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Office of University
Communications

May 11, 2019

Two Ceremonies Honor More Than 500 GWU Graduates and Express Solidarity with UNC-Charlotte

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Gardner-Webb University hosted Spring Commencement on Saturday, May 11, in the Lutz-Yelton Convocation Center. More than 500 graduates were honored during two separate ceremonies.



Green ribbons adorned the academic regalia of graduates and faculty, as well as the lapels of others in attendance. “The green ribbons are being worn as an expression of solidarity with the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, which is also holding its commencement ceremonies today,” Dr. Ben Leslie, GWU interim president announced during his opening remarks. “We salute the students, faculty and staff of that great institution for their resilience and courage as they persevere through this difficult time.”

Saturday Morning Traditional Undergraduate and GOAL–Degree Completion Program (DCP) Ceremony

The Saturday 10 a.m. ceremony featured more than 270 graduates of GWU’s undergraduate program and GOAL-DCP. Carson Erik Branham, of Charlotte, N.C., who earned a Bachelor of Arts in discipleship studies, offered the invocation. Monnie Jordan Davey, of Ludowici, Ga., who received a Bachelor of Science in exercise science, provided the Old Testament reading. Abigail Hope Miller, of Harrisburg, N.C., who celebrated earning a Bachelor of Science in nursing, provided the New Testament reading.

Several morning graduates were honored for outstanding leadership, citizenship, and academic excellence. The Most Outstanding Male Graduate medal was presented to Damian Chance Hutchins, of Cherryville, N.C., who earned a Bachelor of Science in Biology with a biomedical sciences concentration. Michaela Elizabeth Bissinger, of Fletcher, N.C., who received a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, was awarded the Most Outstanding Female Graduate medal.

Jada Lea Aldridge, of Maiden, N.C., Callista Jane Eckert, of Newnan, Ga., Emily Olivia Nordberg,, of Woodbridge, Va., Hannah Elizabeth Roberts, of Summerfield, N.C., and Amy Lois Turlington, of Mills River, N.C., received the Senior Scholastic Award. These five students completed their academic careers with a perfect 4.0 GPA. The Degree Completion Program Scholastic Award was presented to Shelly Ann Lawrence, of Thurmond, N.C., who received a Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice.

A special presentation was made during the program in memory of Jalin Terrill Lawson, who was a junior at GWU at the time of his tragic accident in 2017. He would have been walking with the class of 2019 to receive his diploma. Dr. Bruce Boyles, interim associate provost for Professional and Graduate Studies, made the presentation. “A criminal justice major with an interest in counterterrorism and a member of our track and field team, Mr. Lawson was active in both campus and community life,” Boyles stated. “We celebrate the memory and legacy of Jalin Terrell Lawson, whose presence and spirit is with us on this special day and forevermore.”

Dr. Gerald Keown, associate dean of the School of Divinity and professor of Old Testament Interpretation, delivered the commencement message for both ceremonies. His address was titled, “*Pro Deo et Humanitate: Life With Purpose and Meaning*,” and focused on practicing the University’s motto (*For God and Humanity*) in everyday life.

“Wherever your vocational path may take you, become an advocate for justice on behalf of those who desperately need justice,” Keown challenged. “Be welcoming of strangers, knowing that sometimes the stranger may be you. Don’t just have a passing knowledge of the clear idea that God cares for those on the margins. Be part of putting that care into action. Never let anyone tell you that one person can’t make a difference. Your voice and actions in the service of persons may encourage others to do what they know is the right thing, but are a bit fearful of looking different.”

Saturday Afternoon Graduate Programs Ceremony



Dr. Ben Leslie, GWU Interim President, presents the honorary doctorate to the children of Latoya Bridgers Gantt.

The Saturday 3 p.m. ceremony honored more than 245 students who successfully completed work in GWU's graduate programs. Tamula Shepard Bennett, of Wilmington, N.C., who earned a Doctor of Nursing Practice, offered the invocation. Janice Daynette Snead, of New Bern, N.C., who received a Doctor of Ministry, provided the scripture reading.

During the celebration, a degree was awarded posthumously to Latoya Bridgers Gantt, of Garner, N.C. The 38-year-old was nearing the completion of her doctoral coursework when she tragically passed away in the fall of 2018. "It was Ms. Gantt's hope and the assumption of her teachers that she would be joining her classmates today to receive her doctoral degree," Boyles affirmed. "So today, we celebrate the memory and the accomplishments of Latoya Bridgers Gantt, as we confer on her the title of Honorary Doctor of Education, approved and recommended by the unanimous vote of the faculty of the School of Education, the general faculty and bestowed by the president. And thus, we celebrate her memory and her legacy, even as we know that her presence is with us on this special day."

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.