for Communities in Schools as community outreach coordinator and then as a graduation coach. During that time, he was named a Distinguished Educator three times by students in the area.

He followed another passion by becoming the assistant defensive back football coach at Crest High School. In the 14 years he's coached there, the team has won two state championships. He also helps families and players from Crest and schools across the region navigate the college recruitment process.

Porter serves on the boards of the Cleveland County Chamber of Commerce and the Cleveland County Arts Council. Recently, he was appointed to the board of the Catawba Indian Nation Foundation Inc. by North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper. The 12 members of the board will establish guidelines to fund programs and projects for tribal citizens and the regional community. Porter is excited for this new opportunity to serve. "We review requests and support the needs of the Catawba Indian Nation and others," Porter said.





# Forces in Motion

Dr. Wilson Hawkins: Celebrating a Village of Mentors and Colleagues

**D**r. Wilson Hawkins' energy and enthusiasm in the classroom is contagious. The assistant professor of physics and director of the Gardner-Webb University Honors Program connects with students, whether they are passionate investigators or new explorers of the science of matter, motion, and energy.

Hawkins arrived at the University in 2021. His storytelling teaching style, which relates physics concepts to everyday experiences, made him a favorite with students. He also welcomes

collaboration with faculty and staff to deliver innovative programs. He continued to conduct atomic physics experimental research while mentoring students and inspiring them to present their work at academic conferences. For those reasons and more, Gardner-Webb University President Dr. William M. Downs presented Hawkins with the President's Early Career Award for 2024.

"Dr. Hawkins is off to a fast and impressive start as a member of the Gardner-Webb faculty," Downs praised. "He exemplifies what we look for

in our assistant professors—a clear commitment to instructional innovation and student success, a continuing dedication to advancing new knowledge in a disciplinary field, and a consistent record of collegiality as a member of the GWU community."

Hawkins is the seventh recipient of the Early Career Award, presented to full-time assistant professors who demonstrate outstanding performance in professional development and excellence in service. The annual award includes an additional cash prize designated for

professional development opportunities for Hawkins.

He was nominated by College of Arts and Sciences Dean Dr. Robert G. Prickett, Dr. David Campbell, associate professor and natural sciences chair, and Dr. James Morgan, professor of psychology. All three commended his dedication to students. Prickett noted that Hawkins had re-designed five of his courses around online open resource materials. He also mentored three biology seminar students and 20 students' poster presentations for regional and national honors conferences. Two of those students one national awards for their work.

Hawkins expressed his gratitude to everyone at Gardner-Webb for their encouragement. "It is an honor to be nominated by my peers for this award," he shared. "I can't take sole credit for my work, as I have a wealth of ongoing support from students, colleagues, administrative assistants, and department chairs. These folks have treated me like family from the first day I stepped on campus. Thank you to everyone who chose to lift me up with this recognition. I am truly blessed and grateful to be a part of Gardner-Webb University."

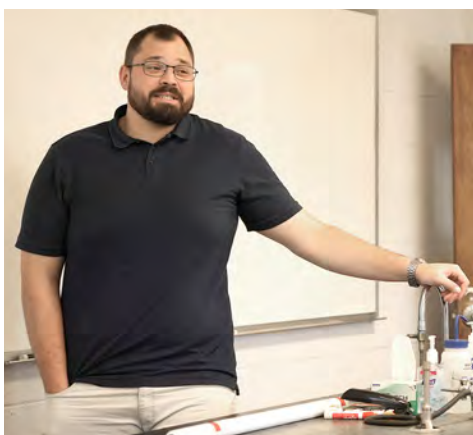
When talking about his achievements, Hawkins points to others. "I've just had one excellent mentor, after excellent mentor," he reflected. "I can't take credit for any of my success, because I'm just a product of a village of people who put me here."

His "village" begins with family and extends to teachers, professors and colleagues. Hawkins is from a small town located near Asheboro, N.C. His maternal grandfather attended Gardner-Webb before serving as a minister in the Asheboro/Greensboro area for over 50 years. His paternal grandfather graduated with an accounting degree from East Carolina University (ECU) in Greenville, N.C.

While his parents didn't attend college, they saw their son's potential and pushed

him to excel academically. His mom homeschooled him until the eighth grade, providing the foundation for his success.

At age 14, he entered public high school, and his father put him to work in the family construction business as motivation. "I worked with him every summer and winter break," Hawkins related. "You know, I'm complaining. I don't want to carry shingles up the ladder anymore. He would always like to grin and respond, 'Well, do your homework, stay in school. It makes you want to go to college, doesn't it?'"



His high school teachers further encouraged him, and he discovered an interest in math. When he decided to pursue higher education at ECU, he leaned towards a degree in the science field. "During my first calculus class, Dr. (Orville) Day explained to me the relationship between physics and math and gave me the answer to the question that all the kids in high school have in their math class: 'When will we ever use this?'" Hawkins shared. "And the answer to the question is physics. So, the moment he showed that to me, I realized this physics thing is something that I have to be around. I told him I wanted to change my major."

Soon, Hawkins was volunteering in the ECU tutoring center. The director, Dr. Elizabeth Coghill, recognized his talents, gave him more responsibilities, and he became the lead physics tutor. He helped Dr. Jefferson Shinpaugh in the ECU Accelerator Lab. He earned a bachelor's in

physics, master's in applied physics and a Ph.D. in biomedical physics. The research was fascinating, but Hawkins had discovered his love for teaching, which led him to apply for the position at Gardner-Webb to teach introductory physics.

"These survey courses contain the exact material that I spent thousands of hours tutoring, teaching, and falling in love with as a student," Hawkins related. "My first impressions of the Gardner-Webb faculty and administration were overwhelmingly positive. This realized sense of community makes me proud to be a part of Bulldog Nation."

Hawkins supervises the GWU Williams Observatory and teaches General Physics, University Physics, and Astronomy courses with accompanying laboratory components. "The majority of my students are applying to graduate and professional programs that require physics for admission as well as their entrance exams," he explained. "I get to work with some of the best science students at the University every single day."

He's also accepted additional responsibilities. In 2022, Hawkins was named director of the Honors Program. He had participated in various Honors' activities and wanted to continue engaging students in undergraduate research. In 2023, Hawkins partnered with the Division of Student Success to work with the first Living and Learning Community (LLC), where first-year students participate in a shared academic endeavor and live in the same residence hall. After a successful year, more LLCs are planned.

Hawkins looks for opportunities to support his Gardner-Webb colleagues. "Because, ever since I got here, all anybody's ever done—administrative assistants, faculty, staff, whoever—is help me," he asserted. "So, if anybody asks for my help, then I'm paying it forward. This machine was already a family before I showed up, so I'm just trying to play my part."

For over two decades, Corn, known for his beaming smile, has dedicated himself to developing well-rounded athletes on and off the court.



# Playing it Forward

Head Women's Tennis Coach Jim Corn Dedicated to Developing Life Leaders

BY AVERY COPELAND

**“Y**ou can take those life lessons. I don't need to take it with me. I need to leave it with somebody. I want to give it back. Pay it forward.” Jim Corn, Gardner-Webb University women's tennis coach, lives by this philosophy.

For over two decades, Corn, known for his beaming smile and wide-brimmed hat, has dedicated himself to developing well-rounded athletes on and off the court. He emphasizes the importance of individualized coaching

and adapting his teaching style to each player's unique talents while fostering a team-centered attitude.

His commitment extends beyond and across the net, ensuring that the values and life lessons he imparts have a lasting impact on his players. By passing on the wisdom he's gained from his own coaches and mentors, Corn embodies the idea of “playing it forward.”

Born and raised in Shelby, N.C., Corn grew up in a rich tennis culture, influenced by the Shelby Tennis Association's establishment in 1961.

At the time, Shelby had more players ranked in the state of North Carolina than any other city or town in the nation. He began playing tennis on the Association's red clay courts at 11 years old. “When we played, everybody knew we came from Shelby because of the color of our socks,” Corn laughed.

Corn also explored team-oriented sports, including basketball, baseball and football, but ultimately found that tennis was his passion. His time pursuing other sports taught him the value of teamwork. “There's a tremendous amount of things

you can learn by playing the team sports,” he noted. These early lessons became a cornerstone of his coaching principles.

Turning his attention to tennis, Corn was ranked seventh in doubles and eighth in singles nationally by the time he was 14. He was also first in North Carolina Men’s singles at age 14, 16 and 18. Corn won 14 state titles and a Southern sectional title. His achievements gained attention from the recruiters for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC).

Corn became the first student-athlete to ever receive a full tennis scholarship to UNC, where he played under North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame coach Don Skakle, who further emphasized team-oriented thinking in tennis. Corn thrived at UNC and is considered one of the Tar Heels most accomplished tennis players. He garnered All-ACC honors four times, set a school record for wins during his career, and won two ACC doubles championship titles. He remains the only player in ACC history to win four individual singles championships at his position. To recognize his successful collegiate career, a court was named for him at the UNC Cone/Kenfield Tennis Center. In 2009, Corn was inducted into the North Carolina Tennis Foundation Hall of Fame.

After graduating from UNC, Corn joined the satellite tennis circuit in Florida, gaining professional experience until an arm injury cut his competitive playing career short. Transitioning into coaching, he became an assistant pro at the Raleigh (N.C.) Racquet Club, where he discovered his passion for teaching tennis. “I became a pro myself, a teaching pro,” he joked. Corn later became the director of tennis at a country club in Virginia and even started his own tennis clothing company.

