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Verhonda Crawford '12 is One of the Youngest-Elected Government Officials in South Carolina

Verhonda Crawford was raised by parents who instilled in her the importance of community service. Her father was a city councilman in Chesnee, S.C., and her mom volunteered for several groups. Before she graduated from Gardner-Webb University in 2012, Crawford ran for city council in Chesnee and became one of the youngest-elected government officials in the state of South Carolina. Because of her contributions to the community, Crawford was inducted into the 2016 GWU Gallery of Distinguished Alumni.

Her classes at Gardner-Webb and involvement in the campus community helped her refine her skills and prepare a career in public service. She obtained her bachelor's degree in public relations and is enrolled in the MBA program. As an undergrad, she was senior class president, a four year cheerleader, and second runner-up at the Miss Gardner-Webb Pageant.

"I love how Gardner-Webb infuses Christian beliefs into practical ideas you can apply to the world," Crawford observed. "Everything I learned I was able to apply to my life. Not only did the education I receive from Gardner-Webb help shape who I am, but the relationships and life lessons have instilled in me the principles I still carry today. I also believe Gardner-Webb has the best caring and knowledgeable professors in the world. My life has forever been changed by the education, friendships, and life lessons that I received at Gardner-Webb."

Since being elected in 2010, Crawford has served as Mayor Pro Tem and is a member of the Economic Grant Committee for the State of South Carolina. Crawford and the committee helped develop an Economic Development and Growth Grant for South Carolina, which awards almost \$300,000. She has also developed a community interest group called the Crossroads of the Carolinas Group, which is a collaboration of local business owners and citizens. As a member of the group's executive board, she helped write a grant for the City of Chesnee to be awarded with city planning services.

Because of her stance on economic development, Crawford decided to open a small business. She is co-owner of Verhonica Ryan clothing boutique and also heads VPR Marketing firm, which specializes in promoting individuals and small businesses. "I'm a firm believer of leading by example. I cannot stand for a platform if I did not apply it to my everyday life," she offered. "I wanted to experience the hardship of being a business owner to understand the struggles an individual will have if they start a business within my city. The best knowledge is gained through real-life experiences."

She's also committed to mentoring and encouraging youth. Crawford works for a national non-profit organization to promote mentorship and personal development for high school students. She volunteers as the director of public relations for the Miss US International pageant. A former Miss South Carolina US International, she placed in the top 15 at the Miss US International pageant. She coaches cheerleading and pageant contestants and several of her students have placed or won titles. "Youth are truly the leaders of tomorrow," Crawford stated. "We must do everything in our power to ensure they are in a position to make lasting changes in our society. You cannot have economic development if you do not inspire students to achieve their very best and to set life goals."