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Dr. William M. Downs Officially Inaugurated as Gardner-Webb University's 13th President

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Office of University
Communications

August 7, 2020

Board of Trustees Chair Jennifer Marion Mills Presides Over Investiture Ceremony

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—The inauguration of Gardner-Webb University's 13th president, originally scheduled as a week-long celebration in March 2020, was one of the many events cancelled because of the Covid-19 global pandemic. Instead of the traditional ceremony with a large gathering, Dr. William M. Downs was sworn in as Gardner-Webb's president on Aug. 6, 2020, in a small service attended by family, friends and GWU officials.



Downs officially took office at Gardner-Webb on July 1, 2019, after a highly competitive one-year national search. Reflecting on the past year, Jennifer Marion Mills, chair of the GWU Board of Trustees and member of the Presidential Search Committee, commented, "A leader is often measured by the times they live in. This year, 2020, has certainly been a challenging time for many people, businesses, and organizations. Gardner Webb has faced many challenges as well."

She continued, “Through Dr. Downs’ leadership, Gardner Webb and its students, faculty and staff have risen to meet the challenges we now face. He empowers all around him to succeed. On behalf of the entire board of trustees of the University, I can tell you enthusiastically that we are looking forward to Dr. Downs’ leadership in the future, and we are thankful for his leadership during these challenging times. Thank you, Dr. Downs, and thank you, Kim Downs, for your commitment, your vision, and your leadership.”

Mills presided over the inauguration service. Also on the brief program, were Dr. J. Eric Davis, senior pastor of Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church in Boiling Springs, who gave the invocation, and David Royster, chair of the Presidential Search Committee and a member of the Board of Trustees, who delivered the benediction.



Over the past year, Davis has developed a friendship with the Downs family, who are active members at Pleasant Ridge. “In that time, I have had the opportunity to see Dr. Downs’ passion and drive to help Gardner-Webb University continue to develop as a school of greatness,” shared Davis, a three-time GWU alumnus. “I believe that Dr. Downs has an amazingly keen vision for the future of this amazing Christian institution ... upon which it was founded. There is no doubt that Bill has come into our community for such a time as this. His bold leadership skills and approachable personality are great assets as plans are being made for GWU students to come back on campus soon. Dr. Downs has remained focused on the safety and well-being of staff, faculty and students at the University during this very trying time as our entire nation has been profoundly affected by the COVID 19 pandemic.”

Although unable to invite a large number of family, friends, and colleagues to acknowledge this next major chapter in GWU’s history, Downs said he was grateful for the small, solemn occasion to take the oath of office and pledge his full commitment to Gardner-Webb and to its mission.

“It is a profound privilege to serve at Gardner-Webb,” Downs affirmed. “We have a 115-year history of academic excellence. We have a team of faculty, staff, and students who each day dedicate themselves to something bigger than themselves. We have a supportive college town that we call home and that is eager to grow in concert with us. I have an amazing First Lady, Kim, who is equally devoted to Bulldog Nation. We have unlimited potential, and with my inauguration now official I am more energized than ever to move forward with the business of making Gardner-Webb University North Carolina’s recognized leader in Christian higher education.”



As part of the ceremony, Downs was bestowed the President's Medallion, which he will wear around his neck at commencements and other important ceremonial occasions. "Its weight is a reminder of the heavy responsibilities that must be willingly carried out by all who occupy this position of leadership," Mills stated during the presentation. "The design is a reproduction of the University Seal, a representation of the large community he will serve. By accepting the President's Medallion, you accept the charge to serve with diligence, dedication, energy, vision and integrity as you carry out the duties of President of Gardner-Webb University, for God and Humanity."

A Raleigh native, Downs earned his BA in Political Science with a minor in Journalism from North Carolina State University (NCSU) in 1988. He holds MA and PhD degrees in Political Science from Emory University. He grew up in an academic family with both parents on the faculty at NCSU. Prior to his appointment at Gardner-Webb, Downs was the Dean of Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences, Professor of Political Science, and W. Keats Sparrow Distinguished Chair in the Liberal Arts at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C. From 1997 to 2014, Downs served various roles at Georgia State University in Atlanta including area dean, department chair, director and professor. He is an accomplished lecturer, research scholar and author.

He and Kim have raised two children, Rachel and Bradley. Rachel is a 2018 graduate of the University of Georgia (Chemistry, French) and is currently enrolled in the School of Dental Medicine at ECU. Bradley is studying political science and economics at NCSU.

Located in the North Carolina foothills, Gardner-Webb University is a private, Christian, liberal arts university. Gardner-Webb emphasizes a strong student-centered experience and rigorous academics to prepare students to become effective leaders within the global community. Ignite your future at Gardner-Webb.edu.