Returning to Shelby, Corn worked for his father’s concrete business, whose products were used in the foundations of many of the Gardner-Webb buildings, including the Dover Campus Center, and



the Lutz-Yelton Convocation Center. Growing up, his father even took him to the University’s basketball games. “I have roots here,” he said.

In 2001, he joined Gardner-Webb’s development office, but months later, he was asked to serve as Bulldog Club Director because of his background in athletics. While serving as director, Corn was drawn back to the courts to volunteer his time and offer coaching assistance to the Gardner-Webb tennis teams. When the tennis program transitioned to Division I, the men’s and women’s teams needed separate head coaches, and Corn was offered the position as Gardner-Webb’s women’s head tennis coach. “It’s the way I could give back to the sport,” he said.

Corn instructs his players to view their opponents as competitors rather than enemies, fostering a mindset that extends beyond matches to how they interact in their personal lives. “We’re all people,” Corn stated. “Relationships matter ... in many ways we’re all the same.”

He learns from his student-athletes and tailors his teaching to enhance their skills, customizing his coaching to each player’s individual strengths and abilities. “There’s no reason to try to make the girl

who can’t hit a big hard serve to try to get a big hard serve ... She’s fast. She’s got quickness ... That’s what makes it fun,” he emphasized.

Corn’s 2023 women’s tennis team averaged a 3.86 GPA, reflecting his commitment to their academic and athletic success. Even when his athletes play their last collegiate match, Corn’s impact continues past graduation. He maintains and fosters long-lasting relationships with his players, including those from his first team at Gardner-Webb. The players also keep in touch with each other. “There’s something you can’t buy,” Corn noted. When one of his early players, Laura Kriett, got married, seven out of nine girls on the team attended her wedding a decade later.

His journey with Gardner-Webb reflects his deep ties and enduring dedication to the University and its students. “It is amazing what we have become in the last 20 to 25 years because I knew Gardner-Webb when it was a junior college (during my youth),” Corn reflected. “And I’ve seen it grow ... but I think the best is still yet to come.”

*Avery Copeland, of Atlanta, Ga., is a senior majoring in English.*



# Gardner-Webb Supporters Surpass Double Dawg Day Records with \$1.4 Million Raised

University Receives 1,366 Gifts to Fund Scholarships, Academic Programs and Athletics

Faithful supporters answered the call in a big way on Gardner-Webb University’s ninth annual Double Dawg Day, April 11, 2024, setting new and impressive records for philanthropic giving. The one-day fundraising total reached its highest dollar amount ever—\$1.4 million. New heights were also reached when GWU recorded the greatest number of gifts received in a single day and when the donor map for the first time included contributors residing in every U.S. state.

Whether funding scholarships, athletic facilities and training, or enhancing classrooms and labs, each of the 1,366 gifts has a direct and lasting impact on the success of Gardner-Webb and its students.

Bulldog Nation painted the USA map red with donors from all 50 states and received especially strong support from alumni and friends in North and South Carolina. Generosity poured in from across the globe, too, with gifts coming from Canada, France, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Austria, United Arab Emirates, India, South Africa, New Zealand—and the donor covering the most distance to make a difference at GWU sent a gift from Thailand, more than 8,900 miles away.

“This year’s Double Dawg Day was beyond special,” Gardner-Webb President Dr. William M. Downs shared. “We had 83 donors who were up between midnight and dawn at the outset of our 24-hour effort, defying the need to sleep, eager and excited just to get their gifts in first. Throughout the day, we watched in awe as the totals mounted and then accelerated dramatically as the last hour arrived. For a university of our size, this magnitude

of donor investment is exceptional and will certainly make a positive difference in the lives of our students, faculty and staff. To say that we are thankful is an understatement.”

Numerous challenges and opportunities unlocked gifts throughout the day, including donations to a new staff development fund and the Power Hour Challenge to unlock an additional \$5,000 for scholarships.

“We are truly grateful for our donors and their remarkable generosity,” Gardner-Webb’s Vice President for Advancement Nate Evans applauded. “With more (than) 1,300 donors, spanning across all 50 states and beyond, we are deeply humbled by your dedication. Your investments are catalysts for progress that raise the bar and help us pursue excellence. Thank you, Gardner-Webb family, for answering the call and standing behind our mission.”

Donors displayed their school spirit by investing generously in the areas that mean the most to them. These included scholarships and program support for academics and matching gifts for many of the sport programs, the Christian Service Organization, and contributions to virtually every aspect of campus life.

Kanisha Fowler, assistant director of Annual Giving at GWU, also expressed her gratitude for all who participated. “I am blown away by the love and generosity of our community,” she asserted. “This is proof that Bulldog Nation stands strong and is connected across the country. Thank you for helping us empower students, increase institutional aid and elevate the mission and vision of the University.”

## Double Dawg Day Leaderboard Spotlights



# Community of Support

Meet Three Couples Who Give to Gardner-Webb Through Different Avenues

BY JACKIE BRIDGES

**M**any individuals come together to support Gardner-Webb University financially. These gifts—made by alumni, students, family, friends, faculty, and staff—come in all

sizes, from all states and from around the world. They share a love and appreciation for the University and its mission to prepare graduates for lives of service and leadership. Their combined contributions

help students follow their passions and create positive and lasting change in the region and beyond.

The following alumni and their spouses share their Gardner-Webb giving story.

## Tom and Glenda Bell Consistent, Loyal Donors for Over 40 years

Tom and Glenda Bell’s loyalty to Gardner-Webb originates with Tom’s heartfelt gratitude for what the faculty and staff at GWU helped him accomplish. The couple has consistently given to Gardner-Webb for more than 40 years.

“While Glenda and I have been blessed, we are not to the point that we have the ability to write big checks, but we have the ability to be loyal, to write annual checks,” Tom shared. “It’s important to me that the money I’m giving gets to the direct help of the student, which is what Gardner-Webb is all about.”

A native of Suffolk, Va., Tom received an associate degree from Gardner-Webb in 1966 when the University was a junior college. He returned in 1970 and was a member of the first class (1971) to receive bachelor’s degrees from GWU.

Tom received financial help from the University that included a partial tennis scholarship and work as a resident director and a secretary. He majored in social science, economics and history and felt welcomed by the faculty and staff. “They didn’t give it to you at Gardner-Webb, but they provided you the opportunity to learn and grow as an individual,” Tom stated.

The Bells live in Atlanta, Ga., where he moved in 1971 to take a job with a trucking company. He met Glenda through mutual friends, nearly 50 years ago. In 1982, he opened his own trucking/warehousing business and retired in 2012.

Tom reconnected with Gardner-Webb in the 1980s by serving on the Alumni Board. Also, he reconnected with some classmates, and they continue to meet yearly.

For over 20 years, he’s served as chairman of the Board of Advisors for Godbold School of Business. He’s a longtime member of the Bulldog Club, and he has also served as a GWU Trustee for nearly 35 years in total. “I have spent most of my business career trying to find a way to give back to the University in a small way,” Tom affirmed. “Giving money to Gardner-Webb is a privilege. It is an investment in our future, in the youth that are going to come behind. It solidifies the mission of what Gardner-Webb means to me.”





## Wade and Kelly Miller Support Science Programs Through Planned Giving

Wade and Kelly Miller recently designated a generous gift to Gardner-Webb as part of their estate planning. This contribution will support GWU science programs. Wade, a 1987 alumnus who earned a Bachelor of Science in chemistry, developed skills at Gardner-Webb that formed the foundation for his nearly 20-year career at IBM.

“If I hadn’t gone to Gardner-Webb and had the experiences, the education, the life lessons, the relationships with the professors, the one-on-one, hands-on, and their prodding and pushing me in the right direction on occasion, I would never have gotten into the door for the first job,” Wade stated.

That job was to automate the crop science lab equipment at N.C. State University. Wade excelled in the position, built his knowledge of computer programming and received job offers from several companies. He chose to go to work at IBM and also opened his first business. He met Kelly at IBM, and they were married. Over the years, they started two other businesses.

They are both retired from IBM. Now, he manages wildlife for 17 ranches in Kerrville, Texas, where they live. “I was able to do all I have done in my life, because of what I accomplished at Gardner-Webb,” Wade observed. “I want to give back to Gardner-Webb as a thank you.”



In recognition of their legacy gift, space in the Department of Natural Sciences will be named for the Millers.

Wade encourages others whose success began with lessons learned in the classrooms and labs at Gardner-Webb to help future students do the same. “It’s just the right thing to do,” he affirmed.

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## Brenda and Larry Watson Pledge to Mission Endowment Fund

Brenda, a 1974 alumna of Gardner-Webb, and Larry Watson recently made a pledge to the Mission Endowment Fund to help underwrite mission trips for GWU students. This year 58 students participated in trips to Eswatini (formerly known as Swaziland), Kentucky, New Mexico and Guatemala. Through their giving, the Watsons will enable more students to go and work nationally and globally.

Brenda and Larry have a passion for mission work, supporting organizations and serving alongside missionaries in other countries. Sometimes the trips included their children, Carmen and Chrissy. Together, the family helped with construction projects or assisted in other ways.

Through their first-hand experiences, the Watsons know the powerful and life-changing impacts of serving on a mission trip. “You’re learning about other people, putting your faith in Christ to work,” Brenda shared. “We know how it changes you, and we want to give other people the opportunity.”

