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BULLDOG PROFILES

GWU Music Education Major Pursues His Passions on the Stage and the Track

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON DECEMBER 20, 2021



Chase Thornhill, '22, is a Musician, Runner, Conversationalist and Salvation Army Volunteer

Ask Chase Thornhill about his educational and athletic experiences, and he will tell you that he's good at three things in life: "Somewhat playing a brass instrument (the trombone), running in a circle, and talking a lot," he checked off.

After he earns his music education degree from Gardner-Webb University in May 2022, Thornhill plans to pursue a graduate degree in trombone performance. While at GWU, Thornhill has been featured as a soloist and in brass ensembles as well as earned a gold medal and competed in the 2021 NCAA Outdoor Track and Field East Preliminary. He's also broken track and field school records along the way.

He's gained valuable experience and relied on his conversation skills while student teaching. At his assignment, he started by assisting with the sixth- through eighth-grade bands as well as the high school program and marching band. "After the first month of student teaching, the middle school band director had a baby, so he went on paternity leave, and I became the head band director for the middle school," Thornhill explained.



- ▲ Chase Thornhill said one of the things he does well is talk a lot.
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Suddenly, every hour of his day was filled. “I woke up at 6 a.m. and school ran until 3 p.m., then I would head to track practice, which ran until 6 p.m.,” Thornhill said. “Then, I spent most evenings writing my edTPA, which is where my teacher certification would come from this semester. Once the director came back, I took over the seventh-grade band and continued to assist everywhere else.”

Through this opportunity, Thornhill said he’s learned time management, behavior management and music leadership skills. He feels more prepared for graduate school and confident about pursuing his goals of playing professionally, teaching at a university and opening his own trombone studio. “I feel like this experience has matured me more than anything,” he reflected. “I have been able to develop nice relationships with the students. They are not as intimidated as they would be when communicating with the actual band director. I have been able to track each student’s progress this semester and then communicate that to the band directors.”

Working with young people is nothing new for Thornhill, who has worked at the Salvation Army’s Camp Walter Johnson in Denton, N.C., every summer since he was 15 years old. Thornhill’s parents have served in the Salvation Army since before he was born, and so have his grandparents on both sides. “Every three to five years, we’ve moved around,” he related. “We’ve lived in Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, Baltimore, Maryland, Florida, and Georgia. So I have connections all over the place.”

Salvation Army camps introduced Thornhill to Gardner-Webb, and his grandmother lived in Shelby, N.C., so he was familiar with the area. At the Salvation Army Music Conservatory, Thornhill met GWU students who invited him for a visit. At the time, Thornhill had already decided he was going to a large college.

It took a hurricane to nudge him toward Gardner-Webb. His family was living in Florence, S.C., when Hurricane Matthew rolled through. The city had no power. His dad was helping with disaster response,

and his mom took the family to stay with his grandmother in Shelby, which had been spared from the storm.

“My best friend, Aaron Jackson, was in school at Gardner-Webb,” Thornhill stated. “I texted up Aaron and said, ‘Let’s hang out.’ Everybody in the music department was so nice. They put me in a music major group chat, and they were just so welcoming. At that moment, Gardner-Webb moved up into my solid top three choices.”



Although he liked GWU, he was still leaning toward his dream of running track at the larger university. A few weeks later, the Gardner-Webb track coach called him. “I’ll never forget that day. I just finished up a track meet,” Thornhill reflected. “My dad comes into my room, and he says, ‘I’m on the phone with the Gardner Webb head coach. He wants to get you to run there.’”

After talking with the coach, Thornhill decided to accept his offer. “It was crazy, but I don’t know, it just felt like the right thing to do,” he said. “The people are nicer, a little bit more intimate, you know, so that’s what got me to Gardner-Webb.”

He realized, too, that his professors and coaches at Gardner-Webb would help him pursue both of his interests. Other schools wanted him to choose one or the other, but he wanted to run and play trombone. “Gardner Webb was the first school to say, ‘We can make it happen,’” Thornhill shared.



His professors and coaches kept their promise and have helped him juggle his many assignments in music and education with his NCAA Division I responsibilities. “I think it just comes down to cooperation and understanding with the people who are in charge,” he said. “No one’s gonna be mad if you tell them what’s up and make sure that everyone is in the loop.”

There have been times when he finishes a workout and runs straight over to the recital hall. The director gives him a few minutes to catch his breath. His track coaches have also been willing to build a schedule around him. “They would make sure if I missed a workout that I could make it up either at a later time or on a different day,” he noted. “I bring my trombone to a track meet, and I’ll tell you what, my Gardner-Webb teammates are very supportive.”

Sarianna Miranda-Rosado, '24, intern for communications, contributed to this story.

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