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Office of University Communications

October 16, 2013

Dr. Jim Thomas Honored with N.C. Long Leaf Pine Award

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Dr. Jim Thomas of Gardner-Webb University recently received the North Carolina Long Leaf Pine Award, which is among the most prestigious awards presented by the Governor and is considered one of the highest honors for a civilian in the state. Thomas serves as dean of the School of Performing and Visual Arts and received the award from Gov. Pat McCrory during a recent event at Mars Hill University (N.C.).

The Order of the Long Leaf Pine, created in 1965, is an honor that is granted in the state of North Carolina. The Longleaf Pine is the official state tree. The award is presented to individuals who have a proven record of extraordinary service to the state.

Thomas was surprised with the recognition when he was in attendance at a celebration of the 40th anniversary of the first renovation of what had been Mars Hill Baptist Church, now known as Owen Theatre.

“I had discovered the almost never-used structure shortly after joining the faculty,” said Thomas. “I was a part of the first theatre production there around 1965, and then in 1973 the transition from church to theatre took place.”

Thomas’ tenure at Mars Hill over 38-years, included serving as chair for both the Theatre Dept. and the Division of Fine Arts. Thomas helped to not only expand theatre arts at Mars Hill, but also in the region and the state.

“I started the theatre major, developed the first theatre arts education degree in North Carolina, started a summer theatre workshop in 1970, which eventually became the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre (SART), a regional professional theatre, in 1975,” said Thomas. Dr. Earl Leininger, associate provost for Arts and Sciences at GWU, was a lead performer in SART’s first production, *The Fantastics*, and appeared regularly in productions through the early 2000’s. Leininger worked at Mars Hill himself and is a longtime professional associate and friend of Thomas.

Over time, Thomas led the way for additional renovations to the church that turned Owen Theatre into a popular theatre facility that is now used for both the Dept. of Theatre Arts and SART.

Thomas shared, “I also introduced Mars Hill’s first Bachelor of Fine Arts in Musical Theatre degree with C. Robert Jones, its first director, who started the first theatre major at Gardner-Webb as a senior college.”

Long Leaf Pine Award guidelines for recipients include contributions to their communities, extra effort in their careers, and years of service to a particular organization. To date, the honor has been bestowed on over 15,000 individuals.

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 for career success and for engaged, responsible citizenship in their professional, civic, and spiritual communities.