The couple’s decision to give to Gardner-Webb came from Brenda’s love and appreciation for the University, which was exactly what she needed as a first-generation college student. She majored in French and minored in psychology. As a member of a Gardner-Webb choral group called “A Gentle Way,” Brenda was given an opportunity to travel and minister through song.



She was introduced to Gardner-Webb by her pastor, a GWU alumnus, who suggested she attend. Brenda’s parent had died unexpectedly, and the family was still recovering from this traumatic event. “I think he knew that Gardner-Webb would be a nurturing place for me,” Brenda reflected. “And he knew our family’s commitment to Christ, and that Gardner-Webb would foster that for me.”

*For more information about giving to Gardner-Webb, contact the Office of Advancement at 704-406-4254.*

Q&A

# Leaving a Legacy

Vice President for Advancement Nate Evans Answers Frequently Asked Questions About Planned Gifts

**P**lanned Giving—sometimes called gift planning or legacy giving—is a different option for donors to consider. Planned gifts are a critical component in philanthropy. They help provide

long-term financial stability for institutions like Gardner-Webb University and make an impact on future generations.

At Gardner-Webb, donors have several options for leaving a

charitable gift to the University after their death. In the following Q&A, Vice President of Advancement Nate Evans answers some of the most common questions about planned giving.

**GW Magazine:** What is planned giving?

**Nate Evans:** A planned gift is a gift that is made in a lifetime or at death as part of a donor’s overall financial and estate planning. Unlike current gifts, planned gifts are typically arranged during a donor’s lifetime but are fulfilled after their passing. These gifts can include bequests through wills, charitable trusts, retirement plan assets, life insurance policies and more.

**GW Magazine:** What are the benefits of planned giving?

**Nate Evans:** Oftentimes, planned giving allows you to have a greater impact while creating a lasting legacy. In some instances, there can be tax benefits. We always recommend you talk to your financial advisor about those benefits.

**GW Magazine:** What is the most common form of planned giving?

**Nate Evans:** Bequests are one of the most common options we see. This is when a donor names Gardner-Webb as a beneficiary in their will. Donors can choose to leave a percentage, a defined amount or the remainder of the estate to Gardner-Webb. They could also leave a gift of retirement assets, life insurance, or property.

**GW Magazine:** How do I make sure my loved ones are taken care of at my death?

**Nate Evans:** That’s not a problem. Typically, in a will, assets are passed to the surviving spouse first. Then, upon that individual’s passing, the remaining assets are distributed according to the will’s instructions.

**GW Magazine:** How does a person make a planned gift?

**Nate Evans:** The first step in making a contribution via planned giving is for the donor to notify us of their interest.

From that point we can work with the donor, offer advice, and take the necessary steps depending on their goals and what’s beneficial for them. We’ll help them explore the different options and help them create the legacy they want.

**GW Magazine:** Last thoughts?

**Nate Evans:** Whether you want to support a specific program, establish a scholarship endowment, or contribute to the organization’s operations, you can specify your intentions in a written agreement or estate planning document. It’s essential to do this part so we can ensure your wishes are honored.

*For more information about giving to Gardner-Webb, contact the Office of Advancement at 704-406-4254.*



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# NEWS & NOTES

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## Gardner-Webb College of Health Sciences Partners with Remote Area Medical to Serve Community



Marissa DiMatteo, RAM Volunteer

Over 300 volunteers responded to the call from Gardner-Webb University's College of Health Sciences to partner with Remote Area Medical (RAM) on Sept. 23-24, 2023, to provide free medical and dental care to more than 50 people. Seven patients also received free glasses.

The clinic was held at Mt. Calvary Baptist Church Community Life Center in Shelby, N.C. Most of the patients (35) received free dental services, such as dental X-rays, cleanings, extractions, and fillings, and the others (30) came for medical services. Some received more than one service.

The idea to bring RAM to Cleveland County, N.C., was proposed by Marissa DiMatteo, a GWU biology and psychology major who graduated in May 2024. She had volunteered with the organization and felt that Gardner-Webb could help sponsor a clinic in the area. She

approached the president's office and the GWU College of Health Sciences to help secure a host site in the area. The Dean of the College of Health Sciences and Professor of Nursing Dr. Nicole Waters assisted in organizing and recruiting volunteers.

DiMatteo was thankful for everything that Waters and the GWU staff and faculty did to make the clinic a reality for the community. "There was so much that happened behind the scenes to make the clinic happen," she reflected.

RAM, based in Rockford, Tenn., is a major nonprofit provider of free pop-up clinics. The organization relies on a team of medical and non-medical volunteers to deliver free dental, vision, and medical services to underserved and uninsured individuals. In 2022, RAM volunteers served nearly 22,000 individuals with a value of care worth more than \$7.9 million.

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## The Golden LEAF Foundation Tours Campus and Meets Scholarship Recipients

Representatives of The Golden LEAF Foundation toured the Gardner-Webb University campus during the 2024 Spring Semester and met with the 15 scholarship recipients. Since 2006, nearly 100 GWU students have received financial support from the Foundation. Since the Golden LEAF Foundation's inception in 1999, more than \$60 million in scholarships has been awarded to over 29,000 students in North Carolina's rural and tobacco-dependent communities.

"The Golden LEAF Foundation has done so much over the years to positively impact economic development in rural North Carolina communities, and we are grateful for the Foundation's investment in GWU students," shared Gardner-Webb President Dr. William M. Downs.





## Hunt School of Nursing Graduates Excel

The faculty and staff of the Gardner-Webb University Hunt School of Nursing (HSON) celebrated the success of their 2023 graduates on two national nurse licensure exams—the NCLEX-RN and the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (PMHNP) Board Certification exam.

Gardner-Webb’s nursing graduates excelled on the innovative version of the NCLEX, the Next Generation NCLEX, that launched on April 1, 2023. According to the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN), this test provides a better measure of nursing candidates’ clinical judgment and decision-making abilities.

Dr. Yvonne Smith, associate professor and PMHNP program coordinator, shared that both the 2022 and 2023 PMHNP

classes achieved 100% pass rates. She said the program prepares students with assignments that are clinically driven, and practice-readiness led. “Students also receive timely and generous amounts of professor feedback, both on their work and additional pertinent anecdotal clinical and practice knowledge from professors,” Smith asserted.

Dean of the College of Health Sciences Dr. Nicole Waters congratulated the HSON team for a job well done.

### **The NCLEX-RN Pre-licensure Exam Rates (first-time test takers) for 2023 Students**

- ASN–100%
- BSN–95.9% (Traditional BSN and Accelerated BSN)

### **The ANCC PMHNP Board Certification Exam Rate (first-time test takers) for 2023 Graduate Students**

- DNP-PMHNP–100%

## Gardner-Webb’s Physician Assistant Class of 2023 Achieves 94% Pass Rate on National Certifying Exam

Faculty and staff of the Gardner-Webb University Department of Physician Assistant (PA) Studies are celebrating graduates’ recent scores on the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE). The PA Class of 2023 achieved a 94% pass rate on the exam that assesses professionalism, and basic medical and surgical knowledge.

Dean of the College of Health Sciences, Dr. Nicole Waters, recognized the efforts of Director of the Department of PA Studies, Ashley Kernicky, and everyone involved in the program. “Congratulations to the Department of PA Studies for their dedicated efforts in analyzing and enhancing the curriculum to enhance students’ grasp of concepts and critical thinking,” Waters praised. “I am immensely proud of our dedicated faculty, staff, and exceptional students for their outstanding achievements in the field of medical education.”

Kernicky explained that the new curriculum begins with courses on cardiovascular and pulmonary medicine. “We wanted to be more intentional in our course structure,” she stated. “Cardiovascular and pulmonary medicine are primary and necessary systems to keep you alive—you have to breathe, and you have to pump blood. These systems are going to be mentioned in the other classes in some form.”

# HealthCare Foundation of Cleveland County Establishes Endowed Scholarship for Physician Assistant Studies at Gardner-Webb

The HealthCare Foundation of Cleveland County, its board of directors and Executive Director/CEO Dick Baker established an endowed scholarship at Gardner-Webb University to support students in the Department of Physician Assistant (PA) Studies program. Preference will be given to PA students who are residents of Cleveland County, N.C., and/or who are committed to practicing in Cleveland County.

“We are very excited about this scholarship,” Baker affirmed. “We have such great resources in Cleveland County, and we think it’s part of our responsibility to enhance these education programs, particularly for county residents or for those who will stay in Cleveland County to practice. Hopefully, this scholarship will become an impetus for the program to continue growing and a springboard for other organizations to provide some scholarship dollars or add to this one.”



Baker noted that Gardner-Webb’s PA studies program aligns with the Foundation’s mission of improving health and wellness in Cleveland County. After speaking with Dr. Nicole Waters, dean of the College of Health Sciences at Gardner-Webb, Baker and the board of

directors learned more about the growing and vibrant PA program at Gardner-Webb. When they discovered the need for PA scholarships, the board recognized an opportunity to encourage students entering the health care profession, where there is a shortage of providers.

