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GRADUATE PROGRAMS

GWU's Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership Program Impacts Alumna and Community

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON JANUARY 19, 2022



Dr. Kim Williams-Roberts, '21, Helps City of Mauldin, S.C., and Finds Strength to Carry on After her Husband's Death

Three years ago, Dr. Kim Williams-Roberts had no intention of going back to school for a doctorate. She already had a master's degree in health services management and a master's in business administration. She was finished with school.

However, her friend, Dr. Jacqueline Norton kept bringing up the subject. Norton received her Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership (DEOL) from Gardner-Webb University in 2020. "She is my best friend, and she was so excited about the program and told me all the great things about the program, but I never paid her any attention," Williams-Roberts recalled. "One day she came to me, and she said something that stuck with me: 'In three years, you can be Kim Williams-Roberts, which is perfectly fine, I love you just as you are, or in three years, you can be Dr. Kim Williams-Roberts and take yourself to another level.'"

Several weeks later, a supervisor made a similar comment to her. "It was confirmation to me that this was what I needed to do, and so I set forth, and three years later here I am," stated Williams-Roberts, who received her DEOL in December 2021. "The time has just flown by, but I have gained so much knowledge. Each and every class that I took gave me something that I will take with me for the rest of my life, and it's not just in a professional area, it benefits me in every aspect of my life."

During Williams-Roberts' doctoral defense, her purpose for entering the program became apparent to her professor Dr. Dale Lamb. "Mr. Mark Putnam, Human Resources director for the City of Mauldin (S.C.)

spoke about the impact that Kim's DEOL Doctoral Consultancy Project had on the city," Lamb affirmed. "That's the goal—to serve their communities—it's not just theoretical, this is all about changing and improving lives."

While Williams-Roberts' research helped the city, working on the project also gave her a reason to keep going after her husband died unexpectedly about a year ago. She was in a Zoom DEOL class meeting when he had a heart attack and later died. At first she thought about quitting but then realized her husband would want her to continue. "I had a really good support system, even at Gardner-Webb, even Dr. Lamb, when he heard about it, he canceled class that weekend," she related. "I was floored. I couldn't believe that he would cancel a whole class because of what I was dealing with and I received emails from the staff at Gardner-Webb who were extremely supportive. I had to pick myself up, dust myself off and push myself forward to get to this point, and now that I am here this whole program and my whole entire doctorate (https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/education_projects/27/) is completely dedicated to the essence of my husband, Leonardo Edwards Roberts III."



- ▲ Dr. Kim Williams-Roberts, second from right, poses with the Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership cohort at Gardner-Webb University's Commencement in December 2021. Dr. Jeff Hamilton, right, is the program coordinator.

In the DEOL program (<https://gardner-webb.edu/programs/organizational-leadership/>), students begin by learning theories on such topics as organizations and behavior, ethics and culture, and strategic thinking. Then, they are tasked with finding an organization to partner with and helping to solve its most critical problem. Williams-Roberts lives in Kershaw County, S.C. As she began to search for a partnering organization, she thought about a former co-worker, who is the city administrator in Mauldin. She contacted him, and he readily agreed to participate and put her in touch with Putnam.

"Mark was on board from the very beginning," Williams-Roberts noted. "He was extremely easy to work with and gave me the opportunity to lead. His input was very valuable."

After meeting with Putnam, Williams-Roberts conducted surveys of the 200 employees and discovered a disconnect between leadership and the staff. Based on the responses, she and Putnam realized that the employee wellness program was inadequate. "Wellness goes beyond me going to the gym four

times a week and working out,” Putnam explained. “We started seeing the employee in more of a 360 way—all the way around—not just the front part or one-dimensional.”

The city began focusing on the employees’ well-being and offering programs on such topics as mental health, finances, estate planning and other areas of interest. To answer concerns from their policemen about financial planning, the city brought in financial advisors who sat down with every police department employee and examined the accounts and insurance they had at work and outside of work. The company offered a software package that allowed the police officers to look at all their accounts in one place. “The police are tickled with it, because they feel like we listened to them and that we care about them other than me just saying to them, ‘Did you go to the gym this week?’” Putnam related. “They are seeing that the city believes in them enough to invest time and energy in them.”

Putnam recommended the program to other organizations and offered this advice: “First of all, you’ve got to say, how can we help that student, how can we help that person obtain that doctorate degree,” he said. “Then, you have to be open to learning and experiencing what they are feeding you back. We got a ton of valuable information. And it was not theoretical. It is where you work, it is where you live and you will get some of the most simple things that you will be able to take to your workforce.”

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