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May 9, 2015

C. Neal Alexander and Frank Stewart Receive Doctor of Humane Letters Degrees at Ceremony

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Gardner-Webb University bestowed its highest recognition of merit, Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degrees, to C. Neal Alexander (Denver, N.C.) and Frank Stewart (Belmont, N.C.) during its Spring Commencement ceremonies on Saturday, May 9.

From left: Alexander, Bonner, Stewart

GWU President Dr. Frank Bonner explained that the guidelines for awarding the honorary doctorate include the recipient's embodiment of Gardner-Webb ideals, caring and Christian service; the awarding of the degree affirms the University's values and honors individual achievements. "These guidelines are exemplified to the fullest degree by Neal Alexander and Frank Stewart in their personal, professional, church, and civic lives, and in innumerable leadership roles," Bonner shared. "The common denominator in all of these areas is their firm commitment to service, consistent with strong Christian faith."

Neal Alexander

A native of Walhalla, S.C., Alexander became involved with Gardner-Webb as an undergraduate student in 1965. However, as a member of the National Guard, he was called into active duty during the early stages of the Vietnam War and was forced to leave GWU. In the summer of 1967, Alexander was released from service and accepted a job at Duke Energy, where he became an engineering surveyor. His career led him to Duke's McGuire Nuclear Station near Charlotte, N.C., in 1971. Around the same time, Alexander and his wife moved to the small community of Denver, N.C., Alexander's career with Duke Energy was advancing, yet he wanted to achieve more.

He earned a Bachelor of Science in Management through the University's Degree Completion Program (then GOAL) and graduated from GWU in 1984. He served Duke Energy for 43 years, primarily in the area of human resources management. He retired on April 1, 2011. In January of 2013, North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory named Alexander as director of the Office of State Human Resources, a role in which he continues to serve.

“I’m incredibly proud of Director Alexander for his accomplishments,” said Governor McCrory. “I’ve known Neal for a long time. He embodies the ideals of service and leadership. It’s wonderful for the university to honor him for his civic service and philanthropic work.”

Over the years, his commitment to civic service has extended from his home community in Denver to locations throughout the region and state. He has also faithfully served Gardner-Webb as a five-term member of the University Board of Trustees, including seven years as board chairman. “Under his leadership, the Board made tremendous strides in professional development, efficiency, and overall effectiveness in its governance of the University,” Bonner reflected.

Frank Stewart

In his remarks introducing Stewart, Bonner discussed the work of 19th century writer Thomas Carlyle, who described a special breed of leaders he called “Captains of Industry.” Competent and highly successful, Carlyle’s definition suggests that the most important quality of the Captain of Industry is that this sort of leader cares more for the well being of people than about profit. “Were Carlyle alive today, he would surely find Frank Stewart to be the perfect embodiment of this ideal: entrepreneur, self-made business success, civic leader, servant leader, and philanthropist who makes efforts to deflect credit for his remarkable generosity,” Bonner shared.

Stewart was born in Barranquilla, Colombia, and moved to the United States in 1982. He earned his bachelor’s degree in business administration from UNC Charlotte and received his citizenship to the U.S. in 1992. He founded Ultra Machine & Fabrication in 1989. Ultra Armoring, which he founded in 2008, is a prime defense contractor that specializes in the design, engineering, armoring and automotive upgrades of several vehicle platforms. The military vehicles reinforced by Ultra Armoring materials deflect deadly explosions, which translates into saving the lives of many American soldiers who serve in combat zones around the world.

In addition to his business success, Stewart remains a generous and committed leader in civic and charitable affairs. Bonner suggested his most notable characteristic regarding Stewart’s philanthropy is his refusal to seek or accept credit. “If you want to learn of his generosity, you will need to get the information from others,” Bonner noted. “You will not hear of it from him directly. He has provided tuition assistance to a number of worthy and deserving students without any interest in recognition. He provided a gift that named a major facility in the Tucker Student Center, but even then insisted that two-thirds of the facility bear the names ‘Hope’ and ‘Faith’ rather than his own.”

Since 1971, Gardner-Webb University has presented honorary doctorates to more than 60 deserving individuals. The practice of awarding honorary doctorate degrees dates back to the 15th century. In the latter part of the 16th century, the practice became common at Oxford and Cambridge universities in England. At GWU, the Doctor of Humane Letters is given in recognition of achievements in the humanities and for philanthropic work.

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University's purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education by preparing graduates for professional and personal success, instilling in them a deep commitment to service and leadership, and equipping them for well-rounded lives of lasting impact, Pro Deo et Humanitate (For God and Humanity).