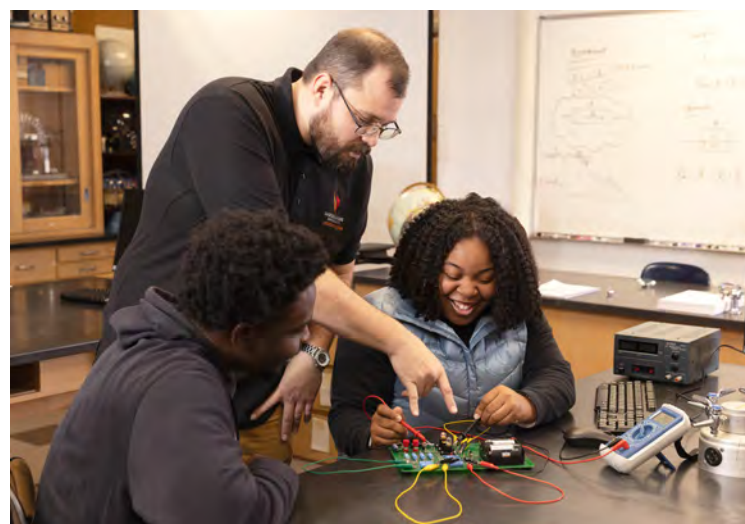
## Gardner-Webb Receives \$150K from The Cannon Foundation

Gardner-Webb University received a \$150,000 grant that will transform health care, science and fine art education at the University. Presented by The Cannon Foundation, this funding will benefit students in the College of Health Sciences and the College of Arts and Sciences, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and enriching educational experiences.

“The equipment that we are able to purchase in Natural Sciences and Music through the support of The Cannon Foundation grant goes directly to student usage,” stated Dr. Robert Prickett, dean and professor of the College of Arts and Sciences. “The piano lab will allow music students to have the latest curriculum and equipment update. The chemistry lab equipment will allow students to do deeper research and different research. Ultimately, this funding allows us to get our students hands even dirtier (in a good way)—which we love.”

While providing financial support, this grant catalyzes collaboration and education across departments and invests in Gardner-Webb’s “high growth” programs.

Dr. Nicole Waters, dean and professor of the College of Health Sciences, expressed deep gratitude for the continuous support from The Cannon Foundation. The funds were used to upgrade



simulation recording abilities to provide more opportunities to record and review simulations, allowing students to reflect on their performance, identify areas for improvement, and enhance their skills. The college also purchased task trainers for wound care and lumbar puncture, and a low-fidelity simulator, all crucial investments in developing practical skills for students.

## Gardner-Webb's Department of Natural Sciences Receives Funds for Undergraduate Researchers

North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities (NCICU) awarded two of 11 Undergraduate Research Program Grants to students in the Gardner-Webb University Department of Natural Sciences. Tuyet “Snow” Anh Nguyen, a chemistry major, and Kyndal Elaina Jackson, a biology major, received over \$500 each to complete their research in the 2024 Fall semester.

Nguyen will be mentored by professor of Chemistry Dr. Stefka Eddins, and Jackson's mentors are professor of Chemistry Dr. Ben Brooks and associate professor of Biology Dr. Meredith Rowe. This is the second year that Brooks and Rowe have worked with a student who received an NCICU grant.

Jackson's project is titled, “In Vitro Study of the Antimicrobial Advantages of Caraway Seed Oil on Skin.” She will use the grant to fund experiments to determine the effects of caraway seed oil and compare them to essential oils that a Gardner-Webb group has tested previously.

Nguyen's project is titled, “Isolation, Purification and Characterization of Shikimic Acid from Star Anise.” She plans to use the funds to isolate star anise oil using Soxhlet extraction for maximum oil yield.

Nguyen said her experience will teach her the process of research outside the classroom and help her become a competitive scholar as she pursues graduate school.



## McAllister & Quinn Will Support Faculty and Staff in Securing Funding to Enhance Academic Programs

Gardner-Webb University has partnered with McAllister & Quinn, a consulting firm that supports the University's efforts to secure federal and private foundation grants. The company's expert staff helps GWU pursue and obtain funding for scholarships and student support, academic programs, research, and equipment.

Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Dr. Karen Aubrey noted that the partnership benefits Gardner-Webb's faculty and students in many ways. “They help us to identify major grants that we are a good fit to apply for and help us to form the best grant narrative and application to, hopefully, win that grant,” Aubrey affirmed. “They provide us with the knowledge, experience, and workload capacity to help jumpstart a culture of grants-seeking on campus.”

McAllister & Quinn maintains the largest and most specialized grant consultant network in the country. Gardner-Webb's faculty and staff work with writing teams from a network of over 250 subject matter experts. In addition, McAllister & Quinn assigns an in-house professional writer, reviewer, and editor to grant projects.

## Lettie Pate Whitehead Foundation Inc. Continues Generous Support of Gardner-Webb Students

Gardner-Webb University continually seeks scholarship opportunities for its students. A major partner in this endeavor is the Lettie Pate Whitehead (LPW) Foundation Inc. For nearly three decades, LPW has supported Christian higher education at GWU with a donation history reaching close to \$4 million.

“Our relationship with the Lettie Pate Whitehead Foundation truly is a special one, and it has been sustained over the years such that the impact on GWU students is both profound and indelible,” Gardner-Webb President Dr. William M. Downs shared. “We were privileged to host Carrie Conway (senior program officer) and Lyons Gray (trustee for the LPW Foundation) on our campus, and I am grateful for their subsequent decision to continue supporting our students. Because Gardner-Webb's student- and faith-centric mission aligns so nicely with the Foundation's, this is a natural partnership that we value very highly.”

The LPW Foundation was chartered in 1946 and devotes most of its resources to the scholarship program, which provides scholarship grants with the intent of educating Christian women with demonstrated financial need at nearly 200 higher education institutions across the Southeast.

In fiscal years 2023-24 and 2024-25, LPW's trustees presented Gardner-Webb with grants totaling \$290,000 for each year. These gifts, along with other University aid, provide scholarships in financial aid packages to students in nursing and other undergraduate programs.



## Founders Day 2023 Recognizes Contributions of J.D. Huggins and Washburn Family

Gardner-Webb University celebrated Founders Day on Nov. 30, 2023, by honoring the names and legacies of the persons and groups who played formative roles in the University's development. The day of celebration was highlighted by the posthumous presentation of the Founders Medal to J.D. Huggins, the first principal of Boiling Springs High School. Huggins, who was affectionately known as "Professor Huggins," steadfastly lived his charge to care for the welfare, encouragement, and growth of the students.

Teresa Hamrick Huggins accepted the award on behalf of the Huggins family. Also attending the medal presentation was Rachel "Gin-G" Hedrick Edwards, the grandchild of J.D. Huggins.

Earlier in the day another founding family was recognized in a ceremony to place a historical marker at the Washburn House, which served as the first free-standing library on campus.

The building was erected in 1940 and was dedicated during the 1943 Commencement at which former Gov. O. Max Gardner was present. North Carolina's governor at that time, Joseph Broughton, was also at the dedication and provided the commencement address. The building was dedicated by Seaton Allen Washburn in memory of his spouse, Mintie Hamrick Washburn, and his two children, Sarah Washburn and Mae Washburn McMurry. Each had passed prior to the dedication of the library.



## Washington Monthly Lists Gardner-Webb as a Top Five Private College in North Carolina for Second Year

In its 2022 and 2023 National University Rankings, Washington Monthly placed Gardner-Webb University in the top five among private colleges in North Carolina. This honor is based on excellence in three areas: social mobility, research, and promoting public service.

“We committed some time ago to ensuring that Gardner-Webb would not simply be a ‘hidden gem’ or North Carolina’s ‘best kept secret,’” affirmed GWU President Dr. William M. Downs. “With this latest recognition from a respected national publication, our amazing team of students and staff is receiving some well-deserved attention. GWU’s mission is solid, and our effort is relentless ... we’ll keep climbing the ladder.”

Only 442 schools in the U.S. were named to the National University list, which is the magazine’s highest tier of U.S. colleges, reserved for colleges that award a significant number of doctoral degrees. Gardner-Webb was one of 15 public and private schools in North Carolina that met the criteria for the national tier. GWU also ranked above Campbell University (N.C.), Liberty University (Va.), Tulane University (La.), Robert Morris University (Penn.), Baylor University (Texas) and Southern Methodist University (Texas).

Among other private schools in the Carolinas, Gardner-Webb ranked in a higher tier than Queens University (N.C.), Anderson University (S.C.), Lenoir Rhyne University (N.C.), and Methodist University (N.C.).

## Gardner-Webb Wins Back-to-Back Conference Championships Players Receive All-Conference Honors

Gardner-Webb University defeated Charleston Southern University 34-10 on Nov. 18, 2023, to win a share of the Big South-Ohio Valley Conference (OVC) Championship and clinch the automatic bid to the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) Playoffs. The Runnin’ Bulldogs held the Bucs to just 81 yards in the second half to bring home the second conference championship in two years.

The Runnin’ Bulldogs shared the Big South-OVC Championship with University of Tennessee at Martin but earned the automatic bid to the FCS Playoffs by virtue of a 38-34 win over the Skyhawks on Oct. 28, 2023.

Gardner-Webb finished the regular season 5-0 at home. It was the first time GWU went undefeated at home since the 2003 season, when the Runnin’ Bulldogs went 6-0 at home. Oddly enough, 2003 was the last time GWU won back-to-back conference championships, taking home the Big South championship in 2002 and 2003.

William McRainey was named Big South-OVC Scholar Athlete of the Year and was a First Team All-Conference selection for the third straight season.

