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Office of University Communications

August 8, 2011

In Emotional Ceremony, University Grants First-Ever Posthumous Honorary Degree to the Family of Jeanna Brown Ayers

 paul foster graduates

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – In their song “Closing Time,” the band Semisonic captures a paradoxical truth that cuts to the emotional heart of college commencement ceremonies: “Every new beginning comes from some other beginning’s end.” Commencement is a time both of great joy and anticipation, but also reluctant sadness, and the true depth of that emotional duality was on display Monday at Gardner-Webb University’s 2011 summer commencement.

The University awarded degrees this summer to 273 graduates, who closed their journeys at Gardner-Webb and launched into a variety of new adventures. The day was particularly special for two students who were honored for maintaining the highest cumulative scholastic averages in their programs. Julian Lee, from Statesville, N.C., won the GOAL (Greater Opportunities for Adult Learners) Senior Scholastic Award for maintaining a 4.0 grade point average (GPA) en route to his Bachelor of Science in Accounting. Jamie Lee Bowen, from Taylorsville, N.C., won the Senior Scholastic Award for the traditional undergraduate Day Program with a GPA of 3.93 while earning her Bachelor of Science in Health and Wellness.

But in the ceremony’s most emotional moment, Gardner-Webb awarded its first-ever posthumous honorary bachelor’s degree to the family of Jeanna Brown Ayers, of Lexington, N.C., who passed away this spring only hours after giving birth to her first child, Cameron.

Ayers had completed 33 hours toward her B.S. in Business Administration, and was in good academic standing, when she tragically passed away. Her husband, Matt Ayers, carrying Cameron, and Jeanna’s father, Mark Brown, accepted the degree in her honor. “Jeanna truly valued education,” said Judy Badgett, Matt’s mother. “She was very happy to be attending Gardner-Webb, and she especially loved her religion classes.”

Badgett insists that while the family mourns the loss of Jeanna, they feel tremendously blessed to have Cameron. “He has already brought such joy and blessings to our family, and we are sure God has a special plan for that baby. We see Jeanna’s spirit in him.”

During his commencement address, David K. Wells, who received his Master of Science in Nursing, reflected on the ways his educational experience at Gardner-Webb bolstered his practice as a nurse educator. “My education was applicable to the work setting. It wasn’t just

some esoteric concept being bestowed upon me. It was tangible,” he said. Wells insisted that he now has a “road map” for success, and he challenged his classmates to let their own similar road maps guide them.

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