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Office of University
Communications

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Professor Emeritus is 'Legend' Among Health Education Associations

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—A Gardner-Webb professor emeritus of health education is being remembered for his contributions to the University and to local, state and national organizations. Dr. Robert R. Blackburn, of Boiling Springs, passed away Nov. 28, 2019. He was a GWU professor for 24 years and chair of the Department of Health and Physical Education for 19 years.

Dr. Dee Hunt, vice president emerita of Student Development, said Blackburn's influence in state and national health organizations is legendary. Blackburn hired her in 1978 as an associate professor. "I was a young professional," Hunt offered. "He gave me confidence and all the support and encouragement I needed."

A proponent of lifestyle fitness, Blackburn was an avid golfer and also a good dancer. Hunt said he taught her how to shag. "He was a kind man, a gentle soul," she added.



Dr. Jeff Tubbs, GWU vice president for planning and institutional effectiveness, was hired by Blackburn in 1981. "His active involvement with the North Carolina and national health and physical education associations was an example to both students and fellow faculty alike—the importance of networking, of conducting oneself as a professional, of embracing leadership and service opportunities," Tubbs noted. "He viewed the teaching of health and physical education as a high calling and impressed upon all of those who worked with him the importance of maintaining the high standards expected of the profession."

Blackburn, a native of Mooresboro, N.C., attended Gardner-Webb and completed his bachelor's in health and physical education in 1954 at Erskine College in Due West, S.C. He served two years in the U.S. Army, and began his teaching career at Walhalla (S.C.) High School. In 1958, he came back to Gardner-Webb as an assistant professor in the Department of Health and Physical Education, head basketball coach, line coach for football, and head track coach. He left in 1963 to chair the Department of Health and Physical Education at Louisiana College in Pineville. He earned his master's degree in 1968 and doctorate in 1969 from George Peabody College in Nashville, Tenn.

Returning to GWU in 1969, his key accomplishments included launching the undergraduate major and developing a graduate program in health and physical education and coordinating the building plans for the Lutz-Yelton Convocation Center. He coordinated community swimming lessons, a program that grew to over 1,000 children and adults each summer. He led workshops for teachers, and he served as the part-time executive director of the N.C. Alliance for Athletics, Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (NCAHPERD). When he retired from Gardner-Webb in 1996, he accepted the position on a full-time basis (1996-2000).

Although he never worked with Blackburn, Dr. Ken Baker, current chair of the GWU Department of Health, Sport and Physical Education, has met people across the state who knew and admired Blackburn. "As I have learned, to have worked with him would have been an honor," Baker affirmed. "I've often been in the company of other professionals in our discipline, who upon hearing that I'm from Gardner-Webb, they immediately identify me as being from Bob Blackburn's university. His legacy is a strong and lasting one throughout the state of North Carolina."

Dr. Kathy Davis, a new professor of physical education at GWU, knew Blackburn when he was the executive director of NCAHPERD and she was secretary for the board. "We called him 'Dr. Bob,'" Davis remembered. "He was always smiling, and always positive about getting things done."

Blackburn was chair of the Cleveland County Board of Health from 2009-2012 and served on the board for 11 years. He was also president of the N.C. Boards of Health for two years. He received multiple awards over his career, including the National Association of Local Boards of Health's Everett I. Hageman Award given to a board of health member who has demonstrated outstanding leadership. He volunteered for the American Heart Association for 40 years, and in 2008, he was presented the inaugural Dr. Robert Blackburn Advocacy Award by the N.C. American Heart Association. In 2018, Blackburn published his first book, "Advocacy from A to Z," with co-authors, Dr. Barbara R. Blackburn, his daughter, and Dr. Ronald Williamson.

A member of Boiling Springs Baptist Church for 40 years, Blackburn served as a deacon and Sunday School director. He is survived by his wife of 63 years, Rose Blackburn, three daughters and two grandchildren. Funeral services will be held on Wednesday, December 4, at 11 a.m. at Boiling Springs Baptist Church.

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.