### Four Gardner-Webb players earned First-Team All-Conference honors:

Ty French, *fourth straight year*  
Ja’Kai Young  
AJ Covan  
Jayden Brown

### Five players earned Second-Team All-Conference honors:

Narii Gaither, *third year*  
JaQuan Adams  
Gabriel Thompson  
Brendan Jackson  
Jamari Brown, *second year*

Gardner-Webb’s season came to an end with a 17-7 loss to Mercer University in the first round of the FCS Playoffs on Nov. 25, 2023.





## Gardner-Webb Announces Athletics Hall of Fame Members

During the 2023 Homecoming festivities, Jesse James (1985-87) was inducted as the newest member of the Hall of Fame, and Joan Cline Backhaus (1957-59) was posthumously recognized for her induction last year. Longtime Sports Information Director Marc Rabb (1995-2023) was also recognized.

### **Jesse James, Football, 1985-87**

Jesse James, the former GWU quarterback, suited up for the Runnin' Bulldogs for two years. In his final season in Boiling Springs, James guided Gardner-Webb to an 11-2 record and a SAC-8 Championship. Gardner-

Webb also won its first-ever NAIA Playoff game, defeating Moorhead State (now Minnesota State University Moorhead) 27-7. James earned First-Team All-Conference honors that season, and passed for 3,833 career yards and 28 touchdowns in three seasons in the red and black.

### **Joan Cline Backhaus, Women's Basketball, 1957-59**

Joan Cline Backhaus was a two-time All-State selection during Gardner-Webb's junior college years. She averaged 34 points per game as a Runnin' Bulldog and served as a GWU cheerleader. Backhaus earns the

hall of fame honor posthumously, having been inducted last year.

### **Marc Rabb, Sports Information, 1995-2023**

Marc Rabb was named the winner of the Chuck Burch Meritorious Service Award. Rabb was the head of the Athletic Communications department at Gardner-Webb for 28 years. During his time at GWU, Rabb helped oversee the University's transition to Division-I competition, while helping tell the stories of numerous Gardner-Webb athletes, championships and hall of famers.

## Gardner-Webb Placed Nearly 83% of its Student-Athletes on Big South Presidential Honor Roll

The Big South Conference announced that a league-record 73.98% of eligible student-athletes earned Presidential Honor Roll status for their work in the classroom in 2023-24. To be named to the list, student-athletes must maintain a grade point average of 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale) or better for the recently completed academic year, and this past season, 2,152 out of 2,909 eligible student-athletes achieved the benchmark.

Gardner-Webb University placed 82.75% (307) of its 371 eligible student-athletes on the Presidential Honor Roll. The only Big South school with a higher percentage was Radford University, which had 85.50% (230 of 269). High Point University was third with 81.47% (255 of 313).

In addition, an all-time high 273 student-athletes received Commissioner's Award distinction in 2023-24 for having a 4.0 GPA. Gardner-Webb had 35 student-athletes who achieved a 4.0.

The full 2023-24 Commissioner's Award and Presidential Honor Roll is available in the Gardner-Webb NewsCenter at [gardner-webb.edu/news](http://gardner-webb.edu/news).





## Lily Streeton of High Point, N.C., Receives Gardner-Webb's 2024 Tucker Scholarship

Lily Streeton, of High Point, N.C., was named the fifth recipient of Gardner-Webb University's highest honor for incoming undergraduate students, the Tucker Heart, Soul, Mind and Strength Scholarship. Established in 2019 by Carolyn and Robert Tucker, the award includes full-tuition, and room and board for eight semesters.

The Tuckers created the scholarship to annually recognize a high school senior who exemplifies the principles and values representative of the Gardner-Webb community. The qualifications are based on the Tucker family's life verse, Mark 12:29-31: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself."

Streeton was one of 227 high school applicants and among 49 finalists invited to interview. They represented 19

states—from the Carolinas to California and Hawaii.

Streeton, an honor student at Wesleyan Christian Academy, volunteers with multiple community organizations that serve young people. She is the assistant worship leader at her church. She plays clarinet with the school orchestra, and on her own, learned to play tenor saxophone for a production of "Annie."

"This scholarship is an amazing opportunity for me," Streeton affirmed. "It's a huge honor. I am so beyond blessed and thankful for this."

When she came for the scholarship interview, she decided then that even if she didn't receive the Tucker Scholarship, she was coming to Gardner-Webb. "I can see how everyone cares about each other, and they put God first as well," Streeton asserted.

## Eight Students Win Gardner-Webb's Ignite Excellence Full-Tuition Scholarship

The eight high school seniors who won Gardner-Webb University's most competitive academic scholarship—Ignite Excellence—rose above the 288 top-ranked students who participated in on-campus interviews.

"This really was an amazingly accomplished group of finalists, and we are thrilled to welcome each of these high-ability students to GWU," praised Gardner-Webb President Dr. William M. Downs.

The 2024 Ignite winners are listed below, with their hometowns and what they plan to study:

**Ja'Kayla M. Alexander**, Shelby, N.C., nursing.

**Ayden Mackinley Bollinger**, Lenoir, N.C., biology.

**Isaiah D. Brown**, Warrior, Ala., criminal justice administration.

**Naliah Chrisha Codjovi**, East Amherst, N.Y., biology.

**Jessica Marie Horn**, Plainfield, Ill., psychology.

**Elijah David Lewis**, Graham, N.C., computer science.

**Jaylan Robert Mays**, Charlotte, N.C., undecided.

**Lucy A. Merritt**, Shelby, N.C., nursing.

Each recipient receives a full-tuition scholarship that covers the cost of tuition for eight semesters. The winners have an average GPA of 3.96 noted Molly Allison, director of Admissions for Undergraduate Admissions.



## Ricky Skaggs Opens Gardner-Webb's Brinkley Amphitheater to a Sold-Out Crowd

A spectacular autumn sunset provided the perfect backdrop as Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder officially opened the Brinkley Amphitheater at Gardner-Webb University on Oct. 28, 2023. An enthusiastic sold-out crowd welcomed the 15-time Grammy winner along with Gardner-Webb student Lindy Bryson and country artist Will Jones.

The concert also punctuated the Runnin' Bulldogs last-minute Homecoming victory over University of Tennessee at Martin

(38-34), the program's first win over a ranked team since 2021.

"From start to finish, this was just about as perfect a Homecoming Day as any of us could have imagined," praised Gardner-Webb President Dr. William M. Downs. "With our spirits already sky-high after a thrilling win at Spangler Stadium, we were then treated to a wildly successful grand opening at our new amphitheater."

Bryson had the honor of being the first performer on the amphitheater

stage and opened the evening with a heartfelt performance. "I could have sung all night; it was such a great crowd," she said. "Will Jones and Ricky Skaggs were awesome and a pleasure to meet. This was definitely a moment I will always remember!"

Since its opening, the Amphitheater has also welcomed Balsam Range and Fireside Collective, the Webbstock Music Festival in April 2024, and a "Summer in the Springs" Concert Series.

## Bo's Smokehouse in Dover Campus Center Offers Slow-Smoked Cooking



Gardner-Webb University's newest dining option, Bo's Smokehouse, opened in fall of 2023. It serves up a delicious array of top-quality local meats prepared in a unique collaboration with Gardner-Webb campus favorites.

Specializing in slow-smoked cooking, the fast-casual restaurant features an eclectic twist on quesadillas, wings, sandwiches and salads. In addition, award-winning North Carolina barbecue is served with a choice of regional sauces. The ever-evolving menu satisfies taste buds with new flavors and monthly specials.

Opening in fall 2024, Gardner-Webb's renovated Caf will provide a wide array of new food options, expanded seating, and a new open concept wing featuring Christian symbolism within the architectural design.



## Gardner-Webb Recognized Nearly 1,000 Graduates in 2023 Fall and 2024 Spring Commencement Ceremonies

Gardner-Webb University celebrated the achievements of nearly 1,000 graduates in ceremonies held on Dec. 15, 2023, and May 2, 2024.

Chris Peek, president and chief executive officer of CaroMont Health, spoke at the December program. He challenged graduates to embrace their individuality. “Each of you has a level of uniqueness unparalleled by anyone else,” he affirmed. “It is simply dependent upon your decision to become what you were uniquely created to be.”

Online Scholastic Award winners were Quentin Blake Whisnant for the 2023 Summer Semester, and Samantha Jade Fellows for the 2023 Fall Semester. Traditional undergraduates Karis Leigh Wallace and Kathryn Wilson won Senior Scholastic Awards.

The featured speaker for the May 2024 ceremony was Gardner-Webb alumna and Superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) Schools, Dr. Crystal L. Hill. She urged the graduates to face their challenges head on. “When we push ourselves out of our comfort zones, we often discover hidden strengths and abilities we never knew we had,” Hill said.

The first Tucker Scholar, Leah Carpenter, was among the graduates. Chelsea Walters and Micah Moulder won the Most Outstanding Graduate Medals. Senior Scholastic Awards went to Leah Carpenter, Caleb Cook, Alexandra Haasser, Paula Harvie, Makayla Jibben, Micah Moulder, Emma Rayfield, Chelsea Walters, and Shelby Watkins. Haila Kaylin earned the Online Scholastic Award.

