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Office of University
Communications

September 26, 2018

'Chairman Jones: An Improbable Leader' Shares Story of Black Farmer Who Leads Integration Movement

Chairman Jones documentary poster

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—In 1969, a trailblazer emerged during a desegregation crisis in Northampton County, N.C. James Henry Jones, a black farmer with a seventh-grade education, led integration efforts and became the first black school board chairman in North Carolina. A documentary about his work, made by his daughter, filmmaker Anna Jones, will be shown at Gardner-Webb University Oct. 15.

The free screening of “Chairman Jones: An Improbable Leader” is co-sponsored by Wildacres Leadership Initiative as part of its William C. Friday Fellowship for Human Relations curriculum. The program is open to the public and begins at 6:30 p.m. in Tucker Student Center. Doors open at 6 p.m. for a reception, and a panel discussion afterward will feature his daughter, along with local leaders and educators.

“This documentary is about a rural North Carolina county moving forward through differences of race, power, and resources with a unique leader who stepped up when no one else was willing,” observed Hunter Corn, interim executive director of Wildacres Leadership Initiative. “It is also a daughter’s story learning about her father’s unheralded leadership.”

The film has won numerous awards nationally and internationally, including the audience choice award at the Real to Reel International Film Festival in Cleveland County, N.C. The historical account unfolds as Anna talks with those who participated in the integration movement and witnessed her father’s extraordinary courage. When leaders in Northampton refused to implement the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to fully integrate public schools, Jones placed his own children on the front lines, brought blacks and whites together for dialogue, and transformed the educational landscape.

“His leadership as North Carolina’s first black school board chairman introduced a new era in education and had a marked effect on racial progress in the state,” Corn observed. “Jones died in 1984, the year that Northampton County school system received accreditation for the first time in its history, largely due to his vision and efforts.”

Joining Anna for the panel discussion will be Friday Fellow Karla Haynes, the executive director of the Cleveland County Community Development Corporation, the new GWU Dean of Education Prince Bull, and Gardner-Webb Adjunct Professor of Communication Studies Noel Manning. The discussion will be moderated by Tom Hanchett, previous staff historian for 16 years at Levine Museum of the New South. The group will take questions and comments from the audience.

More details and optional registration available [here](#).

Auxiliary aids will be made available to persons with disabilities upon request 48 hours prior to the event. Please call 704-406-4270 or email disabilityservices@gardner-webb.edu with your request.

Wildacres Leadership Initiative is a statewide group that sponsors the William C. Friday Fellowship for Human Relations, regional Friday Labs and the Friday Dialogues. The program offers leadership development opportunities for North Carolinians who wish to positively impact their communities through leadership grounded in honest and civil dialogue aimed at abating gridlock, improving human relations, and advancing a just democracy. For more information, visit fridayfellowship.org.

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