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Office of University Communications

December 16, 2013

Dr. Gil Blackburn Received Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters During Dec. 16 Commencement

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Gardner-Webb University awarded its highest recognition of merit, an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree, to Dr. Gil Blackburn during its Fall Commencement ceremonies on Monday, Dec. 16 at 10 a.m. Blackburn's career in higher education spanned five different decades and included more than 35 years at GWU and six years at The University of Virginia's College at Wise (UVa-Wise) before his retirement in 2010.

Blackburn earned his associate's degree from Gardner-Webb in 1960 and headed to Wake Forest University (WFU) where he received a Bachelor of Arts in History (1962). A Fulbright Scholar, he also served four years in the United States Military from 1962 to 1966 and continued his education at WFU, receiving a Master of Arts in European History in 1967. He then transitioned to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for his doctoral work, and earned a Doctor of Education in Philosophy and History in 1975, while simultaneously working full-time at GWU.

After initially teaching at the junior high and high school level, he returned to Gardner-Webb to serve as professor of history from 1968 through 1990 and added a role as professor of education from 1980 to 1990. In 1983, he became director of graduate studies and later served as associate dean, dean, and vice president for academic affairs. His final post at Gardner-Webb was as coordinator of special projects. He became provost and senior vice chancellor at UVa-Wise in 2004. At the time of his resignation from Gardner-Webb, Blackburn stated, "The values of GWU are engrained in my character and I'll always be a 'Gardner-Webb Bulldog.'"

As commencement speaker for both ceremonies on Dec. 16, Blackburn offered words of encouragement and wisdom for the graduates' futures, by illustrating the history of Gardner-Webb's establishment at the boiling springs following a period in which many thought the institution would close its doors. "A spring is formed when a powerful underground vein of water forces its way to the surface through a fissure in the earth's hard crust," he pondered. "Here at the boiling spring, God's love gushed through the hard crust of human waywardness to create a spiritual oasis. All who matriculate at this institution have an opportunity to drink from that spring."

GWU President Dr. Frank Bonner believes Blackburn's contributions to the University were monumental. "There is no single individual who has had a greater influence on the award-winning curriculum, the exceptional faculty, and the academic culture that shapes the Gardner-Webb experience than Dr. Gil Blackburn," Bonner noted. "Today, for his years of faithful servant-leadership, his unwavering integrity, his considerable contributions to the academic communities at Gardner-Webb and Virginia-Wise, and his embodiment of the ideals for which this institution is known, it is my distinct privilege, on behalf of the Board of Trustees, to present him with the Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree."

Blackburn reflected upon his personal and professional history with Gardner-Webb, and said he found it difficult to believe he was worthy of such a tremendous honor. "When I first laid eyes on this campus in 1958, I could not—in my wildest imagination—have foreseen an occasion such as this," Blackburn reflected. "Nor could I have envisioned a university so grand and beautiful, serving 4,000 students. I consider myself a privileged man for having spent 38 of my 74 years on these sacred grounds, the place where I found myself as a student; played football; met my wife; reared my children; and formed the deepest friendships I have known."

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).