Dr. Karissa Ebert received the Darlene J. Gravett Citizen Scholar Award for scholarly research that promises significant societal benefits. The award is named in honor of Dr. Gravett, former dean of the Graduate School and associate provost emerita.

## Faculty Recognized for Service and Teaching

Gardner-Webb University President Dr. William M. Downs announced numerous honors for faculty over the course of the 2022-23 academic year. These honors recognized service, mentoring, excellence in teaching, emerging leadership and others. Below are some of the recipients.



**Dr. Yvonne Smith** received the Excellence in Teaching Award. An associate professor of nursing, Smith was recognized for her service to the University and her community, academic rigor, effective course design, and dedication to students.



**Dr. Wilson Hawkins** received the President’s Early Career Award. Since Hawkins’ arrival to the University in 2021, he has demonstrated productivity in scholarship, creative discovery, and instruction that exceeds expectations. He is assistant professor of physics and director of the University Honors Program.



**Jessica Herndon** was selected for the Rising Star Award. Herndon, instructor of business administration, has updated courses and helped to restructure capstone courses.



**Dr. Jennifer Buckner** was honored with the Faculty Service Award. Associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and professor of English, Buckner is a valued team member and faithfully serves her campus community.



**Dr. Christine Sutton** was recognized with the Mentoring and Academic Advising Award. As the associate dean of the Godbold College of Business and associate professor of business, Sutton demonstrates constant commitment to mentoring students and faculty. She serves on a variety of committees and meets with students almost daily during lunch breaks and after hours.

# Gardner-Webb Awards Faculty Emeritus Status to Six Retired Faculty

Gardner-Webb University faculty members were honored with emeriti titles: Dr. June Hobbs, professor emerita in the College of Arts and Sciences; Dr. Sophia Steibel, professor emerita in the M. Christopher White School of Divinity; Dr. Perry T. Hildreth,

professor emeritus of philosophy; Dr. Ben Leslie, professor emeritus of Christian theology and ethics; Dr. Joseph Webb, professor emeritus in the College of Arts and Sciences; and Dr. Danny West, professor emeritus of preaching.



### June Hobbs

Thirty years of service, retired as professor of English. Hobbs was the director of Undergraduate Research and started the GWU Summer Undergraduate Research Scholars Program. She was faculty sponsor for the Alpha Chi Honor Society for more than 20 years.



### Sophia Steibel

Thirty years of service, retired as professor of Christian education and spiritual formation. Steibel coordinated the spiritual formation curriculum for the School of Divinity and led annual spirituality retreats for students.



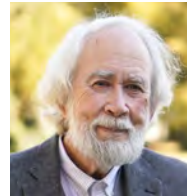
### Ben Leslie

Eighteen years of service, retired as professor of Christian theology and ethics, director of Doctor of Ministry Program, and director of Pittman Center for Congregational Enrichment. Served 16 years as provost and executive vice president and a brief time as interim president in 2019.



### Perry Hildreth

Seventeen years of service, retired as professor of philosophy. Hildreth taught undergraduate, degree completion and graduate classes. He was chair of the faculty from 2015-17.



### Joseph Webb

Fifteen years of service, retired as professor of communication studies. Webb was honored with the 2015 Excellence in Teaching Award from GWU.



### Danny West

Twenty years of service, director of the Doctor of Ministry Program, director of Ministry Leadership Development and professor of preaching and pastoral studies.

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## Kathleen Mirgon Crum Named Head Coach of Lacrosse Program

Kathleen Mirgon Crum is the fourth head coach in the history of Gardner-Webb University's lacrosse program. Previously, she served as head coach at Pfeiffer University in Misenheimer, N.C. While there, Mirgon Crum coached four All-Conference players and the 2022 Pfeiffer Falcons set a school record for caused turnovers in a season (219).

Pfeiffer hired Mirgon Crum in 2021 after a one-year stint as an assistant at Piedmont University, where she helped guide the Lady Lions to a USA

South West Division Regular Season Championship with a perfect 6-0 record.

In addition to her collegiate experience, Mirgon Crum also possesses extensive club coaching experience. She worked as an assistant coach with NXT LC Girls Lacrosse while at Bloomsburg University, the head coach of the Atlanta Storm Girls Lacrosse Club while at Piedmont, and the head coach of the Lake Murray Rapids Lacrosse Club Elite while at Pfeiffer.



## Gardner-Webb Hires Linda M. Fleischman as New Registrar

Linda M. Fleischman has more than 30 years of registrar experience. A resident of Kings Mountain, N.C., she previously served 11 years as registrar at Queens University in Charlotte, N.C. Her experience also includes serving as registrar at Keuka College in Keuka Park, N.Y.

While at Queens, Fleischman systematically reviewed the Registrar Office's services and procedures to improve the student experience and progression towards graduation. She collaborated with faculty committees and administrative offices

to develop, review, and revise academic policies and procedures.

Fleischman's experience includes working with prospective students to evaluate transfer credit and pre-enrollment counseling. As a skilled communicator, she coordinated course scheduling and room assignments with Queens University's schools and colleges and worked closely with admissions, student financial services, student accounts office, institutional research, and information technology services.



## Alex Hinsey Named Head Women's Volleyball Coach

Alex Hinsey joined Gardner-Webb University after four seasons as the head coach at the University of Mary Washington (UMW) in Fredericksburg, Va. He has 11 years of coaching experience and has garnered multiple awards and built winning programs at the scholastic and college levels.

In 2023, the Mary Washington Eagles closed its season with a record 30-5. In 2022, the team also won the Coast-to-Coast Athletic Conference title

and ended its season 26-8 in the third round of the NCAA Tournament.

Before taking the helm at UMW, Hinsey had a successful stint at Elizabethtown College. The Elizabethtown women produced back-to-back 19-win seasons in Hinsey's tenure.

Hinsey, a Reading, Pa., native, played scholastically at Exeter Township High School, winning a District 3 Class AA championship and PIAA Class AA state championship with the Eagles in 2007.



## Ashley Kernicky Named Department of Physician Assistant Studies Director

Ashley Kernicky, a 2009 alumna of Gardner-Webb University, served as interim director of the department this past year. She received her Bachelor of Science in biology with a minor in chemistry from Gardner-Webb and earned her Master of Physician Assistant Studies at Wingate (N.C.) University. She returned to Gardner-Webb in 2013 as an assistant professor in the Physician Assistant (PA) Studies Program.

She was also interim director in 2017, leading the program through an ARC-PA site visit with

just seven months of preparation. She received the Educator of the Year Award for the Department of Physician Assistant Studies in 2018, 2021 and 2022.

Kernicky has served on various committees at GWU for the PA program and the University. Her clinical experience includes working at Orthopedic Urgent Care and utilizing her medical skills to evaluate and treat patients in an office setting.



## Jeffrey Merrill named Assistant Athletic Director for Compliance

Jeffrey Merrill joined Gardner-Webb University after 10 years at Lees-McRae College in Banner Elk, N.C., where he most recently served as deputy director of athletics and chief compliance officer.

In addition to oversight of the department's compliance efforts, Merrill's responsibilities at Lees-McRae included game administration at home competitions, managing the media room schedule, completing the annual NCAA reports, and monitoring the academic success of 300-plus student-athletes.

Merrill started at Lees-McRae in 2014 as the director of compliance and Title IX coordinator. He was promoted to assistant athletic director in 2018, a role he held until his most recent promotion, and he continued to serve as Title IX coordinator throughout his tenure. In 2019, Merrill became an adjunct professor in the school's sport management program.

He is a member of the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA).



## Erik Solberg Named Gardner-Webb's Head Women's Soccer Coach

Erik Solberg joined Gardner-Webb University after four seasons as the head coach at the University of Arkansas Pine-Bluff (UAPB).

At UAPB (2020-23), Solberg steadied a program after being named the Golden Lions' sixth different head coach in an eight-year span. By his third season, Solberg led UAPB to a 9-11 overall record, its best season since 2016, and a 4-4-1 conference record, the program's best record in Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC) play since 2015.

In 2023, Solberg's Golden Lions led the SWAC in scoring, finishing 18th-nationally in total goals (49) and 20th-nationally in goals per game (2.33).

Solberg is the only head coach in UAPB history to lead his team to four consecutive SWAC Tournament appearances. In each of Solberg's four seasons at UAPB, the Golden Lions outperformed their preseason ranking.



## Greg Thiel Named Coach of Track and Field and Cross Country

Greg Thiel joined Gardner-Webb University after 10 seasons as head coach at Southern Wesleyan University in Central, S.C. Earlier in his career, Thiel coached six seasons at the University of South Florida in Tampa.

The first and only head coach in Southern Wesleyan track and field history, Thiel oversaw the program's growth from an NCCAA program to an NCAA Division II program. During that time, he developed 41 NCCAA All-Americans and

six national champions. Since completing the transition for the 2016-17 season, Thiel produced eight All-Americans, 95 all-region athletes, and 137 All-Conference athletes, 65 of whom also claimed Conference Carolinas championships.

Thiel was named Conference Carolinas Indoor Coach of the Year in 2016-17 and Outdoor Coach of the Year in 2021. His women's track and field team finished as Conference Carolinas runner-up nine times during the indoor and outdoor seasons.

