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CAMPUS NEWS

Gardner-Webb Invites Panel of Experts to Discuss Racial Disparities in Cleveland County, N.C.

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON MARCH 2, 2021



Second in ‘Webb Connections’ Series Features Leaders from Government, Schools, Faith and Business

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—Awareness, accountability, action—these three words were used many times during Gardner-Webb University’s second program in the “Webb Connections” series. Hosted by President Dr. William M. Downs and Director of Diversity and Intercultural Initiatives JeNai Davis, the event featured a panel of experts discussing the topic, “Healing the Divide: Working Together.”

Questions focused on racial divisions in Cleveland County, N.C., in terms of opportunities and access to education, quality healthcare and housing. Because of COVID-19 safety guidelines, a small audience of students was invited to attend and given the chance to ask questions. The program was recorded live and the video is available below.



The panelists included:

- Brian Epley, County Manager, Cleveland County—Epley has served as the County Manager for Cleveland County since 2018. He had held the role of the Cleveland County finance director from 2014-2018, and had also held the title of deputy county manager.
- Gregg Shull, director of communications, Cleveland County Schools—Shull began his journey in the field of education in 2006 with Charlotte-Mecklenburg School and has served the Cleveland County community since 2010 with Team CCS.
- Chris Gash, lead pastor, New Ellis Baptist Church—Gash holds a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Gardner-Webb, where he was a member of the men’s basketball team. After graduating, Gash entered public service. He returned to Gardner-Webb to receive his Master of Divinity in 2009. He is currently pursuing his Doctor of Ministry in Religious Education from Gardner-Webb and expects to graduate in 2022.
- Donnie Thurman, vice president, Human Resources and associate chaplain of Holy Angels Inc.—A native of Shelby, Thurman graduated from Gardner-Webb, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in human services. A four-year letterman in football, he was part of two Big-South Conference Championship teams. He is an ordained minister and serves as the Youth and Assistant Pastor at Palmer Grove Baptist Church, where he is also the Praise and Worship leader. In 2013, he became the youngest person in Cleveland County history to be elected to the Cleveland County School Board, and he is one of the youngest elected officials to have served in N.C. history. He completed his tenure on the school board in 2017, but still actively supports the schools.



The panelists spoke candidly about the problems facing Cleveland County and the nation, and offered their suggestions for healing racial divisions. They agreed that the solution must begin with honest conversations. “We have to work together,” Thurman insisted. “In order for us to take hold of these opportunities, we have to become comfortable being uncomfortable. Dr Forest Toms, who is a local genius from this community, says, ‘You don’t have the power to define my reality.’ So many times we try to base other people’s experience off of our own, for instance, you might say, ‘There’s no way he could have experienced a racist action, because I live here and I’ve never seen it.’ Just because we have never seen it or been exposed to it, doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be empathic to someone’s experience.”

The next Webb Connections event “Science and Faith: Not Mutually Exclusive” will feature Dr. Meredith Rowe, assistant professor of Biology at Gardner-Webb, and Dr. Jim McConnell, associate dean and associate professor of New Testament Interpretation for the Gardner-Webb School of Divinity.

Watch the full program below.

Webb Connections • Healing the Divide: Working Together Share

WEBB Connections
— GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY —

HEALING THE DIVIDE: WORKING TOGETHER

March 2 | 7 PM
Tucker Center’s Stewart Hall

Dr. William Downs
President,
Gardner-Webb University

JeNai Davis
Director of Diversity and Intercultural Initiatives

Watch on YouTube

Located in the North Carolina foothills, Gardner-Webb University is a private, Christian, liberal arts university. Gardner-Webb emphasizes a strong student-centered experience and rigorous academics to prepare students to become effective leaders within the global community. Ignite your future at Gardner-Webb.edu.

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