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Office of University
Communications

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Craig Garris ('00) Serves as Police Chief in Wilkesboro, N.C., Home of Merlefest

Every spring, the population of the town of Wilkesboro, N.C., grows by around 75,000 for Merlefest, a musical tribute to the late folk and bluegrass guitarist Merle Watson. Ensuring the safety of visitors and residents during the four-day event requires a team effort of hundreds of people. Chief of Police Craig Garris, a 2000 graduate of Gardner-Webb University, coordinates his department's role in the effort.

photo of Craig Garris

"The police department works in partnership with the college, event organizers, and town government to provide a safe and successful event," Garris explained. "Our officers are only a part of those necessary to fulfill the many duties to control traffic and parking while policing such large numbers. Ultimately, our most important role is preventing a major crime event or mitigating circumstances if one occurred, so we plan and train on these topics."

In all aspects of his job, Garris has seen the benefits of pursuing his bachelor's degree in criminal justice at GWU. "I learned that furthering my education provides knowledge to more effectively solve problems of all kinds that I may be faced with," he reflected. "I gained a background upon which to draw from to make more informed decisions, whether faced with solving technical issues, seeking common sense solutions or answering questions related to law-enforcement specific information."

Garris is a 25-year veteran of the Wilkesboro Police Department and was named chief in 2015. The department has 21 full-time and

photo of Merlefest

two part-time employees and the town has about 3,700 residents. He worked as a patrol officer for more than 11 years. He feels that his biggest accomplishment is implementing a career advancement ladder. "The plan rewards a combination of education, training and experience to provide an environment of career satisfaction from within the department with the goal of increasing effectiveness," he expounded.

Garris chose to enter law enforcement after watching his father serve the community in his job as a sheriff's deputy. "I saw my father as fair and saw his job of protecting the public as being very honorable," Garris affirmed. "I felt a calling and natural ability that I would be effective in helping society by helping people while keeping the peace, fostering a civilized environment to live in and enforcing the law."