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# IN MEMORIAM

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## Former Faculty Member and Dean Gil Blackburn Celebrated for Five Decades of Commitment to Higher Education

**A** native of Mt. Airy, N.C., Gil Blackburn was a student-athlete and Student Government Association (SGA) representative while earning a degree from Gardner-Webb University in 1960. He received a Bachelor of Arts in history from Wake Forest University (WFU) before serving four years in the U.S. Navy. He continued his education at WFU, receiving a Master of Arts in European history, and was awarded a Doctor of Education in philosophy and history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Blackburn began his life's passion at his alma mater, Gardner Webb in 1968 as a professor of history. While at GWU, Blackburn held many positions including director of Adult Learning, director of Graduate Studies, and vice president and dean of Academic Affairs. After 35 years at GWU, he and his spouse, Martha moved to Wise, Va., where he continued his professional career as provost and senior vice chancellor at the University of Virginia's College at Wise where he retired in 2010. At both universities he worked with students to develop "honor codes," and established ROTC programs. In 2013, GWU awarded Blackburn the honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree.

Recognized as a Fulbright Scholar to Germany, Blackburn earned many honors during his career including Teacher of the Year and Alumnus of the Year. He was awarded a certificate of commendation for upholding academic integrity from the American Association of University



Professors. He authored the book, "Education in the Third Reich" (Sunny Press). Blackburn was also a scholar of Russian history and led a group from GWU in 1992 for an extended study abroad to Russia.

He also served many years as scoutmaster and commissioner for the Boy Scouts and was awarded Scoutmaster of Merit by the National Eagle Scout Association.

Blackburn served as deacon for over 40 years at Boiling Springs and Wise Baptist Churches; and was a member of Rotary and Kiwanis service clubs.

While giving the 2013 commencement address at GWU, Blackburn said this, "I've experienced the entire gamut of human emotions and divine ecstasy all here at this place. The college's classrooms, chapels and playing fields are holy ground for me because in those places, I put away childish things, became a man, conversed with my friends, communed with God, charted my future, worked, worked, and again worked. Not for the sake of working, but always with a resolute determination to be more than I formerly was."

He passed away Feb. 10, 2024.





## Distinguished Alumna and Former Trustee Remembered for Her Wit and Wisdom

**G**ladys Brooks Boroughs, passed away at 101 years old on March 17, 2024.

Boroughs graduated as valedictorian of her high school class and was also first in her class when she graduated from Gardner-Webb University in 1942. While living in Washington, D.C., after graduation, the English major was employed by the FBI to edit documents during World War II, serving under the FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

It was at that time she met the love of her life, Lewis Boroughs, also a North Carolinian, from Seagrove. He was a professor at George Washington University, and the couple eventually relocated to Greensboro, N.C. where her spouse practiced law.

Boroughs was known for her work with First Baptist Church of Greensboro, where she held numerous positions: Deacon chair, Women's Missionary Union, Sunday school teacher, and chair of many other committees. In their retirement years, the couple traveled the world, often serving in the mission field. In Temuco, Chile, they helped teams from First Baptist Church construct an

orphanage. On several occasions, Boroughs preached at the Sunday morning worship service and led Bible studies for the women.

She and her spouse were also instrumental in forming the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) in North Carolina. Groups from across the state often met at the Boroughs' house to discuss the impact CBF could have on outreach and ministry.

Boroughs was also a devoted member of the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) and founding member of Sedgefield Woman's Club. In 1987, she became North Carolina State President of GFWC.

She was a former GWU trustee, and she and her spouse established a scholarship through the Christian Service Organization. In 2003, she was honored as a Gardner-Webb Distinguished Alumna. Her life was dedicated to living out Gardner-Webb's motto, "For God and Humanity."

*\*A feature story on Borough's life can be found in the 2023 edition of Gardner-Webb: The Magazine.*

# Jim Johnson, Assistant Professor of Mathematics, Former Head Basketball Coach Leaves a Legacy

The Gardner-Webb University family said goodbye on Sept. 6, 2023, to a distinctive faculty member. Jim Johnson, assistant professor of mathematics passed away at the age of 76. He was “unique” because he began his career at Gardner-Webb as head basketball coach in 1990.

Then, after a successful five years as coach—which included a South Atlantic Conference regular season championship in 1992 and being named SAC Coach of the Year—Johnson joined the GWU faculty on a full-time basis.

Johnson received his bachelor’s in mathematics from Furman University and his master’s degree from the University of South Carolina. Prior to Gardner-Webb, Johnson served as head basketball coach at Spartanburg Methodist Junior College for 11 seasons. He won five championships and was named coach of the year four times while he was there.

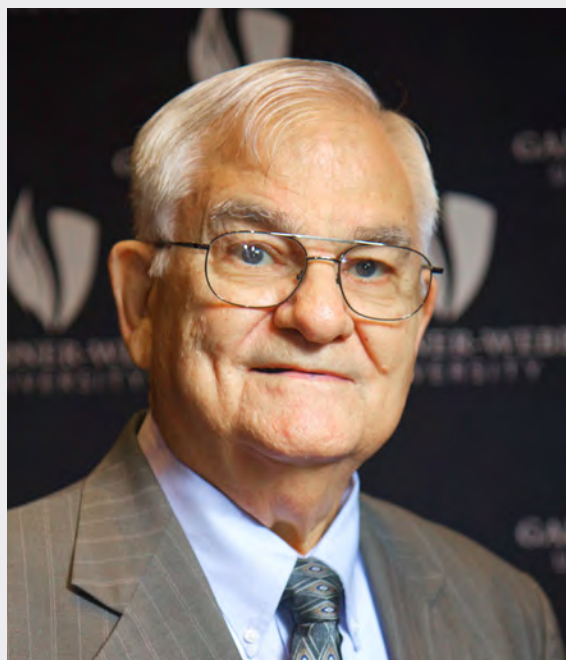
He served on various faculty committees at Gardner-Webb and was the director of the GWU Math Academy from 2013 to 2021. Johnson was also actively involved in the community, volunteering as a lunch buddy and math tutor from 1997 to 2020 at Boiling Springs Elementary. He was an active member of Boiling Springs Rotary Club, holding the positions of president, secretary and sergeant-at-arms over the years. At Poplar Springs Baptist Church, he was a deacon, Sunday school teacher and church moderator.

Faculty friend Tammy Hoyle started teaching in the mathematics department the same year that Johnson started coaching. “Jim was a treasured friend, colleague, and brother



in Christ to all of us in the math department,” Hoyle, assistant professor of mathematics, shared. “His intense dedication to his work and his students was a great inspiration. Despite physical challenges in the latter years, he did something admirable—he showed up time and time again. In addition, his devotion to his family, church and to Jesus was an encouragement to me. There will be a great void in our department, our lives, and GWU.”

## Department of Natural Sciences Leader Established Legacy in Chemistry



Clarence “Sherman” Parrish served Gardner-Webb University for over three decades in the Department of Natural Sciences. He was known for his personal investment in students’ success, professional connections, willingness to serve his community, and a calm demeanor. Parrish passed away at age 85 on Aug. 6, 2023.

Parrish was born and raised in Roanoke Rapids, N.C. Growing up on a family farm in Halifax County, he was no stranger to hard work. Parrish spent time working the fields from an early age, and that continued during the summers of his college years.

Parrish graduated as class valedictorian from William R. Davie High School in

# Gardner-Webb Remembers the Life and Legacy of Robert B. Tucker

**R**obert B. Tucker, a visionary entrepreneur who shared a dream that forever enhanced the Gardner-Webb University campus, passed away on Sept. 30, 2023. A devoted spouse, parent and businessperson, Robert was known for his humble attitude and heart for helping others.

Robert and his cherished spouse and soulmate of 66 years, Carolyn, founded Shoe Show Inc. in 1960 in Kannapolis, N.C. Their success was based on a simple formula of providing quality products, service and value. The couple's longtime support of Gardner-Webb began after their child, Lisa, graduated in 1989. Lisa, a volleyball player, has remained committed to the University for over three decades and currently serves as treasurer for the Board of Trustees.

In 2010, the Tuckers announced the largest donation in school history: A \$5 million gift to begin construction of the Tucker Student Center, a 110,000 square-foot building that has become the heart of campus life. However, Robert was not finished. Two years later at the dedication

ceremony, he surprised everyone by announcing an additional gift in the amount of \$500,000.

In 2013 at the August commencement, Robert and Carolyn received the University's highest recognition of merit, honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degrees. Robert and Carolyn gave another historic gift in 2019 with the announcement of a \$4 million endowment to establish the "Tucker Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength Scholarship."

Robert was born on Aug. 5, 1937, in Badin, N.C., and eventually settled in Concord, N.C., where he immersed himself in work as a cook and curb boy. Beyond the midnight hour, he diligently cleaned the parking lots of an ice cream shop and another local restaurant.

While still in high school and a member of the track team, Robert's ambition led him to secure a job at Baucom's Shoe Store during his senior year. This experience launched him into opening his own store, now a retail giant. Over the past 60 years, Shoe Show Inc. has



continued to grow with stores named Shoe Show, Shoe Dept., Shoe Show Mega, Shoe Dept. Encore, Shoebilee and Burlington Shoes. Currently Shoe Show Inc. has over 1,100 locations in 47 states.

The company is active in a number of charitable causes including Cooperative Christian Ministries, Bible Teaching Associations, Salvation Army, Hospice and Palliative Care of Cabarrus County, Crisis Pregnancy Center, Cabarrus Victims Assistance Network, and The Arc.

