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Office of University
Communications

September 5, 2014

Annual Honors Student Association Event Prioritizes Environmental Service, Awareness

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – One of the oldest rivers in the world will once again receive a helping hand from Gardner-Webb University honors students as they prepare for an annual environmental cleanup event. Dozens of students, faculty members, and volunteers are expected to depart from Boiling Springs and participate in the annual New River cleanup day, held Sept. 12-14 in Ashe County, N.C.

The initiative is coordinated by North Carolina Big Sweep, an organization whose purpose is to rid the environment of litter by promoting environmental education and organizing annual statewide cleanup efforts of waterways and other areas.

According to Dr. Tom Jones, GWU professor of biology and dean of the honors program, the Gardner-Webb University Honors Student Association has participated in the effort for many of the past 25 years. “Our numbers are continuing to grow, and I expect we’ll have around 90 students, faculty, staff, international teacher assistants, and families join us for this year’s sweep, which is up from the 72 we had last year,” Jones reported. “We normally get assigned two to four sections of the New River, and each section is four to five miles in length. I expect we’ll get four sections this year with this many people going.”

Students find old tires, trash, and a variety of items that would have likely remained environmental hazards if not removed. “This has become our big annual tradition,” Jones said. “We drive up on Friday night, cook dinner and camp out. Then, we get up early the next morning, hit the river, and see just how much junk we can pull out of it in a four-hour time span.”

Jones said the experience is a favorite of students, and many participants have never had an opportunity to serve in such a hands-on manner. “New students are a bit cautious in the beginning about picking up things,” Jones described. “They’ll reach out with paddles for a bottle, but by the end of the section, they are in the water, using the canoes to hold their cargo, and competing to see which canoe can find the most tires.”

As part of the waterway cleanup, students don plastic gloves and access several sections of the river in canoes. They scan the waters and the shoreline for trash and debris, where they often locate lumber, old tires, plastic tarps, and everything in between.

“We’ve found everything in the river—bottles, cans, Styrofoam, tires, old cars, a tractor, building materials, appliances, kids toys, golf balls. The students really get into the competition about who is getting the most trash,” Jones reflected. “Though we are disgusted with the amount of stuff that folks throw into the river, we’ve seen a real improvement over time. In addition, the students are getting a strong lesson that what you do definitely affects others. They will probably never toss anything into the water again, and if you watch them, you may even notice that they will stop and pick up litter they find on campus.”

While the New River cleanup day is held annually in

September, the statewide NC Big Sweep initiative is set for the second Saturday in October. On Oct. 11, volunteers from all 100 counties in North Carolina and approximately 90 countries worldwide will come together to clean up land and waterways in their area.

North Carolina Big Sweep was founded in 1989 after operating for two years as a grassroots coastal cleanup organization. More than 300,000 volunteers have collected over 10.3 million pounds of trash from the North Carolina environment as part of efforts coordinated by NC Big Sweep. For more information on local initiatives, call Cindy Prewitt at the Cleveland County Health Department at 704-447-8206.

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University offers a comprehensive academic experience that introduces students to the diverse world of ideas and to the people who think them, preparing them not only for professional success but for lives marked by empathy, compassion and a commitment to service on the broadest scale.