1956. He attended Berry College in Rome, Ga., from 1956-1960, where he majored in chemistry and mathematics. At Berry College he met his spouse, Joan Eubanks. Parrish pursued graduate studies at the University of Mississippi, earning his way as a research and laboratory assistant. He and Joan married, and Parrish continued his studies towards a Ph.D. degree.

He began his collegiate teaching career in the fall of 1964 in Campbellsville, Ky., where he completed his dissertation and oral examination. His hard work paid off, and he was awarded his degree in January 1965. After six years of teaching chemistry and serving as department chair at Campbellsville College, Parrish

transitioned to Gardner-Webb University. He taught chemistry for 33 years at GWU and served as chair of the Department of Natural Sciences.

Parrish also served in the department as a professional advisor to students entering medical school, pharmacy school, and medical technology programs. The medical technology programs were coordinated programs with Bowman Gray and Carolinas Medical Center. Throughout his career he served on the pre-professional committee of the department which interviewed and recommended prospective students for graduate and professional studies. He retired at the end of the 2002-03 academic school

year and was selected as professor emeritus of chemistry. The Department of Natural Sciences began the Sherman Parrish Freshman Chemistry Award in his honor.

Upon retirement, Parrish spent much of his time doing church work and community activities. His interest and expertise in computers, photography, videography and audio production was an appreciated talent through multi-media and senior ministries, and community teaching. He also coordinated Boiling Springs Baptist Church audio ministries through WGWG radio, a Gardner-Webb radio service, and served as producer and editor for weekly pastoral video outreach for over 15 years.

# Dr. Dianne Sykes Remembered as Servant Leader

**A** friend, colleague and professor, Dr. Dianne Sykes, passed away on Dec. 11, 2023. An associate professor of sociology, she also served as chair of the Department of Social Sciences.

Sykes earned her Ph.D. in 1999 from Texas A&M University in College Station. In 1990, she received her Master of Arts in teaching (social studies and English) from Pacific University in Forest Grove, Ore. After earning her degree, she taught at a home for boys, a summer migrant program, an alternative school, and a high school. She graduated summa cum laude in 1989 with her bachelor's degree from George Fox University in Newberg, Ore.

Dr. David K. Yelton, professor of history, said Sykes was tremendously dedicated to her students' success. For several years, his office was next door to hers in Frank Nanney Hall. "Frequently, she spent hours in one-on-one meetings with them," he shared. "Her patience with them was boundless, and she had a real gift for empathizing with students in need. She didn't seek publicity or reward for that, she just did it because of her commitment and her caring personality. In many ways, her actions exemplified the



true spirit of any Christian institution ... 'Love thy neighbor.' That's what I'll always remember about Dianne."

In June 2007, Yelton was chair of the Department of Social Sciences and leader of the search committee that brought Sykes to Gardner-Webb from Berea College in Kentucky, where she was an assistant professor. She also taught at Blinn College (Bryan Campus) in Texas and Marian College (now Marian University) in Wisconsin.

Throughout her 33-year career in education, Sykes focused her research on a variety of areas: multicultural education, media and children, telecommunications, and animal rights and rescue organizations. She specialized in social theory, social change, gender, minority groups, and criminal justice.

She wrote numerous articles for various publications such as the "Latino Studies Journal," "Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology," and "Food and Society." She also presented her research at the American Society of Humanistic Sociology, American Sociological Association in Washington, D.C., and the American Sociological Association in San Francisco.

She was a member of the American Sociological Association and the North Carolina Sociological Association.

Professor of history, Dr. Tim Vanderburg, described Sykes as a servant leader. "She was a champion of the underdog, the overlooked and the down and out," he observed. "As a department chair, she fostered unity and comradeship among our three disciplines. Her kindness, empathy and servanthood is greatly missed."



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# Bill Stowe Remembered for Challenging and Inspiring His Students

BY AVERY COPELAND

**D**r. William “Bill” Blackstone Stowe, a beloved Gardner-Webb professor of communication studies and the department’s first chairman, passed away on Sept. 22, 2023.

Stowe earned a bachelor’s degree from St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, N.C and a master’s degree from Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C. He completed his higher education with a Ph.D. in Renaissance literature from the University of South Carolina in Columbia.

After 16 years teaching in the English Department at Gardner-Webb, Stowe played a pivotal role in establishing the Communication Studies Department in 1981, serving as its first department chair. He also served as director and chair of numerous other campus programs, including advising the campus newspaper, “The Pilot,” and the college yearbook, “The Web.” Stowe was even involved in Gardner-Webb achieving University status in 1993.

Known as one of the campus’ most demanding and rigorous professors, Stowe aimed to challenge his students and deepen their understanding of communication studies. Darryl Richie, a former student of Stowe, commented on Stowe’s Facebook page that his Communication Theory and Rhetoric and Grammar courses “neutered the misconception that Communications was an easy degree to get.”

Despite Stowe’s dedication to challenging his students, they admired his ability to inspire personal and academic growth, shaping them into well-rounded thinkers. “Dr. Stowe provided opportunities for me time and time again to mature as a student and a person. He was a constant presence—there to remind me that I was more than I could imagine,” recalled Noel T. Manning II, another former student.



Following 30 devoted years to Gardner-Webb, Stowe became a licensed building contractor, constructing single-family homes in Cleveland County, including a development in Boiling Springs. His passion for building began in 1975 when he and his wife, Tollie Stowe, helped build their own home in Polkville, N.C.

Stowe’s dedication to teaching extended beyond academia. He led Sunday school classes at Shelby (N.C.) Presbyterian Church on the representation of Christianity in classical literature.

Stowe was an active member of the Greater Shelby Community Theater,

performing in multiple productions and serving on the board. He also contributed to developing the Cleveland County Arts Council and acted as communication chairman for the local Friendship Force chapter.

Former student, Dawn Tolbert reflected on Stowe’s profound impact during her time as his student, commenting, “He saw me for the people-pleaser I was ... and would spend the next four years trying to toughen me up, always encouraging me to ‘not let the bad guys get you down.’”

*Avery Copeland, of Atlanta, Ga., is a senior English major.*

## Did you know?



*Mason*



*Miller*

Gardner-Webb alumnus Mason Miller '21 made Major League Baseball (MLB) All-Star Game history with the hardest pitch ever recorded. Miller lit up the Midsummer Classic for the American League in his All-Star debut with a 103.6 mph heater.

★ Miller, an Oakland Athletics' closer, entered the contest in the fifth inning. With 12 pitches for eight strikes, eight throws hitting triple digits, and two strikeouts – Miller had a night to remember. ★

The 94th annual MLB All-Star Game was held Tuesday, July 16, 2024, at Globe Life Field in Arlington, Texas. The American League earned the win 5-3.

# Who is Community?

**A**t Gardner-Webb University, we are most vibrant as a community when we love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and when we love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31). This focus shifts our attention from “what is community” to “who is community” and unites us around a common objective, Pro Deo et Humanitate—For God and Humanity.

Our community doesn't just exist on the campus in Boiling Springs; it broadly extends to our alumni who passionately build strong, flourishing communities in their own neighborhoods, churches and workplaces. Without a doubt, Gardner-Webb students, faculty, staff, coaches, and alumni have proven to be indispensable partners in the communities, towns, counties, and regions where they reside.

A flourishing community is a place where you are supported and sustained as you fulfill your purpose in God's story of making all things new (Rev 21:5). It's the place where you are at home. The community is comprised of authentic and diverse individuals who have a shared story of significance to collectively remember. Within the diversity, there is unity around a common purpose.

We see a marvelous picture of this type of community within the Trinity. Humanity originally enjoyed unbroken fellowship with the Triune God, and they also bore the mark of His image, the “Imago Dei” (Gen 1:26-27). Like Adam and Eve, we are created in the image of God, and we are created to live in community—ideally, we actively and honestly communicate with God and others, and we regularly live in unity with God and others. Truly, it is “not good” for us to be alone (Gen 2:18), and we are, in fact, our brother and sister's keeper (Gen 4:9).

In Scripture, we see that “remembering” is vital for a flourishing community. Think of Israel in the Old Testament. The Israelites remembered God's salvation from the bondage of the Egyptians (Psalms 77 and 78), and they set up memorial

stones to remember God parting the Jordan River (Joshua 4:19-24). Similarly, “remembering” was foundational for the early church in the New Testament. That community regularly gathered to remember God's salvation from the bondage of sin and death through the sacrifice, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and they celebrated the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:14-20).

Building a community takes effort. Foundations have to be laid, and if the community is to flourish, then there are responsibilities for each member. For those in the Gardner-Webb community, our responsibilities include:

- Remembering the “Imago Dei”—as God's image bearers, each person is valuable and worthy of respect.
- Remembering our history and heritage—where did we come from and how did we get here?
- Remembering our purpose—to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education.
- Remembering our fellowship—we are an authentic place of mutual aid that is united because of the Gospel. We share meals together, pray for one another, rejoice and celebrate with one another, and we weep with one another (Acts 2:42; Rom 12:15; Eph 4:1-6).

Our personal lives are better because of our active involvement in the community, and our community flourishes when we remember our individual and collective responsibilities. God is at work making all things new, and each of us has a role to play in His story that has no end. One day the community of the redeemed will gather before Him in sweet fellowship remembering and celebrating the Lamb who was slain for us (Rev 7:9-10).

## **Dr. Josh Parrott**

*Vice President and University Chaplain  
Office of Christian Life and Service*





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